

**Crafting Elastic Masculinity:
Formations of *Shenti*, Intimacy and
Kinship among Young Men in China**

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Abstract

Under the ever-deepening transformations in contemporary China, traditional gender relations have been reshaped, but elements of patriarchy informed by the legacy of Confucianism still linger. These intricately interwoven forces have exerted a great impact on the gendered lives of the young generation. This research aims to examine young men's views of Chinese manhood and how they construct and negotiate masculinities in their everyday lives. I conducted 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Chinese men aged between 22 and 32, who are mostly ordinary men in the middle social stratum in Shanghai and Shenyang. I regard Chinese men as actively negotiating their identities within particular stages of their life course. Overall, this thesis is informed by perspectives of relational selfhood and Confucian notions of the relational, reflexive, and embodied self that is an ongoing process of becoming. I bring indigenous concepts and cultural repertoires into critical dialogue with global and leading sociological theories of individualisation and reflexivity. In doing so, I focus on three aspects of these men's everyday negotiations of masculinity: I consider Chinese young men's embodied experiences and interactions, through which they create Confucianism-informed masculine selves; I also investigate these men's practices of intimacy between couples; equally important, I explore how they narrate and create masculinities through kinship ties. Based on these analyses, I introduce and develop the concept of 'elastic masculinity'. Specifically, I argue that the masculinity of ordinary young men is flexible, adaptable and accommodating. However, the term elastic masculinity also illustrates that it is limited by the availability of resources, structural constraints, cultural traditions and diverse personal relationships. Thus, elastic masculinity is an appropriate metaphor and an important concept to understand Chinese young men's active engagement with China's global modernity, increasing individualisation, shifting gender values and local realities.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. An article 'Whingeing husbands' published on *Families, Relationships and Societies* draws on some of the material from this thesis. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as Bibliography.

Chapter 1

Introduction

One day in the summer of 2008, I was having a family dinner with relatives in Shenyang. A few days later, I would be leaving for Shanghai for my undergraduate studies. It was going to be the first time I ever visited Southern China, which felt like a completely strange place to me. At the table, my aunts and uncles were keen to tell me about the distinctiveness of the Shanghai young men that I would encounter:

‘They’re short.’

‘Shanghai men have a gentle and mild temperament.’

‘They’re very *niang*.’¹

‘Shanghai men are very shrewd and selfish.’

‘You know Shanghai men will buy *only one* spring onion when they do grocery shopping?’

‘It’s said that Shanghai men are dominated by their wives, and they are very considerate and caring to women.’

‘I heard Shanghai men are responsible for cooking in their families.’

‘Yeah, they do most of the housework.’

Most of these characteristics sounded alien to me and to most of my relatives. In Shenyang—a typical north-eastern Chinese city—men are usually the opposite of the above descriptions. They are relatively tall, assertive, rugged, macho, generous and careless, and they would certainly buy a bunch of spring onions. As far back as I can remember, I have been very familiar with everyday scenes in which my father talks and laughs very loudly with his bros, young men swear at friends to display their familiarity and intimacy, or crowds of half-naked men swallow cold noodles at a messy outdoor stall during the summer. Thus, my relatives tended to tell me these differences in a joking tone and found many of these behaviours hilarious.

¹ *Niang* is used in colloquial Chinese to describe a man who is effeminate or lacks macho masculinity.

Somehow, the topic ended up with my aunt trying to persuade me: 'You should find a Shanghai boyfriend. You'll be looked after very well.'

Subsequently, I started my undergraduate course at a Shanghai university where the female to male ratio reached 5:1. Probably because of the information provided by my relatives, I did feel that Shanghai men were not masculine enough. Their soft accent sounded very unmacho compared to that of north-eastern men. Moreover, the fact that I looked taller than many local Shanghai men made me even more uncomfortable. After all, a man's height is an essential part of appropriate masculinity in Shenyang. However, as I started to hear about the notion of gender and social constructionism during an undergraduate course, I started to rethink my relatives' depictions of Shanghai men, as well as some of my own assumptions. I gradually felt uncertain about whether there is a fixed standard for the 'right' type of Chinese man or woman.

Beyond my personal experience, from 2010 onwards, China has grown increasingly anxious about the masculinity of its young men. All of a sudden, images of 'feminised', 'stylish' and 'delicate' young men proliferated across the media, appearing on TV programmes, in men's magazines and on cinema screens. At the same time, another label started to gain wide acceptance among young men on the Internet. The image of poor, sloppy and cynical men was celebrated as *diaosi*² (losers). More than this, many times I heard older men of my father's generation complaining that current young men lacked responsibility and motivation at work. Similar disapproval of young men is also widespread on the Internet, among which one famous post jokingly states: the post-70s are workaholics, the post-80s never work overtime, the post-90s refuse to work. As a famous commentary in the magazine *New Weekly* claims: Chinese men still exist as a gender, but have lost their masculine features. They are vanishing not physically, but spiritually (Pan, 2011: 39). This proliferating discourse of declining masculinity has sparked heated

² *Diaosi* literally means male pubic hair, and has been roughly translated as 'losers' (Szablewica, 2014). It emerged as a popular Internet phrase around 2012 and was originally used to refer to a working-class figure who is 'short, poor and ugly' (Cao, 2016).

public debates, and has been summarised as a ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Zheng, T., 2015a³). As a result, I became increasingly curious about the assumption that Chinese men as a whole are becoming less masculine.

Studying for my Master’s degree in Media and Cultural Studies in the UK enabled me to become more acquainted with feminist theories and the power dynamics behind media discourse. It began to dawn on me how easy it is for us to make assumptions about normative masculinity. While I was preparing my PhD application in 2013, another news item captured my attention. It was about a recent boys’ summer campaign that aimed to ‘save boys’ and create ‘real little men’. Educational experts and counsellors raised various familial and social reasons for Chinese boys’ poor performance in schools, convincing parents of these little emperors that their only son urgently needed to be revamped. It was at this time that I decided that I would like to explore what had been silenced behind this alleged crisis of masculinity. In particular, I was interested in Chinese men of my generation who have been exposed to dramatic social transformations from the 1980s onwards. Presumably, significant historical changes, such as the one-child policy and the increasing restructuring of everyday life, are likely to shape ‘the development of all or most people growing up at a particular time and that there is nearly always a shared cultural identity that sets them apart from the parental generation’ (Alwin & McCammon, 2003: 24). I thus wondered if any of my peers were experiencing the sense of a crisis of decreasing masculinity or of disappointing the older generation, as claimed in the media.

Therefore, this thesis has arisen from my curiosity about Chinese young men and, indeed, doubt and uncertainty about the loss of Chinese manhood. Indeed, ‘starting from one’s own experience’ is a common approach in feminist research (Reinharz, 1992: 259). But research is a process, and one that is not straightforwardly linear (Jamieson et al., 2011b: 179). Throughout the whole trajectory of this project, the subject of inquiry and my analytical stance have

³ This thesis uses the Harvard referencing style for citing sources. When two or more authors have identical surnames, I added first initials (and sometimes a second initial if needed) to distinguish between these authors’ work.

undergone some significant shifts. As I read more widely, my research attention gradually moved to Chinese young men in general. More specifically, the ‘unproblematic’ young men accepted by mainstream gender culture became my central focus. In all likelihood, the flower-like, effeminate men or less privileged men who call themselves *diaosi* are victimised because they fail to live up to the normative notion of Chinese manhood (Louie, 2016). I believe that there is no crisis of masculinity, but rather an emerging diversity in possible ways of being a Chinese man. The widespread sentiments that worry about the loss of manhood are one of the signifiers of the rapid socioeconomic and cultural transformations that have followed in the wake of China’s globalising modernity. If identity appears to be explicitly invoked only through ‘its apparent loss or instability’ (Lawler, 2014: 1), I would like to problematise its seemingly stable and consistent aspects.

My experiences of growing up in China, studying abroad, going back home to conduct fieldwork and subsequently analysing and writing in English have been a major challenge for this study. The trouble is not only because I need to write across languages, but also because I need to think across cultures and contexts. This translating process, which entails multiple goals, means ‘texts and traditions are transformed in order to satisfy new needs in different cultural contexts’ (Bielsa, 2014: 395). On the one hand, some deeply rooted ‘insider knowledge’ sometimes obstructed me from adopting a fresh perspective. On the other hand, English training and writing might have made it difficult for me to highlight the historical and cultural specificity of Chinese masculinity. During the whole research process, I kept reflecting on these issues by paying greater attention to terms, concepts and theories. I seek to engage with what Punch (2015) terms nuanced ‘cross-world’ analysis, where ‘attention is paid to commonalities and differences across contexts’ (McCarthy et al., 2017: 8). Overall, this thesis has been informed by perspectives of relational selfhood (Jackson, 1999, 2010, 2011; Smart, 2007, 2011) and critically engaged with theories of individualisation and reflexivity. Meanwhile, Confucian notions of the relational, reflexive, and embodied self that is an ongoing process of becoming are consistent with many of these debates (Hall & Ames, 1987; Ho, 1995; Tu, 1985). Therefore, I am keen to link indigenous concepts and historical

thought with the global circulation of leading theoretical concepts and values. Incorporating indigenous concepts also yields additional insights into culturally and historically specific gender identities. Hence, I have drawn on a number of Chinese terms and concepts as key analytical tools instead of purely 'translating' Chinese men's experiences into another context. Xiaoying Qi (2014: 1) contends that dominant social theory may expand its explanatory capacities by incorporating alien ideas, especially those associated with selected Chinese concepts. In line with her argument, I believe that more fruitful and nuanced insights into Chinese masculinity can be generated through enhancing the knowledge flow between the 'East' and the 'West'.

After beginning to read around this topic, I found there was little recent literature on ordinary⁴ Chinese young men's gendered experience. Despite being a burgeoning area of study, Chinese men and masculinity have generated knowledge mostly around the 'loudest voices' (Back, 2007), namely those who have benefited enormously from or been disadvantaged by social changes over the past few decades. For example, in terms of Chinese elite men, there has been empirical work studying the 'new rich' (Osburg, 2013, 2016), senior government officials (Uretsky, 2008, 2016), and wealthy businessmen (Zheng, T., 2006, 2012). Meanwhile, migrant workers (Choi & Peng, 2016; Lin, 2013), rural men (Obendiek, 2016) male sexual workers (Kong, T., 2012; Rofel, 2010), and other disadvantaged or stigmatised male groups have also been substantially documented. In comparison, I am interested in investigating Chinese men located in the 'middle' social groupings. Furthermore, in the contemporary sociocultural, economic and historical context, ordinary Chinese men born between the mid-1980s and early 1990s have been relatively less well examined. Although there is a rich body of academic work about these men at work, in families or in the media (Louie, 2016; Song & Hird, 2014), other axes of identity, such as the body, embodiment and

⁴ By the term 'ordinary', I am referring to Chinese men who belong to neither ruling nor subordinate social groupings. In the context of this thesis, ordinary Chinese men are those situated within the middle social stratum of urban China. Most of my participants come from financially comfortable but certainly not markedly rich family backgrounds and are in white-collar jobs. My adoption of the term 'ordinary' was also informed by many young men's description of themselves as being an 'ordinary person' (普通人) during the fieldwork.

narrative practices appear to have been neglected. These issues will be addressed in Chapter 2, where I provide an overview of the relevant literature and contextualise this research. I will outline influential themes about contemporary Chinese society and different perspectives on Chinese men, while situating my analytical focus within both Western and Chinese sociological concepts and theories.

Following this, in Chapter 3, I will detail the methodology of this research. In order to explore how Chinese young men interpret the ongoing debates around the notion of 'real men' and practise gendered identities in their everyday lives, I gathered men's accounts from 30 semi-structured interviews with young men aged between 22 and 32. Specifically, I talked with 15 young men in Shenyang and 15 in Shanghai. The contrasting masculine landscapes of these two cities is what first stimulated my thoughts and they are indicative, although not representative, of contemporary urban China. In this chapter, I map out the research design process and my changing position from being interested in the 'masculinity crisis' to focusing on the construction of masculinities. I also review the fieldwork process during which various forms of gender performance, emotional labour and power dynamics emerged. I finish my methodological exploration by reflecting on the subsequent process of data analysis, interpretation and developing an analytical framework.

The rest of this thesis focuses on the analysis of my interviews with 30 Chinese young men and is divided into three parts. In Chapter 4, I deal with men's bodies and embodied masculinity. Drawing particularly on Confucian values and conventional philosophical thought, I seek to investigate different ways through which Chinese men work on and live with their bodies in everyday life. I discuss the great extent to which young men's perceptions and practices of the body are pivotal aspects of constructing ideal masculinity. In particular, I use the Chinese term *shenti* (body-self or body-person) as a central concept in order to investigate the Chinese male body. Based on participants' accounts, I further develop *du* (degree, position, quantity or proportion), *li* (ritual, propriety or etiquette), and *he*

(harmony), which characterise the young men's embodied everyday lives. By doing so, I demonstrate how young men's bodily aesthetics and embodied experience are embedded in the local context. Meanwhile, I enquire into the extent to which men's embodied relationships and interactions shape the process of identity-making.

Chapter 5 mainly concerns Chinese young men's interpretations and practices of intimacy between couples. Overall, the men articulated *you dandang*—being willing to shoulder responsibilities and capable of fulfilling male roles—as the key criterion of masculinity in the intimate sphere. This masculine ideal is shaped by conventional Confucian teachings about role fulfilment and familial integration. At the same time, it is subject to a contemporary gender culture that imposes new expectations on young men. I consider how this leading masculine discourse in the intimate sphere has influenced the young men's visions and practices of intimacy, all of which occur in an inherently relational and interactive manner. Moreover, I discuss the alternative strategies deployed by the men who are not capable of achieving *you dandang*. I illustrate that men's practices of intimacy are often implicated in wider practices of gender, class and culture. The construction of intimacy is undertaken within structural conditions, and also networks of personal relationships which are energised by enduring, albeit reworked, Confucian ethics.

In Chapter 6, I turn to the temporal dimension of masculinity located within kinship networks. While familial integration and harmony have always been of paramount importance to Chinese people, I attempt to unpack both continuities and emerging transformations from young men's experiences. I also look into the generational transmission of masculinity and fatherhood by examining the interrelationship between the past, present and future. This temporal and life-course perspective engenders a deeper understanding of the dynamic process whereby 'social selves construct the meaning of their lives over time' (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000: 182). The discussion of Chinese masculinity in kinship also demonstrates how core concepts of Confucian heritage persist over historical time. Throughout the three main chapters, I analyse both the men's everyday gender practices and the

strategies they used to narrate masculinity during interviews. Chapter 6, in particular, is developed by employing this combined approach to analysis. By treating the interview as an interactional setting, I aim to investigate the diverse social spheres within which ordinary young men make meanings of Chinese manhood.

In Chapter 7, I bring the threads of analysis together and reflect on various dimensions of Chinese young men's creation of masculinity, especially elaborating what I call 'elastic masculinity'. This analytical concept grew out of a reflexive engagement with participants' accounts, in which it displayed its potential for capturing the flexibility, heterogeneity, and constraints involved in constructing masculinity in present-day China. It also highlights the gendered experiences of ordinary Chinese young men, which potentially differ from their parental generation and from young men in other social groupings. Meanwhile, I discuss how this thesis may contribute to existing knowledge about Chinese men, masculinity, and alternative epistemologies and methodologies when conducting social science research in a non-Western context.

Chapter 2

Situating Ordinary Chinese Young Men: Social Transformation, Masculinities and Identity Formation

Introduction

I remember that, when I was in primary school, sitting down in KFC or MacDonald's was a celebratory event that only happened on the newly imported festival—Christmas Eve. Another unforgettable scene after the big dinner was the extremely crowded but joyful shopping mall, where my mom would buy me new clothes in the sale. Even now, I can clearly recall that excitement and satisfaction. This is certainly not only about eating fried chicken or trying on a Snoopy jacket. As Yan (2000) suggests, in the late 1990s, what fascinated Chinese customers about Western fast-food restaurants was not the hamburger but the *experience*.

Now fried chicken and burgers are certainly not restricted to a festival dinner. In fact, I am offered far more choices—ordering a delivery on my sofa or visiting a fine restaurant that serves burgers made with Australian Wagyu. And changes are more than this. Every time I go back to my hometown of Shenyang, which I left nearly ten years ago, or land at Shanghai from the UK, I am astonished by the ever-changing urban landscape and everyday lifestyle. More broadly, present-day Chinese society continues to experience deep transformations in every corner of the fabric of social life. Even though the rate of increase of national GDP may have slowed down, people's worldviews and living experiences do not stop updating. Meanwhile, although enormous social changes induce anxieties and uncertainties, there are certain stable and persistent resources for individuals to seize upon when coping with emerging risks. All of these ongoing transformations have affected the daily lives of urban individuals. Therefore, in order to develop critical understandings of ordinary Chinese young men, it is necessary to first contextualise their gender practices.

In this chapter, I will map out the wide shifts and continuities that are relevant to Chinese young men by critically examining the existing literature. I begin by

reviewing debates around the major driving forces that have shaped contemporary Chinese society, including modernisation, individualisation and the resilience of Confucianism. I focus in particular on how these issues have been approached differently among scholars in the West and East Asia, as well as their impacts on individual lives in contemporary Chinese society. I then discuss a variety of Chinese masculinities in order to position ordinary Chinese young men within the masculinity paradigm. Specifically, I detail plural ways of being a Chinese man across different historical periods and social classes. I also briefly illustrate the popular media discourses of contemporary young men that gave rise to this research. Finally, I offer an overview of the theoretical discussions about identity formation and cultural values that have informed this thesis. By bridging relevant Western and Chinese knowledge about social change, men and masculinities, I attempt to set out an analytical framework and explain the formation of my analysis.

The Transformative Era: Conflicts and Continuities

It has been widely acknowledged that momentous social transformations have taken place in China during the past few decades. While the critical year of 1978—which marked a shift from the Maoist era—is widely acknowledged as initiating the subsequent series of unprecedented changes in Chinese society (CIA Factbook, 2017; Gittings, 2006), contemporary China continues to display transformative potential in numerous respects. Both intense tensions and striking continuities are demonstrable, and these have a great impact on individuals and their identity creation. There are several overarching themes in scholarly debates about Chinese society, among which the country’s modernising project, growing individualisation and ‘New’ Confucianism are particularly relevant to this study.

Tradition and modernity

The pursuit of modernisation has long been an imperative task for China: from the end of the Qing dynasty when China was compelled to open up to the West, to the May Fourth period that spread Western democratic and scientific thought among the intelligentsia, followed by the Maoist era during which achieving socialist

modernity became a national task for everyone. After Deng Xiaoping's return to China's political arena in the late 1970s, the project of modernisation was guided by Deng's alternative theory, which was characterised by the 'adoption of a market oriented economy and the integration of Chinese society, culture and economy into the global capitalist system' (Wang, X. Y., 2003: 152). Deng's reform policy of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' is also known as combining 'political authoritarianism, increased individual autonomy, and economic pragmatism' (Hinsch, 2013: 156). At the same time, the government's continuing engagement with traditional—predominantly Confucianism-informed—notions as the marker of China's soft power further complicates the country's modernising process (Louie, 2011). Exemplified by the reintroduction of the civil servant exam system, Harmonious Society Construction, the establishment of Confucian Institutes around the world, and the institutionalisation of filial piety, deep socio-economic transformations in China have progressed in tandem with the interaction between tradition and modernity.

In the Western context, modernity has been predominantly theorised as a 'post-traditional order' (Giddens, 1991: 5), or as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim read it, as 'detraditionalization' (2002: 26). However, such universalising claims of modernity and the rigid opposition between tradition and modernity have received growing critiques (Rofel, 2001). For example, feminists have been highly critical of Giddens's model of transforming intimacy and family life informed by detraditionalisation (Jamieson, 1999; Smart, 2007), while others have interrogated the intrinsic masculine bias within theorisations of modernity (Adkins, 2002). Meanwhile, post-colonial perspectives dispute the Eurocentrism of modernity and post/second modernity theories (Bhabra, 2007; Chakrabarty, 2000). Indeed, scholars from various disciplines have observed that distinctive cultural traits endure over long periods of time and continue to shape a society's political and economic performance (Inglehart & Baker, 2000: 22).

Compared to Western scholars, East Asian specialists have paid more attention to the perpetuation of traditions due to the region's unique sociocultural and

historical background (Jackson et al., 2013). At the same time, increasing reflexivity at both a social and personal level have also been noticed (Bishop, 2004; Han & Shim, 2010; Suzuki et al., 2010; Yoon, 2003). Akio Tanabe and Yumiko Tokita-Tanabe (2003: 4) argue that modernisation is juxtaposed with the desire to maintain 'traditional self-identities in distinction from the modern West' in many Asian societies. Strong traditions that are regarded as 'guidelines' for self-perception and practice are especially meaningful to the young generation (Chen & Mac an Ghail, 2015). In other words, traditions are negotiated and remoulded into modernised vocabularies to suit the contemporary landscape. Moreover, strategies for maintaining traditions can differ depending on regional and historical particularities. As Jackson et al. (2013) note, retaining tradition does not inevitably indicate resistance to change as Giddens (1991) implies; rather, tradition can be reshaped through either 'deliberate revival or simply adaptations of everyday mores and practices' (2013: 669). The intricate interplay between tradition and modernity in a number of East Asian countries certainly displays some distinct features and thus contributes to a pluralised understanding of modernities (Rofel, 1999; Dirlik, 2006). For example, Tu (2014) suggests that Confucian cultural traditions continue to be an active agent in shaping the modernising process across a number of East Asian societies. Specifically, widespread notions such as 'network capitalism, soft authoritarianism, group spirit, consensus formation, and human relatedness' all highlight 'the transformative potential of Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity' (Tu, 2014: 108). From a different perspective, Chang Kyung-Sup (2010) has developed the concept of 'compressed modernity' based on his insightful observation of contemporary South Korean society. Compressed modernity refers to a 'civilizational condition' in which various dimensions of social change occur within extremely short periods. Importantly, the society that has undergone compressed modernity 'still manifests distinctly traditional and/or indigenous characteristics in many aspects of personal, social, and political life' (Chang, 2010: 447). These paradoxes and ambiguities within compressed modernity mean that individual lives 'need to be managed intensely, intricately, and flexibly in order to remain normally integrated with the rest of society' (Chang, 2014: 39). According to Chang, China can also be considered as experiencing

compressed modernity, albeit with clear structural and institutional specificities.

Even among East Asian societies that share similar cultural values and historical legacies, the nuances of China's modernising process have been noted. Yan (2010a: 510) argues that contemporary China demonstrates a rather complicated scene, which 'simultaneously demonstrates pre-modern, modern, and late-modern conditions, and the Chinese individual must deal with all of these conditions simultaneously'. The tension brought to bear on Chinese society by competing social forces can be clearly seen in various domains. For example, in their introduction to transforming Chinese patriarchy, Harrell and Santos (2017: 31) highlight the uneasy coexistence between the 'modernist ideology of individualism and of gender and generational equality' and 'ideas inherited from the classic patriarchal configurations'. Another epitome of the complicated scene of Chinese modernisation is the ubiquitous discourse of *suzhi*. *Suzhi*, literally meaning quality and denoting personal value, is especially visible in the process of social development and population control over the past few decades. Essentially, *suzhi* centres on the body and attaches vital importance to cultural attainment, both of which are linked with Confucian traditions. Nonetheless, *suzhi* has also appeared as a keyword for enhancing modernity and civilisation, and it simultaneously invokes greater distinctions among different social groups (Anagnost, 2004; Jacka, 2009; Kipnis, 2007). The discourse of *suzhi* also encourages each individual's reflexive self-regulation and improvement. In addition, the nuances of China's modernising process is characterised by intensified regional inequalities: the 'desiring subjects' actively creating themselves as cosmopolitan citizens (Rofel, 2007) are juxtaposed with migrant workers and ethnic minority youth, who rush to the city for basic material improvement (Lin, 2013, 2014; Schein, 2001); or, as French and Crabbe (2010) creatively describe it, by the discrepancy between 'fat cities' and 'lean countryside' as a result of the unequal distribution of wealth.

For most urban only-children, growing up within such a rapidly changing environment offers them privileges and simultaneously engenders anxieties (Liu, F. 2008). Young women are facing both enduring and newly emerging challenges in

terms of being 'left over' in the marriage market (Ji, 2015), negotiating reproductive sexuality (Feng et al., 2016), surviving in the male-dominated workplace (Liu, J., 2016; Mason, K., 2013) and many more. But it should not be neglected that Chinese young men are similarly caught in the dilemma between tradition and modernity. For example, despite weakening patrilineal beliefs among the young generation, men are not free from the pressure to marry and achieve fatherhood (Cai & Feng, 2014; Eklund, 2016). Moreover, urban Chinese young men confront growing pressure to accumulate sufficient economic and cultural capital prior to a socially approved marriage (Zarafonetis, 2017). These conflicting realities highlight the uneasiness that men need to navigate in the domain of intimacy and family.

Another demonstrable tension between different sets of values is the articulation of both 'standing out' and 'staying normal', which both matter significantly to men in today's China. While the embracing of 'standing out' is an outcome of neoliberalism and the enterprising spirit, 'staying normal' has long been a key part of Chinese culture. Bakken (2000: 1) contends that China could be understood as a Confucianism-informed 'exemplary society', where "'human quality" based on the exemplary norm and its exemplary behaviour is regarded as a force for realizing a modern society of perfect order'. Such exemplary norms are translated as the hegemony of *chenggong* (success) that marks contemporary exemplary masculinity (Liu, F., 2017). Liu's participants, who are young men at upper secondary school, unanimously express their aspirations to extraordinary accomplishment. They also stress that 'nothing should be lacking: health, love, and material comfort' (2017: 14). Conversely, there still exists the cultural valorisation of 'normality' (Kam, 2015), and many of the men I interviewed repeatedly noted the importance of '*zhengchang*' (being ordinary or normal) or being 'just like everyone else'. These contrasting perceptions of masculinity are likely to result from the cohort difference of Liu Fengshu's (2017) and my participants, but they also mirror the intense tensions experienced by young men because of the complicated interplay between tradition and modernity in contemporary China. Consequently, young men are required to reflexively engage with cultural

traditions, but also to incorporate global and modern notions, in order to make sense of their masculine selves.

Individualism, individualisation and relationality

Following the launch of Deng's new reform politics, new concepts of consumerism, the market economy and, importantly, individualism, swept Chinese society. An emerging emphasis on the individual self and personal wellbeing could be observed in diverse social and cultural sites. Despite great disparities, contemporary Chinese society has been undergoing a certain level of individualisation. This means the 'disintegration of previously existing social forms' on the one hand, and that 'new demands, controls and constraints are being imposed on individuals' on the other (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 2). Yet, these social upheavals are not alien to China, as one could observe a strikingly similar discourse during the Republic Period when terms like 'free love', 'self-reliance' and 'personal interests' were endorsed by urban intellectuals (Glosser, 2003; Lee, H., 2007). What is new in the contemporary wave of individualisation is the ongoing intersection of individualism and relationality in social lives.

Over the last few decades, individualisation is argued to have set a grand framework for social science researchers in the West. Carol Smart (2007) characterises individualisation as the 'big idea' that became hugely popular and that seemed to offer an explanation for everything. For example, marriage has been increasingly theorised as a personal choice (Hull et al., 2010); body image and health are seen as being shaped by the pervasive discourse of 'choice' and self-responsibilisation (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Moulding, 2003); the notion of kinship, while retaining a certain fixedness, has become more elective and creative (Finch, 2007; Mason, J., 2008; Smart & Neale, 1999). It is true that 'individualism, self-realization, [and] affirmation of the individual's personal qualities' have been core values throughout Western history (Illouz, 1997: 152). However, since 2000 in particular, more and more voices have become sceptical of individualisation as an interpretative instrument (Jallinoja & Widmer, 2011: 3). Individualisation as an all-encompassing notion has been problematised and, at the same time, the evident

disjuncture between the discursive imagination and people's real-life practices has received more attention (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005). Typically, recent studies on youth transitions illustrate how structural inequalities continue to shape individuals' lived experience. In spite of the proliferation of the 'do-it-yourself biography' or 'individualistic choice', young people's practices of aspiration, imagination about their future and adulthood constructions demonstrate that both varying forms of personal connections and social embeddedness are relevant (Allen, K., 2014; Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005; McDowell, 2013; Stahl, 2014). The rejuvenation of class analysis in British academia offers another angle on the embeddedness of inequalities in social institutions rather than seeing it as a purely subjective issue (Reay, 2005; Sayer, 2002; Skeggs, 1997). As Johnson and Lawler (2005) maintain, deeply ingrained class distinctions even shape the most private sphere of romantic love.

Historically, China lacks the social foundation to nurture ideas of individualism. In comparison, the deeply relational feature of the Chinese self has been widely acknowledged (Hamilton, 1990; Liang, S., 2005; Moore, 2005; Sun, 1991; Yang, M. M., 1994). As Fung (1998: 635) emphasises, 'every individual is the centre of a social circle which is constituted of various social relationships' in traditional Chinese society. Therefore, a person exists through social relations by fulfilling his or her social roles as a father, a daughter, a member of the gentry, or a farmer. Although there is an explicit focus on the individual self in classical Chinese philosophy, the aim of self-cultivation or improvement is to enhance the collective wellbeing of families, groups and the whole society (Triandis, 1995). However, it is true that each individual is regarded as having a distinctive existence with a unique social position in Chinese culture, but such a perception differs hugely from the individualist agenda. In Fei Xiaotong's (1992) famous theorisation of rural Chinese society, he argues that 'egocentrism' rather than 'individualism' is key for Chinese people, who are embedded in self-centred 'elastic networks' that are inherently contingent, unequal and hierarchical, rather than the formal organisations found in the West. King (1985: 66) similarly points out that the Chinese self is 'a relational being endowed with a self-centred autonomy'. Accordingly, there is a latent

recognition of the self and also self-interest in Chinese cultural traditions (Barbalet, 2013, 2014). Yet, this does not amount to a core value of individualism as it is advocated in many Western cultures. Importantly, the Chinese self must exist through relationships and fulfil designated roles in his or her personal network.

The reforms since 1978 have refashioned almost all aspects of social life, represented by the disruption of state-allocated employment (Davis, 1999; Hoffman, 2008), the rise of the commercial housing market (Davis, 2010; Wang & Murie, 1999), the arguable deinstitutionalisation of marriage and sexuality (Davis & Friedman, 2014; Farrer, 2014), and the development of a private health-care system (Eggleston & Yip, 2004). As a result, some scholars claim that contemporary Chinese society has witnessed an intense individualisation of social life (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Davis, 2000; Sima & Pulsley, 2010; Yan, 2003, 2009, 2010a), while others address new forms of social control and relationality under the new conditions (Cheung, 2012; Kipnis, 2012; Ong & Zhang, 2008). Nevertheless, even the most radical voices express some reservations: for example, Yan (2010b), who has written extensively on the individualisation of Chinese life, notes that core values of the individualist spirit, including social obligations and respect for other individuals' rights, remain underdeveloped in China; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2010: xviii) also acknowledge that the increasing assignment of responsibility to Chinese individuals is 'within the constraints of a restricted geographical mobility and the strict regulation of the opportunity to emigrate from the country into the cities'. For the most part, empirical work that investigates the lived experience of individuals in contemporary China has highlighted the nuances and complexities of the individualisation process (Chen, R., 2015; Hanser, 2002; Luo & Yeh, 2012; Wang & Nehring, 2014). In the South Korean context, Chang (2014) argues that women are thrust into 'individualisation without individualism' under the complex condition of compressed modernity. This unique pattern is illustrated by Korean women's practical rather than ideational changes in restructuring their family and personal lives. Likewise, the young generation in urban China is experiencing a similar dilemma, pursuing an individualised lifestyle while retaining connections to prior social relations and

institutions.

Echoing this growing body of critical evaluation of individualism and the individualisation thesis, I take the position that personal life in contemporary Chinese society is becoming *more individualised* but, at the same time, *deeply relational*. Such a statement may sound paradoxical but, indeed, the young men I interviewed had experienced and expressed a conflict between aspirations towards individual autonomy and the continuing salience of relational and networked identity. Rather than becoming disembedded from various social institutions and family relations, people are largely living within and making sense of themselves through relationships. The feeling of being in connection with others is crucial for my participants, who repeatedly articulated the indispensable value of their families, partners and friends (see also Hansen & Pang, 2008). Moreover, for young men possessing a certain amount, albeit insufficient, of gender resources, being an enterprising and completely self-reliant subject is often difficult to realise (Harmon, 2014). Rather, maintaining and developing social ties are intentional strategies for constructing ideal masculinities. It is within such a context, where individualism competes fiercely with relationality, that ordinary Chinese men appear to have forged more flexible and mobile identities.

Confucianism: official revival and living tradition

It is almost impossible to overlook Confucianism when one tries to make an inquiry to contemporary Chinese society. With its dominant influence throughout Chinese history and culture, Confucian traditions are once again prevailing in present-day China. Although experiencing fluctuating approval and respect among scholars, officials and the general public from the late Qing dynasty onwards, the Sage Confucius has never been forgotten. More than a decade ago, Gilbert Rozman asked 'Can Confucianism survive in an age of universalism and globalization?', and predicted that 'East Asian states singly and as a group are likely take a fresh look at their traditions' (2002: 12). At least in the Chinese context, Rozman's prediction seems to have come true at both the governmental and individual level. At the same time, other modern East Asian countries have hardly heard the 'death knell'

of Confucianism either (see, e.g. Ito, 2014; Kim, 2017; Lee, J.-K., 2005; Walker & Wang, 2005). Scott (1999: 66) contends that the modern is seen not as the natural end of a normalised teleological history, but as a comprehensive *alteration* in the forms of social life and the conceptual categories that define it. In this sense, the resilience of Confucianism enables us to examine how traditions are inserted into China's modernising process. More than this, taking Confucian ethics and values into critical consideration may unravel the specific cultural meanings behind Chinese young men's narratives about masculinity.

Once held in high regard in imperial China, Confucianism received a fierce critique during the New Cultural Movement (from the mid-1910s to the 1920s), but recovered during the late Republic period. While anti-Confucianism was a key motif of the Maoist era, it slowly re-emerged out of communist values under Deng's new policy (Hu, 2007). In line with a rapidly growing economic output and stronger emphasis on unique Chinese characteristics, the new millennium saw a greater revival of Confucianism, among other traditional cultural resources, as markers of China's rising power (Cheung, 2012; Lindsay, 2012). A pivotal official shift towards Confucianism began with President Hu Jintao's political agenda of constructing a Harmonious Society and the 2006 Plan for Cultural Development. These discourses highlight that the 'splendorous' Chinese traditional culture has played an indispensable role in motivating socio-economic development, and will make a continuing contribution to China's development in the future (Billioud, 2007). Meanwhile, the establishment of more than 100 Confucius Institutes at a global level was believed to 'uphold the diversity of world civilization' and 'spread the values of harmonious development' (Tang, Z., 2016: 386–7). Nonetheless, there have also been critical voices raised towards the government's enthusiastic attempt to disseminate Chinese traditional culture. As Louie puts it, Confucius and Confucianism have become China's 'brand' in a world where national identity is marketed for political spin (2011: 78).

The official promotion of Confucian values has been taken further under the

current presidency of Xi Jinping⁵. For example, central government has legislated the essential Confucian ethic of filial piety through an amendment to the Constitution and Marriage Law. In 2013, the revised *Protection of the Rights and Interests of Elderly People* further addresses adult children's obligation to look after their parents. According to Article 11, supporters of the elderly shall perform the duties of providing for the elderly, comforting them, and catering to their special needs. Furthermore, the spouse of the supporter is stipulated as being equally responsible to provide for parents-in-law. The government's powerful re-inscription of Confucianism and other traditional ideas into its official discourse has attracted increasing attention from scholars, who have interpreted it as a reinvented mechanism of social control (Bakken, 2000), as part of the broader scheme of strengthening socialism with Chinese characteristics (Solé-Farràs, 2008), as post-reform governmentality (Zhang, Y. H., 2014), as a new moral foundation that might replace fading Communist beliefs (Bell, 2010), or as a crucial component of the new nationalism (Fong, 2004; Kim et al., 2016).

By contrast, another school of scholars views Confucianism as a form of 'living tradition' that has permeated Chinese life (Chen, Y., 2012; Jackson, 2011; Yao, X., 1999). Alternatively, there are growing studies that investigate the circulation of Confucian values in everyday life and individuals' diverse interpretations (Billioud & Thoraval, 2014; Zhao, B., 1997). It is such perspectives that I find more illuminating for my analysis of masculinity construction in this thesis. It is true that the official promotion of traditional culture may serve to enhance people's internalisation of Confucian ethics. Meanwhile, some officially endorsed Confucian 'virtues' appear to be problematic in the contemporary world, such as the inherent patriarchy of Confucianism (Santos & Harrell, 2017) or domestic moral education and parenting (Wang, X. L., 2017). However, as X. Yao (2001: 325) maintains, Confucianism should be understood as 'more a way of life than a unified system'. It functions as common values rather than a philosophical framework to explain those values. The penetration of key Confucian values into the everyday life of Chinese people is

⁵ More recent governmental texts and the official discourse promoting traditional culture, especially Confucianism, are also discussed in Chapter 6.

vividly illustrated in Farquhar and Zhang's (2012) analysis of life nurturing and self-cultivation (*yangsheng*) among Beijing citizens. They observe that:

More important to us, in our conversations with *yangsheng* enthusiasts, we began to hear deep currents of resonance with Chinese discourses that an empiricist historiography would have long ago declared to be dead (even if subject to resuscitation as 'invented tradition'). Though the retired workers and teachers, soldiers and bookkeepers with whom we most often spoke seldom cited the classics in so many words, we have occasion to point out [...] the common sense values they reported have much in common with ancient wisdom. (2012: 31)

Nevertheless, Farquhar and Zhang continue to remark that it is both a privilege and a burden for Chinese contemporaries that they have such a deep fund of resources on which to draw as they craft a living tradition and embody myriad daily lives (ibid.: 32). Particularly among the younger generation, traditional values remain as the underlying logic of identity practices in many respects in spite of having been exposed to global cultures. Broader social changes are not always able to obliterate the influence of cultural conventions. Hu and Scott (2016: 1287) report that higher education and female employment are associated with *more not less* traditional beliefs. In addition, recent generations, born since 1978, tend to be more traditional towards filial piety, and some of my data echo these findings. Typically, in this study, the aspirational young men who have left their hometowns to pursue better career opportunities in Shanghai and Shenyang are commonly concerned about their parents' later life. Many young fathers hope to develop equal and intimate relationships with their children, but they emphatically affirm that the father should be the stern disciplinarian and the mother is naturally caring and attentive to children's needs. Hence, the alleged 'revival of Confucianism' through official discourse only tells one side of the story. Through generational transmission and daily experience, Confucian doctrine does not simply belong to the past, but is reinvented and practised by contemporary individuals.

Chinese Masculinities: Diversity and Change

Having set the contemporary stage for researching personal life and identity in

China, now I shift the focus specifically onto Chinese men. Notably, the Chinese language itself lacks an accurate and equivalent term to describe ‘masculinity’ or ‘manhood’. As Song and Hird (2014: 1) record, this led to a senior female Singaporean Chinese researcher sneering before a faculty meeting: ‘Chinese masculinity? Is there such a thing?’ In spite of this linguistic dilemma, relevant ideas are not unfamiliar to Chinese men. Represented by *wenren* (scholar), *haohan* (good buddy), *nan zi han* (macho man) and *niang niang qiang* (effeminate man), there is actually a rich vocabulary to describe different male images. From historical periods to the current era, ways to be Chinese men have been heterogeneous and inconsistent, but also with a series of continuities. Some male identities have largely withdrawn from the contemporary stage while new notions of masculinity are constantly emerging. Moreover, there have always been variations of manhood in terms of class disparities and the urban-rural divide. I therefore offer an overview of the literature on Chinese masculinities in order to explicate who the ‘ordinary Chinese young men’ in this thesis are.

Historical evolution and continuities

In an early essay, Carrigan, Connell and Lee argue that any understanding of masculinity must start by examining how men’s social involvement constitutes the gender order, which displays ‘historical dynamics as a whole’ (1985: 598). For contemporary China, this view is particularly relevant in light of entrenched cultural traditions and the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity. In feudal Chinese society, expressions of manhood were constantly ‘on the run’. According to Hinsch (2013), the long Chinese history has witnessed a close association between masculinity and personal/group honour during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), alternative Buddhist masculinity during the Jin dynasty (265–420 CE), intensive valuation of cultural capital in evaluating manhood during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), and modernising forms of masculinity during the late imperial period (roughly from 1860 onwards). At the same time, some consistent characteristics of manhood paragons were also evident in feudal China. Typically, historical Chinese manhood was shaped by ‘an unbroken legacy of literate culture’ and was also inseparable from the ‘dense network of real and

fictive kinship ties' (Hirsch, 2013: 7). In addition, successful masculinity used to be almost exclusively marked by a man's acquisition of a government post. This intimate grouping between the nation and manhood, starting in antiquity, underlines how Chinese masculinity has long been subject to institutional power.

In terms of the adaptability of the concept of 'masculinity' at a global level, Connell (1993: 603–4) notes that 'the models of masculinity familiar in Euro/American discourse simply do not work for the realities of gender in other cultures, so far as these cultures can be reconstructed before colonial or commercial domination by the Euro/American world.' Seen in this light, Kam Louie's (2002) theorisation of the *wen-wu* (cultural attainment-martial prowess) dyad to engage with Chinese masculinity provides an insightful framework. Since the tough, decisive, and generally macho type of male image glorified in the Occident was appreciated in Chinese culture to a much lesser degree, the *wen-wu* paradigm is more appropriate for examining Chinese masculinities. As Louie elaborates:

Chinese masculinity, it will be shown, can be theorised as comprising both *wen* and *wu* so that a scholar is considered to be no less masculine than a soldier. Indeed, at certain points in history the ideal man would be expected to embody a balance of *wen* and *wu*. At other times only one or the other was expected, but importantly *either* was considered acceptably manly. (2002: 11)

The importance of the two attributes to a Chinese man is also acknowledged in *Analects* (19.22), maintaining that 'There is no man who has not access to the Way of *Wen* and *Wu*.' Although beginning with a textual analysis of ancient figures—the *wen* icon Confucius and the God of War Guan Yu, Louie's theorisation has much contemporary relevance as the model allows for dynamic changes (Louie, 2014). In general, while *wen* masculinity has generally been prioritised, cultural attainments and martial prowess are continuously evolving and competing in the Chinese masculine hierarchy. During the Mao era, working-class and soldierly men were once highly endorsed by the Party-State, albeit undergoing sexual suppression (Brownell, 1999). However, the official celebration of *wu* masculinity seemed to cease along with the end of Maoist leadership. Male workers and peasants soon

found themselves being displaced and marginalised as the dominant discourse changed from class struggle to economic development from the late 1970s onwards (Yang, J., 2010).

The power dynamic between *wen* and *wu* masculinity became more perplexing and contingent under ever-deepening social transformations and the influx of Western ideas and values. Centring on popular music after the Reform, Nimrod Baranovitch's (2003) work offers a fresh perspective to investigate masculinities after 1978. Beginning with Cui Jian's widely known 'Having nothing' in the 1980s, Chinese rock music inherited 'individualism, nonconformism, personal freedom, authenticity, direct and bold expression, and protest and rebellion' from Western rock culture (Baranovitch, 2003: 32). But, at the same time, rock music demonstrated its special Chinese feature of searching for and re-making a modern self. In particular, since male rock stars played the key role in this new musical genre, the celebrated masculinity during the transitional period featured self-empowerment and individualism, as well as expressions of desire and emotionality. These desirable masculine traits mirrored a general rejuvenation of *wu* masculinity at that time. But it was a form of reworked *wu* masculinity that was clearly differentiated from that in the Maoist era.

Meanwhile, discontent about the stringent gender-equal policy of the previous decades fostered the popular perception that female liberation was achieved at the cost of reducing men's power and 'turning them into obedient instruments of the authoritarian party-state' (Song & Hird, 2014: 9; see also Lu, T., 1995). The concern over Chinese masculinity at this time was attributed to 'the regimentation and mental "castration," as it were, imposed by the Communist rule on Chinese men' (Song, 2010: 407). Such anxiety led to extensive discussions about the term *yinsheng yangshuai*, or 'rise of women and decline of men' in public debates and cultural texts, which prevailed during the early 1980s. A central theme throughout the quest for masculinity during the early reform era was thus closely associated with resisting the authoritarian Party-state policy of gender equality during the Maoist era (Wang, X. Y., 2003), 'which is said to have emasculated men,

masculinized women, and mistakenly equated the genders' (Rofel, 2007: 117). Consequently, the dominant gender sentiment, especially as circulating in literary works, called for the revival of gender differentiation (Schaffer & Song, 2014). Hence, it was not only Chinese men and the nation who needed to reclaim their power and potency. Chinese women, whose 'natural' and 'essential' sexual identity had been tragically repressed by socialism during the Maoist era, were subject to being 're-feminised' by many female writers (Zheng, W., 2015).

It was also during this period that Western and also Japanese images of 'tough men' started to flourish in China. Chinese men, together with the country's emasculated colonial past, were treated as obstacles on the way towards modernisation. The weak and fragile Chinese male body were especially interrogated and criticised. This unprecedented concern about both the gender and sexual identity of men gave rise to a new 'cultural fever' in China, represented by the 'looking-for-real-men' and 'root-seeking' movements ranging across music, film, literature, and so on. According to Zhong (2000: 5):

Men's issue began to appear in a different light: on the one hand, 'maleness' came to symbolize an oppositional gesture against the dominant discourse; on the other hand, men appeared as embodiments of dilemmas—political, historical, and cultural—and their 'problems' dominated a discourse centering on a weak/strong dichotomy concerning the uncertainty of male identity.

Notably, masculinity, the male body and the nation became increasingly interlinked under such cultural discourses (Brownell, 1995). According to Everett Zhang (2015: 2), 'since the 1980s, *nanke* (men's medicine) a new division of Chinese medicine that specialized in treating impotence and other male sexual problems, had emerged in hospitals throughout the country'. This dramatic change from sexual repression during the Maoist era to an active pursuit and celebration of individual desires is central to the subject of modernity in contemporary China. Under this 'impotence epidemic', a man's fully functional body and sexual potency have become key markers of masculinity, and furthermore, 'a measure of the fullness of life in its ceaseless rejuvenation' (Zhang, E., 2015: 224). As a result, the status of

wu masculinity was arguably enhanced during this period. The quest for a stronger nation on the global stage and China's increasing exposure to the world forced Chinese men to look beyond indigenous forms of manhood. Instead, they were compelled to position their male identity in a globalised context and absorbed criteria for being 'real men' from the outside. To a large extent, contemporary Chinese young men still confront this difficult task.

Nonetheless, *wen* masculinity was not entirely overshadowed by such a strong desire for physically tough and virile men. Since the 1980s, public acceptance of the chauvinistic model of Chinese masculinity has started to decline (Jankowiak & Li, 2014). Specifically, although the changing cultural and gender landscape had enabled physical or symbolic violence to gain a certain amount of social approval in some male interacting settings (Kohrman, 2007; Watson, 1988), male intellectuals or men with high educational achievements were still respected. For instance, Jankowiak and Li (2014) observe that both men and women, who were *danwei* elites, strived to conform to the ideal of gentility. Towards the 1990s, ordinary people in north-eastern China still overwhelmingly named 'intellectuals' as the most respected group (Hsu, 2007). Nonetheless, traditional scholarly masculinity was redefined by the unleashed force of the market economy and its concomitant changing gender values. To put it simply, the pivotal concern of both Chinese men and women shifted 'towards more global images of elitism and upward mobility in economic and political senses' (Zhang, X., 2011: 146). The most appealing men were represented as those embodying the entrepreneurial spirit—competent, smart ambitious, self-motivated—but certainly differentiated from *baofahu*, who quickly become rich but lack sufficient cultural capital (Lei, 2003). As a result, the breadwinning role was turned into 'a salient gender issue as well as a pressing economic problem for the urban family' (Zuo, 2003: 319). In present-day China, the image of the educated gentleman valiantly and virtuously struggling to lead a moral life in a materialistic and uncouth world is still esteemed in certain circles, but the man with money is winning in the ideal masculinity stakes (Louie, 2015: 89). Thus, it is necessary to take a closer look at different forms of contemporary Chinese masculinities as performed by men from different social strata.

Class formation and masculinities: locating ordinary young men

Class is not a familiar notion among the general public in present-day China. With the shadow of class struggle extending from the Maoist era, it more or less remains dangerous or sensitive to discuss (Li, C. L., 2013). Instead, a softer vocabulary—social strata—has been more frequently articulated. Anagnost (2008: 501) suggests that, unlike ‘class’ (*jieji*), the new language of ‘social strata’ (*shehui jieceng*) references social inequality in a way that does not assume social antagonism⁶. However, not talking about the word ‘class’ does not mean that the concept is irrelevant to contemporary China. On the contrary, it has penetrated into people’s daily lives through official guidelines on raising a high-quality population as well as the proliferating discourse around the distinctive new middle class. In recent years, the middle class, or middle stratum (*zhongchan jieceng*) as it is more frequently termed, seems to be an exception about class that symbolises what everyone desires and pursues. As Guo Yingjie (2009) accurately puts it, ‘Farewell to class, except the middle class’. Moreover, the intersection of class, gender and sexuality has become increasingly visible and organised according to the principle of heteronormativity. It can be seen from the stigmatised ‘leftover women’ (Zarafonetis, 2017) and the glorified middle-class, heterosexual male ideal of being ‘tall-rich-handsome’ (Cao, 2016).

To understand the *ordinary* Chinese men who are the focus of this study, it is necessary to begin with an examination of masculinities in other class strata that may shed light on ‘the mutual conditioning of gender dynamics and other social dynamics’ (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 848). Indeed, contrasting class-coded masculinities are highly visible in today’s China (e.g. Xiao, 2011; Zheng, T., 2015b). While the injustice in the distribution of social resources disempowers some social classes, a group of privileged men has benefited enormously from the economic reconfiguration. Represented by male entrepreneurs, successful businessmen, high-ranking government officials and other ‘new rich’, elite masculinities have

⁶ I am aware of controversial issues around ‘class’ and ‘social strata’. Since the differentiated meanings of these two terms are not the focus of this thesis, I use these two terms in a roughly interchangeable way.

attracted escalating attention among Chinese specialists in recent years (Osburg, 2013, 2016; Zhang, E., 2001; Uretsky, 2008, 2016; Zheng, T., 2006, 2012; Zurndorfer, 2016). Notably, most of these studies highlight the indispensable role played by sexual consumption in business practices and the performance of elite-class masculinities. In all likelihood, the ability to purchase and control women's sexual labour symbolises a man's high social status and even his business competence. As T. Zheng (2012) argues, women's bodies are manipulated as a testing ground for enhancing male bonding and facilitating business deals. Moreover, these privileged men's sexual consumption is legitimised as a way to display entrepreneurial masculinity.

Another notable feature of elite masculinity in contemporary China is the central significance of developing and maintaining *guanxi* (social networks), which is now 'oiled with the bodies of women who serve as mediators providing the glue that finally binds relations' (Uretsky, 2016: 45). Drawing on traditional Chinese notions of sworn brotherhood, Osburg (2016) argues that *guanxi* networks between entrepreneurs, state-owned company managers and governmental officials can be interpreted as *jianghu*. Stemming from knight-errant culture and Chinese martial arts, *jianghu* connotes 'a social and moral space different from the normative world of family, law, and the state in which a concern with honor (*yiqi*) outweighs all other concerns and trumps state law' (Osburg, 2016: 160). In this sense, male homosocial ties that are characterised by solidarity, mutual assistance and moral obligation play a central role in the creation of elite masculinity in China. However, as I will explore, these hallmarks of elite masculinities are barely noticeable among the ordinary Chinese young men whom I encountered.

At the other end of the masculine hierarchy, researchers have examined how rural men, migrant workers, and 'money boys' strive to reclaim their devalued masculinities. Since family background, educational qualifications, marital status and personal economic accumulation are all relevant in evaluating a man's masculinity, these disadvantaged male groups are no doubt facing painful realities. What further threatens their masculinity is usually the dislocation from familial

environments. Migrant workers, as Lin (2013) puts it, need to reinvent themselves to 'become modern' in urban settings. Nonetheless, Lin also observes that Confucian ethics remain as important resources in shaping their manhood and the sense of being filial sons in spite of their absence from their rural families. The tension between traditional and modern values can also be seen in Obendiek's (2016) research with university graduates from rural north-western China. Despite their assertion of autonomy in marriage choice, many young men feel obligated to consider 'paying back' their parents in terms of making the most appropriate marital decision. This is usually driven by a feeling of indebtedness for all ranges of support offered by their families during higher education. In other words, rural men's aspirations to construct 'modern' masculinity are enmeshed in their traditional networks.

Yet, cultural affiliation to conventional gender discourse is not universal. In the new socioeconomic landscape, Chinese men who embody peripheral masculinity are constantly redefining their masculine selves and adjusting their gendered practices. For example, migrant workers in Choi and Peng's (2016) study have made 'masculine compromises' by strategies such as undertaking more domestic chores and developing intimate fatherhood in order to preserve their 'symbolic dominance'. In Bax's (2012) study of male hairdressers in Shanghai, he contends that within the modern service regime, a migrant hairdresser is required to pursue a cosmopolitan and commoditised self to the extent that 'uncosmopolitan' personal history has to be erased. Nevertheless, a common concern for these marginalised men is the stigmatised labels they need to bear. As Sayer (2002) suggests, a moral stigma is frequently attached to those who are worst off in class terms and, correspondingly, moral privilege is attached to high class. Vocational school students, for instance, are widely viewed as 'failures' of the contemporary education system (Ling, 2015; Woronov, 2011). In comparison, many 'money boys' confront a dual predicament in terms of class and 'dangerous' sexuality. These men, who mobilise their bodies for sexual transactions, are seen as deviant and rebellious labour subjects for breaking the moral order of sex and desire, not to mention normative masculinity (Kong, T., 2012; Rofel, 2010). Money boys also fail

to live up to the dominant neoliberal discourse rooted in the present state ideology, in which 'economic development takes precedence over everything else' (Zheng, T., 2015b: 97). Yet, the sense of embarrassment and loss because of their lower social status and displaced masculinities are much less widely articulated among ordinary Chinese young men.

As can be seen, both elite and lower-class masculinities embody some distinct features in contemporary China. However, among scholars writing on the middle class in China, many agree that the urban middle classes occupy an ambiguous position within society, and the internal configuration of the 'middle class' usually appears complex and amorphous (Cheng & Goodman, 2013; Li, C., 2010; Tomba, 2004). Recently in Chinese academia, 'stratum analysis' has been more favoured instead of the sensitive topic of 'class analysis' (Guo, Y., 2009). Li Chunling (2013), a prominent Chinese scholar in this field, points out that what really marked the emergence of the middle class was the alluring description of middle-class life in commercial advertisements in the media, through which the image of the 'new middle class' was constructed and widely accepted among the public. She maintains that defining the Chinese middle class and middle stratum requires plural indicators (occupation, income and educational background) rather than a singular standard (Li, C. L., 2013: 68). In Li Qiang's research on the middle class and middle stratum in China, he argues differently that 'university education is the main mechanism for the construction of the middle class by offering mainstream, or middle-class norms' (2001: 20). But the elusiveness of the Chinese middle class is further compounded by the huge urban-rural divisions and regional differences. Therefore, the definition of the specific social group eligible to be included as middle class remains controversial.

Middle-class men in contemporary China appear to bear various identities, such as 'elite migrants' (Dong, 2012), urban university students of the one-child generation (Liu, F., 2008), metrosexual men with distinctive taste in lifestyle magazines (Song & Lee, 2010), and male white-collar workers (Hird, 2009, 2016). Among these studies, Beijing's white-collar men in Hird's ethnographic study have most in

common with my participants. As Hird argues, these professional men, who embody what Connell (2005a) terms ‘transnational business masculinity’, attempt to ‘define themselves through the rhetoric of freedom and equality, and move toward these ideals in some of their activities, but simultaneously act to shore up the parameters of their own gendered and classed privileges as much as they can’ (Hird, 2016: 138). Thus, white-collar men construct their subjectivities in a ‘bricolage-like’ manner in order to fit into the urban masculine ideal of neoliberal discourse. This is particularly evident in white-collar men’s firm support for essentialist sex divisions and men’s gender privilege over women in both public and private spaces. But they also draw on a variety of discourses, including Confucian tradition, biological difference and market forces, to legitimise their male dominance.

In general, the ordinary young men in this research share some of these characteristics of white-collar Chinese men, but there are also several differences. For instance, while a core part of performing white-collar masculinity is ‘grooming and fashioning the body in a particular look’ (Hird, 2009: 56), the ordinary young men endeavour to distance themselves from such an image. In addition, homosocial bonding and business socialising play a much smaller part in the ordinary men’s identity formation compared with white-collar men. Moreover, the occupations of the young men I interviewed are not restricted to white-collar positions, but also include small-business owners, junior civil servants, employees of public institutions, and university students. And, overall, the ordinary men in this study are less well-off than the middle-class men in Hird’s research, some of whom own their own companies or occupy senior professional positions. In this sense, the social location of ordinary young men ranges from lower to standard middle class. Most importantly, many of the ordinary young men described themselves as ordinary (*putong*) or normal (*zhengchang*), and hoped to avoid standing out. To a large degree, they lack the enterprising spirit that is a key marker of entrepreneurial masculinity—in my participants’ own words: ‘My life after ten years...I hope it’ll be just the same as today’ (Alex and San pangzi).

The problematic media discourse

The Chinese young men in this study have grown up in an era characterised by an explosion of media discourse around men and masculinities, especially on the Internet. Across the world, individuals born from the mid-1980s onwards are categorised as the 'Digital generation', 'Net Generation', the 'Net-Gen', or 'Internet generation' (Herring, 2008; Collin & Burns, 2009). For many researchers interested in the lives and identities of young people, this is an unprecedented situation that has led to a range of revolutions in youth lifestyles, youth transition and subcultures. In the Chinese context, positive views see the young generation utilising the Internet to create 'modern' Chinese identities (Liu, F., 2011). Although the government's sophisticated Internet censorship system has been widely acknowledged (Deibert, 2002; Qiang, 2011), it is contended that online space also 'provides an alternative locus of power, permitting the transgressing of existing social and cultural hierarchies' (Gong & Yang, 2010: 4). Indeed, the Internet serves not only as a platform for entertainment, but also as an emerging space for the articulation and negotiation of identities. In this virtual space, young netizens adopt constantly renewing identity labels that can directly reflect their lives in the real world. In turn, such practices also have a great impact on their real-life experiences.

While new identities and gender roles emerge at enormous speed on the Internet, Song and Hird (2014) maintain that these circulating images reveal the conflicting, sometimes even contradictory (re)constructions of Chinese masculinities in cyberspace. Despite challenges to traditional male roles or even to heteronormativity, men's domination over women and elite men's privileges over other men are often reinforced. For example, *diaosi* initially emerged as a joking expression among disadvantaged young men calling themselves 'losers', but became widely embraced across society even among middle-class men. However, it is argued that *diaosi* discourse is both transgressive and reproductive (Cao, 2016). On the one hand, the social celebration of *diaosi* men contributes to resisting the ruling values and dominant masculinity. On the other hand, it reinforces the existing social and gender hierarchy by demarcating *diaosi* men from

the ideal of 'tall-rich-handsome', and by enlarging *diaosi* men's heterosexual desire. Moreover, the evident disjuncture between alternative depictions of Chinese young men in the media and in their real-life experience must be addressed. For example, androgynous men, who are super idols and top stars in the media, continue to be seen as embodying problematic masculinity in reality (Chapter 4). In short, what is tolerated as a social phenomenon is not necessarily what young men and women wish themselves, their intimate others, children, and the people around them to adopt in everyday life (Hird, 2013: 63).

Another issue that is frequently raised in the media is the 'crisis of masculinity' discourse. Along with their Western counterparts (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2013; McDowell, 2000; Roger, 2008), boys and men in China are repeatedly warned that they are experiencing a severe crisis in terms of their educational achievement and assertion of manhood. Recent media representations of failing boys in schools, feminised boys and men, and young men who are sloppy compared with their stylish girlfriends seem to have thrown the whole society into intense concern about Chinese boyhood and manhood. However, many researchers are sceptical about such assumptions. For Lin and Mac an Ghail (2017: 2), the circulating media accounts of 'boys-in-crisis' is 'derivatively borrowing from Western neoliberal policy discourses about gender relations with a particular emphasis on selective descriptive narratives'. Moreover, the discursive shift from boy preference to boy crisis actually serves to re-inscribe traditional notions of boys' and men's privileges and strengthens a modern nation. With a different focus on effeminate men (fake women, *weiniang*) in the media, T. Zheng (2015a: 361) argues that what underpins the discursive production of a crisis of masculinity is the broader project of building strong Chinese manhood and sharpening proper male gender roles. Importantly, the distorted educational system that has created under-achieving boys is believed to cause deviant masculinities. In this sense, although a variety of media depictions of men should not be equated with social actualities, they are embedded in, and informed by, structural forces. They may also offer an alternative lens to examine ideal masculinity in today's China.

Identity Formation and Cultural Values

Having outlined the broader context of contemporary China and situated ordinary young men within the historical, social and economic backdrop, I now move on to explain the theoretical and conceptual rationale of this thesis. While the complex formation of any form of masculinity may deserve at least a book-length exploration, in this thesis, I mainly focus on embodied masculinities, practices of intimacy and the temporal dimension of men's identities as constructed and narrated through kinship. Essentially, I chose these three aspects based on the rich data available from my interviews. At the same time, each of these themes provides a distinct angle to investigate how ordinary Chinese young men make sense of their masculine selves. These dimensions of masculinity also evoke bigger themes, such as health, relationships, and families, which are of paramount importance to being a Chinese man today. Analytically, I have sought to investigate the masculinities of ordinary young men in a Chinese cultural framework imbued with a historical Confucian legacy without overlooking Western debates on personal lives, reflexivity and individualisation. Such an approach contributes to a more critical understanding of the local specificities of Chinese masculinities whilst building up critical dialogues with variants of manhood in other parts of the world.

Body and shenti

Once an 'absent presence' in sociology (Shilling, 2003), the body has come to the fore in contemporary Western sociological studies since the mid-1980s. Before this, the Cartesian legacy that prescribes the domination of mind over body and an ontological distinction between them rendered the body less worthy of scholarly attention (Turner, 1984). As has been widely acknowledged, the growing prominence of the body as a subject of study is attributed to a range of factors, both in terms of sociocultural developments and shifting academic concerns (Morgan & Scott, 1993; Nettleton, 2013). Major influential forces include the escalating obsession with the body and identity in consumer culture (Featherstone, 1991; Mishkind et al., 1986; Twigg, 2012), technological innovations in reproduction and cosmetic surgery (Williams, S., 1997; Shilling, 2007), demographic changes like the 'greying of populations' (Buse et al., 2016; Howson,

2013) as well as feminists' writings on the politics of women's bodies (Jackson & Scott, 2002; Kline, 2010). For Turner (1992), the centrality of the body in contemporary Western societies means that we are moving towards what he calls a 'somatic society' structured around the regulation of bodies; that is, a social system in which the body, as simultaneously constraint and resistance, is the principal field of political and cultural activity (Turner, 1992: 12).

In general, there are three key theoretical perspectives on the body (Nettleton, 2013). Emerging during the 18th century, the naturalist approach defines the body as a biological entity, which generates individual identity and social, political and economic relations. Such perspectives have served to legitimise gender inequalities and, of course, have been critiqued by feminist scholars (Bleier, 1984; Scott & Morgan, 1993). In contrast, the social constructionist view, in spite of many variations, argues that the body is socially produced or invented and thus subject to its sociocultural and historical contexts. In particular, the scholarship of Norbert Elias (1994) emphasising the evolution of civilised bodies along historical transformations, Pierre Bourdieu who sees the body as 'the most indisputable materialisation' of class inequalities and distinctions (1984: 190), Michel Foucault (1979, 1981) on disciplinary power and bio-politics, and Erving Goffman's (1959, 1963) dramaturgical model that highlights the presentation of the individual body for particular impressions, have been extraordinarily influential. Sociologists and anthropologists have since developed more literature based on these theoretical frameworks. For example, informed by the work of Bourdieu and Elias, Shilling (2003: 4) raises the notion of the 'body project'—a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity in the process of becoming; a project that should be worked on and accomplished as part of an individual's self-identity. Moreover, Turner (1992: 57), drawing upon a Foucauldian perspective, stresses regimes of regulation of the body, but also argues that the body is 'simultaneously both discursive and animated [...] both socially constructed and objective'.

The third approach to the body stems from phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), which emphasises the intentionality of actors and the embodied nature of

all human perceptions. These ideas have contributed significantly to the concepts of embodiment and the lived body, which are prevailing analytical tools in sociological studies of the body (Nettleton & Watson, 1998; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). Furthermore, in relation to both phenomenological and social constructionist thought, contemporary authors have been inspired by symbolic interactionism (Waskul & Vannini, 2006b). Crossley (2001, 2006a, 2006b), for example, has taken up both phenomenological philosophy and interactionist perspectives, and privileged the 'reflexive embodiment' framework. As Crossley highlights, *we are our bodies* and we have the 'capacity and tendency to perceive, emote about, reflect and act upon one's own body' (2006a: 1). This standpoint has given rise to empirical work that explores the habit(us) of mixed martial arts (Spencer, 2009), and the subjective experience of the female athletic body (Kotarba & Held, 2006), whereby reflexive body techniques and embodied experience play the key role in (gendered) identity formation.

In comparison, traditional Chinese understandings of the body—*shen* or *shenti* in Chinese—are shaped by its distinct cultural elements and philosophical conventions (Ames, 1993a). Interpreted as body-person or body-self, it has been well documented that Chinese *shenti* has some intrinsic differences from Western perceptions of the body (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002; Elvin, 1993; Ots, 1990). Fundamentally, body and mind are not considered as having a separate existence, and therefore the Cartesian mind-body dualism that has impeded the development of Western sociology of the body has scarcely impinged upon Chinese thought. Contrastingly, *shenti* is straightforwardly identified with the self (Sun, 2004 [1983]; Tung, 1994). As Ames (1993b: 163) explains, in classical Chinese philosophy, the conceptualisation of the person was 'seen holistically as a psychosomatic process'. The Confucian worldview, in particular, put enormous emphasis on *shenti*. The Confucian body holds the potential to become 'an aesthetic expression of the self' (Tu, 1994: 178), which subsequently extends to the family, the community, the country and even the whole universe. Thus, of pivotal importance in comprehending Chinese *shenti* (and the self) is its inherent relationality (Tu, 1985; Ho, 1995). Ham (2001: 317) maintains that, in

Confucianism, what determines and confirms my being is not the metaphysical, the transcendental, or the rational, but my physical body and the intricate intersubjective social network within which it is placed. However, as I shall explore in Chapter 4, the embodied self in contemporary China is also able to claim its autonomy, rather than the conventional self that 'can never be thought of as independent' (Bockover, 2012: 185). Furthermore, Chinese cultural traditions in general regard the body as a dynamic process of becoming and lived experience; it is transformable and elastic rather than a static existence (Huang, J., 2009; Tu, 1992, 1994). With regard to my analytical focus on Chinese male *shenti*, embodied self-cultivation lies at the centre of Confucianism, which connotes both intellectual and moral significance and forms the basis of ideal male identity construction (Hall & Ames, 1987; Fingarette, 1979).

As Zhang Yanhua eloquently sums up, Chinese *shenti* is:

a word with a connotation of 'person' and 'self', is much more active and intentional than body [...] *Shenti* is both physical and extraphysical, capable of feeling, perceiving, creating, and resonating or embodying changes and transformations in the social world as well as in the natural world. It is the world: at the same time, emotive, moral, aesthetic, and visceral. (2007: 6)

Thus, the meaning of *shenti* is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions with historical imprints (Zhang, E., 2015). Nonetheless, I suggest that *shenti* can also forge critical links with several Western schools of thought on the body. For example, modern physical education and training with moral connotations resemble Elias's 'civilised body' (Brownell, 1995), while the pervasive media discourse of middle-class male bodies with distinct taste strongly echoes Bourdieusian critiques (Song & Lee, 2010). Moreover, the state promotion of health-seeking practices and biotechnology forcefully underlines Foucault's 'bio-politics' and strategies of governmentality (Chen, N., 2008). Especially in urban areas, people have indeed 'come into being by welding the body onto the social, cultural, economic and political responsibilities of citizenship and the state' (Halse, 2009: 50). To some degree, the traditional Chinese perception of *shenti* can be

adequately interpreted using phenomenology (Tung, 1994). Studies of the Chinese medical view of bodies, for example, embrace ideas such as the lived body and the 'body in human experience' as Merleau-Ponty (1962) phrased it (Ots, 1990). More than this, an emphasis on the relational and social features of *shenti* is in concert with the interactionist perspective, which considers the body to be 'always more than a tangible, physical, corporeal object' but 'an enormous vessel of meaning of utmost significance to both personhood and society' (Waskul & Vannini, 2006a: 3). The Chinese body-person, or body-self, has much in common with Jackson and Scott's (2007: 111) model of embodied selfhood that encompasses 'how we make sense of what we feel', 'what we can make intelligible to ourselves as feeling' and 'what we can therefore convey to others'. Thus, my analysis of embodied Chinese masculinities has been enlightened by Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) conceptualisation of taste, habitus and bodily hexis and the interactionist perceptions of the embodied, reflexive, relational self located in social relationships (Crossley, 2006a, 2006b). Despite all of these considerations, traditional cultural repertoires, especially Confucian traditions, make the major contribution to my analytical framework in light of the great extent to which we are informed by our culture and history.

Families, relationships and intimacy

During the late 20th century, feminist scholars made great efforts to redefine the domestic sphere as a social construct rather than a biological formation (Fox & Murry, 2000; Thorne & Yalom, 1982; Yeatman, 1986). However, under the profound social transformations brought by late modernity, individualisation and neoliberalism, 'the family' has gradually lost its appeal over the past few decades. For example, in British academia, the research domain of families and close interpersonal relationships is argued to have witnessed an 'intimate turn' since the 1990s, which signifies a scholarly shift from familial structures and institutions to 'the very qualitative meaning of family life' (Gabb, 2008: 78). As Gilding (2010: 757) notes, a new orthodoxy has emerged in the field of family research that 'highlights the open-endedness of intimate relations' and 'marginalizes the concept of the family, on the basis that it obscures contingency and diversity'. At least among

Western family sociologists, *the family* has been pluralised to *families* in order to capture the increasingly multiple and heterogeneous forms of intimacy, togetherness and care (Budgeon & Roseneil, 2004; Holmes, 2014; McCarthy et al., 2003; Smart & Shipman, 2004; Weston, 1991; Williams, F., 2004).

While there has been a general shift away from the singular form of family, the pivotal role played by important relationships in shaping individuals' identity formation has not been overlooked among family researchers. In more recent years, a variety of analytical lenses and concepts have been introduced in relation to families and intimate relationships (Morgan, 2003). One of the milestones in family studies is David Morgan's (1996) 'family practices', which marks a shift away from the normalising label of 'the family' to the fluidity and heterogeneity of contemporary families. Thus, individuals reflexively *do* family in a broader social, historical and cultural context. Family practices foreground the everyday dimension of family lives, both significant and unremarkable, and encourage reflexivity on the part of both family members and researchers (Morgan, 2011a). This concept has been widely adopted and further developed, as exemplified by Finch's (2007) argument that families have to be 'displayed' as well as 'done'.

Intimacy, which refers to 'any form of *close association* in which people acquire familiarity' (Jamieson, 1998: 8; emphasis in original), is another widespread term used to examine the quality of family life and relationships. Jamieson (2011: 1.2) later elaborates 'practices of intimacy' as 'practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other'. Hence, practices of intimacy may overlap with family practices, but are not restricted to interactions in the domestic sphere. These relational and dynamic framings of relationships and families are particularly pertinent to investigating contemporary Chinese families and intimate ties, which have been gradually open to negotiation in light of rapid social changes. For example, in his study of Chinese male migrant workers, Lin (2014) observes that rural men who are physically away from their rural families reinvent rather than discard the meaning of traditional family connections. Typically, providing material support for their ageing parents

and other family members has ‘gained significant symbolic meaning of *displaying* oneself as a filial and responsible son’ (2014: 724; my emphasis). In Chapter 5, I will detail young men’s negotiation of couple relationships by drawing on the concept of intimacy and practices of intimacy. These concepts allow my analysis to move beyond treating Chinese young men’s familial role as driven solely by obligatory contracts, but with an alternative focus on the multifaceted quality and density of personal relationships (cf. Liu, J., 2017). They also serve as flexible conceptual tools to examine participants’ narratives about their day-to-day intimate lives.

With the intention of capturing the decentralisation of families in the contemporary West, some other sociologists have proposed more inclusive models. A prominent contribution is made by Carol Smart through her conceptualisation of personal life, which ‘can keep the term “family” in the lexicon, but which puts it alongside other forms of intimacy and relationships without always already prioritizing biological or married forms of relationships and/or intimacy’ (2007: 187–8). As Vanessa May (2011a) argues, a personal-life perspective stresses that a multitude of separate spheres of the everyday—such as family, childhood, sexuality, consumption and so on—need to be seen as linked with each other and examined in a relational way. Differently, Pahl and Spencer (2004) privilege the concept of ‘personal community’ to designate a network of intimate and active interpersonal ties in order to capture the blurring of boundaries between family and non-family, especially friends (see also Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Indeed, a growing recognition of non-familial relationships that eclipse conventional family relationships is another marked feature of recent sociological analyses of personal life in the age of individualism and late/second modernity (Jamison et al., 2006). Friendship, because of its relative ‘pureness’ that can be freely chosen (Pahl, 2000; Roberts, 2009), has been argued to be a privileged source of identity construction and continuity compared with family or romantic relationships (Budgeon, 2006; Rebughini, 2011). However, as Irwin (2004: 1.8) emphasises, subjectivities are not more autonomous of the social interaction order than in the past, but remain an integral part of that order, even in a time of rapid change. It is true that, despite all the fascination with friendship, relationships

between friends have been found to be intrinsically gendered and classed (Migliaccio, 2009; Pellandini-Simányi, 2017).

Nevertheless, against the new orthodoxy of decentring families, the continuing social relevance and usefulness of the concept of 'family' have also been documented (Bengtson et al., 2002; Morgan, 2011b). Gilding (2010) contends that there is a risk among sociologists of overlooking the inequalities and institutional constraints within and around families by overstating the fluidity and openness of intimate relationships. It is therefore suggested that 'the family is best understood as an institutional regime' given its 'reflexive reconfiguration on the one hand, and [their] institutional embeddedness on the other' (Gilding, 2010: 774). This echoes Widmer et al.'s (2008: 7) argument that narratives of individual families 'are embedded in relational structures that exist beyond individual knowledge'. From a different angle, McCarthy (2012) maintains that the proliferation of family in everyday language justifies its enduring value in providing togetherness and belonging for constructing relational personhood. In this sense, contemporary familial and intimate relationships may have undergone profound transformations or been imbued with different meanings, but they remain key sites of identity construction for individuals.

As to intimate and familial practices in contemporary China, they are characterised by a 'deinstitutionalisation' of marriage along with enduring family values and a division of labour defined by the Confucian patriarchal order (Davis & Friedman, 2014). While individuals have been granted more space to reconfigure their personal relationships, these negotiations 'also always are shaped by cultural memories both physically embodied and engraved in the wider social environment' (Kipnis, 2017: 115). Specifically, in contrast to the radical egalitarianism during the Maoist period, the breadwinning role has been redefined as men's task under the sweeping market forces from 1978 onwards (Zuo, 2003; Zuo & Bian, 2001, 2005). Meanwhile, women undertaking the majority of the housework are viewed as contributing positively to relational harmony. Even with the tremendous changes of the past few decades, enduring family ethics and a

division of labour defined by the Confucian patriarchal order persist as the major forces shaping people's understandings and practices of intimate life (Yang & He, 2014). Notably, heteronormative conjugal marriage is still the most desirable and 'normal' form of intimate relationship (Kam, 2015), and as Evans (1997: 212) states, 'the only legitimate form of adult existence'. Moreover, family relations are generally regarded as a reliable and indispensable resource supporting individual members' financial and emotional wellbeing (Xu & Xia, 2014). Consequently, it is not uncommon to treat adult children's marriage as a collective issue, albeit with regional variations (Ji & Yeung, 2014; To, 2015; Zhang & Sun, 2014). Another lingering influence of Confucianism is the valorisation of family roles and responsibilities for both men and women in contemporary China (Cao, 2017; Chan, A., 2012; Jankowiak & Moore, 2017; Shu et al., 2012). The significance of fulfilling one's family duties in order to construct a socially appropriate gender identity is widely demonstrated in domestic lives, ranging from the everyday triviality of housework to more significant decisions like achieving parenthood (Evans, 2007). Importantly, the latter point of reproduction has been argued to be entangled with state control and extended family networks in complicated ways (Santos, 2016; Tong et al., 2016).

Yet, this is not to deny gradual transitions in Chinese intimate lives. In particular, the way in which individuals are connected with their partners and family may have transformed. For example, Chinese fathers are found to be more engaged, caring and emotionally expressive (Choi & Peng, 2016; Chuang et al., 2013) in contrast to the tough, invisible and silent image of the father figure in conventional Chinese families (Li & Lamb, 2013). In addition, dramatic economic reconfigurations and the increasing cost of living have made it more difficult for men to perform culturally appreciated masculinity in couple relationships (Farrer, 2014). Chinese young men do not only confront the pressure to marry but, more importantly, they are expected to bring more resources into a marriage than before in both rural and urban areas (Shi, 2017; Zavoretti, 2017). Another evident shift in Chinese families and marriage is the growing significance of emotional bond and emotional display. While many women commonly face the dilemma of

‘cash or care’, Chinese young men also need to tackle the intense tension between financial support and emotional investment in their relationships or families. In the past, anthropologists have reported that Chinese culture conceptualises emotion as an idiosyncrasy and lacking symbolic importance, something that does not intrinsically matter in social interactions and identity constructions (Potter, 1988). As a result, Chinese marriage used to be built upon pragmatic reciprocity and collaboration (Fei, 1992). Pimentel also suggests that ‘Chinese couples have what Westerners might characterise as a relatively unromantic vision of love’ (2000: 44–5). However, other authors have questioned a West-oriented view of reading Chinese intimate lives by raising alternative models (Chen & Li, 2007) or offering evidence that underlines the growing articulation of love and affection in practices of intimacy (Farrer, 2014; Hansen & Pang, 2008; Yan, 2003). Focusing on class formation and housing, Li Zhang (2010) argues that conflicting values and beliefs about relationships and marriage convincingly mirror the reconfiguration of the intimate realm with shifting notions of self-worth in contemporary China. However, Zhang continues to emphasise that this configuration ‘is a rather complex and gendered process rather than a simple story of materiality trumping emotionality’ (2010: 166). These works highlight the complex entanglement between emotion, responsibility and material accumulation in present-day China.

Similar to the cultural view of *shenti*, I suggest that a pivotal point for understanding families, relationships and intimacies in the Chinese context is to recognise that the growing debates about relationality, connectedness and reflexivity in Western academia are rooted in indigenous social and cultural repertoires and vocabularies. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to bridge Chinese social reality and historical values with leading theories and analytical frameworks that emphasise practices (Morgan, 1996, 2011a), intimacy (Jamieson, 1998, 2011) and relationality and connectedness (Smart, 2007). In general, contemporary authors have produced more work on the transforming scenes of Chinese families and marriage than studies questioning their existence or necessity (Santos & Harrel, 2017). The salience of ‘families’—both as an analytical focus and real-life issue—retains its centrality in intimate life, which rarely extends to include

friends or other intimates, as in many Western societies. While terms indicating fictive kinship ties are still in use among certain groups of Chinese men, they usually connote different meanings compared with family members or are enacted in particular contexts (Lin, 2013; Osburg, 2016). Although male homosocial bonds used to be a pivotal part of men's everyday lives and, therefore, the construction of masculinities (Mann, 2000), more recently their connotations have been redefined and sometimes overshadowed by a discourse of self-reliance.

Temporality, narrative identity and kinship

Throughout my fieldwork and the writing process, I was often impressed by how the young men told their stories to me. The tone in which they spoke with a woman, the delicate emotions imbuing their accounts and some common strategies they used to present their masculine selves convinced me that narratives play an essential role in the construction of gendered identity, as has been noted by many qualitative and feminist researchers (Brannen, 2013; Laslett, 1999; McNay, 1999, 2000; Plummer, 1995). Rather than merely offering an opportunity to talk, interviews are seen as powerful sites for interviewees (and researchers) to construct identities (Conway, 2008; Grenz, 2009; Jamieson et al., 2011a). As J. Harding (2006: 1.2) contends, interview interactions 'create specific subject positions for interviewees to take up, which they in turn variously negotiate, modify and, possibly, refuse'. Meanwhile, the variety of vivid stories about the past and familial memories that I heard bring the temporality of gendered identity to the fore. This means that the masculinities of Chinese young men need to be examined across individual life courses, generations within their families, and perhaps also historical periods.

Drawing on George Herbert Mead's theorisation of self and time, Jackson (2010: 124) argues that, when telling a story about oneself, the person 'is also revealed in the act of ongoing self-construction, in self-making, through reconstructing her past in relation to the situated context of self-telling.' Lawler (2014: 30) refers to Paul Ricoeur and makes a similar point that 'the very constitution of an identity is configured over time and through narrative'. Here, it is clear that narrative

identities should be viewed as processual, relational, reflexive and temporal. The temporality of story-telling underlines the pivotal point that we are always narrating the past from the perspective of the present in order to tailor our histories to be congruent with current identities; that is, 'acquisitions and applications of pasts always follow the needs and demands of the present' (Welzer, 2010: 6). As Mead (1934: 116) neatly puts it: 'The past must be found in the present world.' More than this, Mead directs our attention to the subordination of the past to the future: 'the novelty of every future demands a novel past' (1932: 31). Therefore, the past is 'a resource, not a cage', and 'we use it to make sense of the present and imagine the future' (Flaherty & Fine, 2001: 153). Temporal selfhood can be clearly observed in the generational 'handing-down' of identities in Lawler's (2000) research on mother-daughter relationships. Leyshon and Bull's (2011) study on young people's narrative identity in the English countryside also provides a persuasive example. As they argue, the storied-self is 'a type of self that can shape and be moulded to the various transitions or openings of life' (2011: 163).

While telling stories can be a powerful tool for identity creation, Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) note that such self-formative power may be constrained and even determined by the cultural frames in which narratives are located. The recognition that personal narratives are shaped by wider structures bolsters a coherent and situated sense of selfhood, which cannot be completely capricious or creative (McNay, 1999). According to Stuart Hall (1997: 32), 'some stories have a much longer structuration, a *longue duree*, almost a historical inertia.' This historical depth of narrative account has been illustrated in studies on collective narratives about community (Blockland, 2005), national identity (Byrne, 2007), and painful memories in relation to race, migration and war trauma (Jacobs, 2010; Moriarty, 2005). In the Chinese context, the compelling work of Joseph Esherick (2011) and Henrietta Harrison (2005), both locating personal and family experience within the turbulent national history, have explored the embeddedness of private memories in social realities with diverse biographical and historical baggage. Meanwhile, individuals' potential to engender bigger changes are also highlighted. As Esherick

(2011: 14) writes: 'The members of the Ye family certainly suffered as well, but they were not simply passive victims; they were also active participants in the making of history.'

On a micro level, the contemporary enthusiasm for tracing family genealogies and narrating family histories reveals the fascination of kinship for both the public and academics (Carsten, 2000; Kuhn, 1995; Mason, J., 2008). Although anthropologists used to assert that only non-Westerners live through kinship ties whilst Westerners make individual selves (Carsten, 2004), such an assumption has already been challenged and critiqued. Even with rapidly developing new reproductive knowledge, blood ties, kinship, and family relations are usually irreplaceable to individuals. As Edwards (2000: 229) was told by a resident of a Northern English town: 'Everybody needs roots'. Roots contribute to connecting individuals to their relational and spatial pasts by offering a reliable feeling of security and continuity. These perspectives are more or less linked to the notion of 'family practices': telling and retelling old family stories knit family members together (Widerberg, 2011), while preserving and doing family rituals shapes an individual member's identity within the family group (Smit, 2011). Family-rooted memories are particularly alluring and powerful because 'the emotional reaction people often have to recalling these memories can create a sentimental aura around the past of "the family"' (Smart, 2011: 18). The importance of the ability to recount one's family past and display it to others is also manifested through material goods such as family albums or a mantelpiece to display identity, family and class taste (Hirsch, 2012; Hurdley, 2013). It is true that personal or family memories and the ways in which we reinterpret them are always gendered, classed, and sometimes ethnic (Blockland, 2005; McNay, 1999; Walkerdine, 1991). In this sense, the intergenerational transmission of identity and the distinction between working-class and middle-class parenting both validate the social nature of memory and narratives (Brannen et al., 2011; Finn & Henwood, 2009; Irwin & Elley, 2011).

The literature discussed above sheds light on the significance of exploring narrative masculinity and its temporal dimension, as well as how it is shaped by but also

shapes kinship ties. In the Chinese context, time and temporality are primary concepts in classical philosophies and indicate the country's high historical consciousness (Liu, S., 1974). Tu (1974: 119) suggests that time is considered 'not merely as a mental construct but also as an experienced reality' in Confucianism, through which individuals consistently invest in self-cultivation for the ultimate self-realisation. Importantly, generational transmission, as advocated by Confucius, has played a fundamental role in the continuation of Confucian ethics. A traditional task for Chinese people is to model cultural practices for the generations that succeed them throughout their lives. In so doing, the older generations 'recommend to the progeny that they do the same for those generations yet to come' (Ames, 2014: 183). In all likelihood, the vitality of filial piety in contemporary China, which has scarcely been eroded among the young generation receiving a modern education, is the most convincing example to justify the historical continuation of Chinese identity (Deutsch, 2006; Hu & Scott, 2016). On a personal level, Eklund (2016) finds that, among informants of the one-child generation who plan to become parents, the majority want to have more than one child as a result of the loneliness in their own childhood memories. In comparison, Shi (2017) documents a declining belief in continuing the family line in rural north-eastern China. This is energised by the changing roles of sons from 'care providers' to 'financial burdens' for parents under the transforming patriarchal institution. These studies, although raising different arguments, reveal the multi-dimensionality of the temporal self. One may refer to significant personal and collective pasts—exemplified by childhood experience and filial piety—but abandon less relevant aspects, like the reproductive obligation. These transformations cannot be separated from the conflicting values wrought by profound social changes since the 20th century. In present-day Chinese society, the continuity of masculine identity in kinship networks, although remaining demonstrable, is only facing more challenges.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set the backdrop for ordinary young men in contemporary China. These men are living in a transformative era, the prologue to which

probably started much earlier than their birth. On the one hand, they are the lucky generation, at least with regard to most men I encountered. They have been free from the violent social upheavals that occurred before the Reform era and enjoy material comforts created by their parents and a vibrant modern lifestyle driven by the market economy and globalisation. On the other hand, they are inevitably confronting new challenges, which have been produced by the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity, as well as individualisation and relationality. Even though these men are able to live relatively well-off lives in urban China, increasingly discernible class inequalities and energetic media discourse foment new anxieties for them. Meanwhile, the historical legacy of Confucianism remains a powerful force in shaping men's identities, despite tremendous shifts in both public and private lives. Whereas Confucianism has largely ceased to be a rigid system of domination, official discourses and governmental policies, especially in recent years, have strengthened its overarching influence.

By critically reviewing the literature, I have also identified the key theoretical perspectives that informed my analysis. Discussions around the body, relationality, intimacy and narrative identities in the West are especially inspiring and useful, while indigenous cultural, philosophical and historical resources serve to inform critical investigations into the masculinity-making process of Chinese young men who are straddling tradition and modernity. An additional point I want to emphasise is my focus on everyday life, during which these men make meanings for themselves and construct their masculinities. It is through numerous mundane and unnoticed days and nights that culture is lived out (Williams, R., 1981, 1993), mechanisms of power operate and wider transformations become possible (Bennett & Silva, 2004). Given its analytical significance yet insufficient exploration, throughout this research I have paid attention to the everyday as a crucial site of masculinity production.

Chapter 3

Researching Young Men in the Chinese Context

In this chapter, I provide a detailed exploration of the methodological issues around researching Chinese young men, which maps out the trajectory of my research design, conducting fieldwork, data analysis and reflections throughout the whole process. As Skeggs (1997: 17) suggests, methodology is ‘a theory of methods which informs a range of issues from who to study, how to study, which institutional practices to adopt (such as interpretative practices), how to write and which knowledge to use.’ Accordingly, I also address some methodological reflections on my shifting epistemological engagement with Chinese young men and the process of developing the analytical framework, both of which are central to knowledge production. Meanwhile, I consider the difficulties I confronted and the satisfactions and pleasures gained from doing this research. Thus, this chapter is contextually specific and contains reflexive autobiographical accounts. I will detail how this particular project has been influenced by the economic, cultural and social baggage that I brought into this intellectual work. In this sense, I view ‘making the backstage visible’ (Riessman, 2005: 486) as a chance to bring distinctive, reflexive and critical insights into the study of Chinese young men.

Research Design

Shifting positions: from crisis of masculinity to identity construction

Traditionally, sociologists have adopted the official definitions of problematic groups and issues as the starting point of their research (Young, 1971). Inviting sociologists to pay more attention to daily episodes that are easily passed over or neglected, Back (2007: 8) contends that sociology has nonetheless been haunted by an ‘enchanted obsession with the spectacular, namely, the loudest voices, the biggest controversy and the most acute social concern’. When I began this project, my topic also demonstrated similar limitations, although, to be fair, it should be pointed out that my initial interests were heavily influenced by my previous experience in Media and Cultural Studies. From the representation of men in popular culture and news reports, to my personal experience of distinguishing

Northern men from Southern men, I followed the dominant assumption that contemporary Chinese society had developed increasing anxieties regarding the status of its young men as a result of declining masculinity. Consequently, my perceptions of Chinese young men were predominantly shaped by the mainstreaming of a 'crisis of masculinity' discourse as defined by official utterances and public discussions (Lin & Mac an Ghail, 2017; Zheng, 2015a). However, while researchers need to engage with dominant academic and popular discourse, the danger of prioritising the voices of certain groups in the knowledge hierarchy and eliminating others should be carefully dealt with (Edwards & Ribbens, 1998). Otherwise, particular forms of knowledge are likely to be (re)produced, which normalises and legitimates the interests of privileged groups. White working-class women, for example, have long been deemed not 'respectable' or 'worthy objects or subjects of knowledge' (Skeggs, 1997: 18). In the early stages of this project, however, I was more or less attracted by the idea of studying a 'problematic' group of men, presuming that Chinese masculinity was monolithic and fixed.

Fortunately, one of the most exciting aspects of carrying out empirical work is the major shifts that occur during the process in seeking to make a sense of the subject of inquiry (Popoviciu et al., 2006: 397). In this sense, it is possible to modify the research focus by using 'methodological imagination', which recognises the autonomy of methodology. A significant epistemological turn in my perception of Chinese young men was inspired by Steph Lawler's (2014) work, which introduces different sociological perspectives on identity. Lawler reminds us that identity appears to be explicitly invoked only through 'its apparent loss or instability' (2014: 1). Moreover, troublesome identity 'underlines a belief in a normative (silent, non-troubling) identity, but it also underlines a belief that taken-for-granted forms of identity are unworthy of sociological or other scrutiny' (2014: 2). Accordingly, I moved from reading the masculinity of Chinese young men as illegitimate, problematic and 'being in crisis' to acknowledging the flexibility and diversity of male identities. Instead of a unitary conceptualisation of *masculinity*, I became aware of manifold forms and dimensions of *masculinities* that co-exist, compete, overlap, and compromise with each other. Following these insights, rather than

uncritically adopting established masculine categories, I aimed to investigate the complex interplay between cultural resources, structure and practice in the construction of male identities. And, if possible, I wanted to gather men's own voices and 'weave a new fabric of masculinity' (Davison, 2007: 387).

To achieve these intentions, I adopted an interpretivist, or constructivist stance that allowed me to engage with Chinese young men as active agents. In order to make sense of their everyday lives, it was necessary to shift from an identity politics position towards an anti-foundational framework (Popoviciu et al., 2006). Moreover, I paid greater attention to the intersection between various facets of identity such as gender, age, education and class. Recognising what Merriam (2014: 8) emphasises as 'multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event' was illuminating to my changing epistemological perspective. I became convinced that the nuances, complexity and ambiguity behind any form of Chinese masculinity, be it 'in crisis' or dominant, deserved re-evaluation. In this way, I also tried to avoid reproducing common assumptions of young men as losing their Chinese manhood, and to generate 'responsible knowledge' by carrying out research that 'listens to others rather than making assumptions about their existence' (Skeggs, 1997: 33). Therefore, I committed myself to interrogating any fixed or rigid categorisations of male identities, and also to complicating common-sense views of Chinese men and understanding their gendered lives in new ways.

Revising research topics

Similar to many qualitative studies that stem from 'a question, or at least an intellectual curiosity if not a passion for a particular topic' (Janesick, 2000: 382), this study emerged primarily from my interest in and curiosity about Chinese young men of my generation. While I had much experience of talking about women's lives with friends and family, I knew little about what men's lives looked like. At the beginning, this led me to make some stereotypical assumptions about Chinese young men. Along with my epistemological shift, critically reviewing the existing literature also revealed an academic lacuna around ordinary Chinese men's voices and involvement in social interactions. At the same time, there were plenty

of types of young men depicted in the media that I found problematic or distorted. Therefore, my research focus was gradually redirected towards exploring and representing young men's personal ways of living and identity making by unravelling their diverse perceptions and experiences.

In doing so, I wanted to inquire into how different layers of Chinese masculinities are constructed within the 'cultures of everyday life' (Gray, A., 2003) or, as Raymond Williams (1981) calls them, 'lived cultures'. Perceiving culture as being actively and materially produced in mundane life provided illuminating insights for the development of my research topics. It entails investigating how human beings actively make culture out of subjective experiences, and how culture in turn forms social relations and effects transformations. As such, individuals are allowed to see themselves as 'active agents whose sense of self is projected onto and expressed in an expansive range of cultural practices' (McRobbie, 1992: 730). To consider how people actively engage in constructing their selves and identities through with culture, Ewing (1990: 258) incisively states:

When we consider the temporal flow of experience, we can observe that individuals are continuously reconstituting themselves into the new selves in response to internal and external stimuli. They construct these new selves from their available set of self-representations, which are based on cultural constructs.

Hence, with an awareness of the variety of impetuses that inform Chinese masculinities, such as individualisation (Yan, 2009), neoliberalism and marketisation (Davis, 2000; Rofel, 2007), modernisation (Lin, 2013) and Confucianism (Cheung, 2012; Yao, X., 1999, 2001), I attempted to consider how young men themselves engage with these discourses. Furthermore, under these broader changes in their everyday lives, I was interested in examining changes and continuities in ordinary young men's own interpretations of Chinese manhood within their personal relationships. Addressing the study of men in the local context was particularly salient in terms of unpacking individual men's relationships with women, with other men, and with the whole of society.

Accordingly, I generated an overarching research question about the construction of masculinities among ordinary young men in present-day urban China. Following this, I thought about which aspects of identity I wanted to explore, but these drafted topics also evolved along with the progress of this work. For me, research questions are 'navigational tools that can help a researcher map possible directions but also to inquire about the unexpected' (Agee, 2009: 432). Indeed, there were many unpredicted challenges and new ideas emerging from the subsequent process.

Given my interpretivist stance in the research, I attempted to sketch out the everyday lives of Chinese young men as they craft and practise masculinities across different sites. In this regard, my study was also informed by the emphasis on researching 'experience' as a valid resource for generating knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Skeggs, 1997). According to A. Gray (2003: 32):

'Experience', then, is the ground for engagement with and the manifestation of the moments of 'unification' where the elements are somehow brought together. The value of the concept is that it avoids a deterministic and mechanical model in which powerful social structures and ideologies shape who we are. Rather, it enables an exploration of the relationships between subjects and different, if powerful, discursive elements.

Of particular significance, taking 'experience' as a way of exploring the masculinities of Chinese young men may create space for discussing subjective perceptions and practices without neglecting structural and discursive constraints. This means producing situated knowledge that stems from social actors' participation in social relations and negotiations of power. Such a perspective significantly informed the design of my research topics, and also proved practical and helpful in the later fieldwork process. For instance, from reading media representations, I held the assumption that the label *diaosi* was widely adopted with pride among young men, but my participants' reactions appeared to be surprisingly different from what I had imagined. Actually, a large proportion of the Chinese men displayed negative attitudes towards this word, and their reasons for disapproval also varied across age, class, occupation and even marital status.

Viewing experience as a legitimate source of producing knowledge, I was able to adjust my perspective and interview questions accordingly. Young men's accounts were therefore ascribed epistemological privilege in this research. At the same time, I was aware that interview accounts are never objective reflections of the 'true' past. At the moment of the storytelling, experience has already been reworked and reinterpreted or, as Stanley and Wise (1990: 42) articulate it, 'experience is never "raw"'. Jackson (1998: 49) further argues that experience is 'a reflexive, narrative construction', which is narrated depending on 'the interpretative devices and discourses culturally available to us'. Thus, while attaching importance to personal experience, I remained cautious about the personal differences and social complexities that might have given rise to participants' accounts. These reflections led to my interest in narrative analysis and was particularly illuminating for my analysis of kinship ties and filial practices among Chinese young men (Chapter 6).

Choosing a research method

Since the aim of this research is to explore and interpret the *meanings* of Chinese young men's everyday gender lives, I found a qualitative approach to be of more practical utility in collecting data. Compared with quantitative method that 'emphasises the collection of social facts or documents the operation of particular relationships between variables' (Jayaratne & Stewart, 2008: 54), I wanted to prioritise people's experience and perspectives. Thus, qualitative inquiry was more compatible with my epistemological concerns and research focus. By doing qualitative research, we can:

explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate. (Mason, J., 2002: 1)

Therefore, employing a qualitative approach to studying Chinese masculinities means looking beyond the media and state descriptions of young men, and turning to a more active engagement with personal narratives that might often be

silenced. Furthermore, the choice of qualitative method was also informed by my research question about the construction of masculinities among ordinary young men in present-day urban China. Because qualitative research usually comes to terms with the underlying meanings of phenomena that are otherwise regarded as 'naturally occurring' in the world (Van Maanen, 1979), Chinese young men's self-representations and their own interpretations of everyday life can thus be foregrounded. It also allowed me to uncover nuances and subtleties, which cannot be efficiently achieved through quantitative methods.

When coming to select a specific qualitative method, I had thought about using a combination of focus groups and individual interviews to facilitate mutual discussion and exchange of ideas. However, with a consideration of potential male inexpressiveness, the difficulty of gathering scattered participants, and a female researcher's potential to ease the tense atmosphere of interviews (Manderson et al., 2006), I decided to use only individual interviews for data collection. More precisely, I designed my fieldwork to consist of semi-structured in-depth interviews that would privilege 'the accounts of social actors, agents, individuals, or subjects, as data sources' (May, T., 2002: 225). In general, questions were designed to be open-ended, and I was careful not to include any confrontational questions. This was due to my willingness to encourage interviewees' responses and minimise my own involvement.

Furthermore, this study has followed the values and ethics of feminist research⁷. Feminist researchers, regardless of their varied standpoints and methods, aim to challenge the taken-for-granted, articulate the experience of the invisible or oppressed, and remain aware of reciprocity and producing responsible knowledge (Cottle, 1978; Skeggs, 2001; Wylie, 2012). At the same time, academic work

⁷ I gained ethical approval from The University of York ELMPs Ethics Committee before entering the field and conducting interviews. Prior to my departure, I carefully considered the ethical implications of this study and followed the university's guidelines on research ethics throughout the fieldwork. The following discussion about my experiences in the field also demonstrates my commitment to conducting ethical research.

informed by feminist values is mindful of the power dynamics and hierarchies within the research process and usually emphasises the importance of reflexivity (Doucet & Mauthner, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2012). Accordingly, my study of Chinese young men was designed to take into account the complicated webs of power within which they negotiate the meaning of Chinese manhood. The appropriateness and also necessity of including men as part of feminist research has already been noted in earlier literature (Smart & Neale, 1999; Stanley & Wise, 1993). Moreover, embodying a feminist spirit and using feminist methods is argued to be consistent with researching men (Hopkins & Noble, 2009; Morgan, 1992; Robinson, 2010). As Curato (2010: 246) explains:

By rendering men's gender culturally visible, it interrogated [*sic*] the dominant configuration of gender practices that legitimizes not only the subordination of women to men but the subordination of other expressions of masculinities to its dominant form. Banking on the successes of feminist research, masculinity studies aim at theorizing the subjective experiences of men and their relationships to their social worlds.

Thus, my central intention was to foreground ordinary men's voices, which until now have been much less often represented than those of Chinese women (Louie, 2015). And I hoped to explicate any of their alternative gendered strategies compared to dominant forms of Chinese masculinity. I wanted to address how gender hierarchy and masculine privileges operate at the individual level against broader continuities and changes in contemporary society. Meanwhile, I attempted to problematise the assumption that men, as a unitary gendered category, are always the advantaged group in opposition to women. Through conducting in-depth interviews, I consider my role to be that of unpacking the dynamic process during which multi-layered and heterogeneous masculinities are constructed. While feminist research has long researched on behalf of women, in this thesis, I hope to research *on behalf of both women and men*.

Locating the research and designing interviews

My decision to locate the fieldwork in Shanghai and Shenyang was mainly based on two considerations. Firstly, my personal experience ensured that I was familiar with

the economic, social, political, and cultural contexts within which young men interpret the notion of Chinese masculinities. As one of the post-90s generation, I was born and raised in Shenyang, a north-eastern provincial capital city, and spent more than six years in the metropolitan city of Shanghai. Before I decided to start this project, I was greatly impressed by the diversified types of young men who could be observed in everyday life and within popular discourse. Having had little chance to talk with young men about their everyday feelings and experiences, I grew increasingly interested in hearing their own voices. I believed that, in all likelihood, this personal background and my ability to adhere to the local specificities would offer me an insider position under certain circumstances and would facilitate the conversation (although my actual experience turned out to be more complicated than this).

Secondly, geographical differences, both discursively and culturally, significantly shape and also become reinforced by locally distinctive forms of masculinity in China (Moskowitz, 2013; Song & Hird, 2014). Although empirical work on gender issues conducted in Shanghai is not unusual (Bax, 2012; Farrer, 2002), north-eastern China remains a region that has received little attention. Nonetheless, as represented by Shanghai and Shenyang, this North/South divide in versions of masculinity is widespread in popular culture. From my interviews with men from both cities, the geographical varieties of masculinity were also reflected in participants' own accounts. Whereas Northern China is usually associated with a rugged and macho type of masculinity that links back to its political history, Southern China has long been regarded as more soft and feminine (Baranovitch, 2003). Thus, I situated my fieldwork in Shanghai and Shenyang to look at how masculinities become translated (or not) across different regional contexts. Of course, I did not assume that my selection of sites could represent the myriad forms of masculinity in contemporary Chinese society. What I expected to achieve was to explore young men's reworking of their masculine selves under the dynamic interaction between global/transnational trends of masculine images and locally/personally constructed male identities.

In choosing participants, my research plan was to interview Chinese young men aged between 22 and 32. On the one hand, this cohort was likely to be representative of the young generation in contemporary China, covering both the post-80s and post-90s. Being part of this generation, I might share similar values and perspectives with these men. It was also to my advantage as a young researcher to produce a timely study about Chinese men. On the other hand, I chose this age group for study because it represents a key period of time for being a Chinese man in terms of its moral, cultural and social connotations. According to the marriage law of China, no marriage may be contracted before the man has reached 22 years of age. While youth transition is flexible and multifaceted, becoming 22 still signifies the possibility of legitimate adulthood. Meanwhile, the age of 30 traditionally marks another transitional point for Chinese men. As stated in the Confucian *Analects* (2.4), 'at thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground'. That is, a man should be able to establish his career and family as well as taking up more social responsibilities at the age of 30. Therefore, I was also interested in talking to men who were reaching this critical moment to see how they negotiated this conventionally critical life phase for men. Based upon these perceptions, I interviewed 15 men in Shenyang and 15 more in Shanghai. In each city, I tried to achieve an even distribution of age samples in this cohort of 22 to 32.

To orientate the fieldwork towards the aim of my research, the interview outline was roughly divided into four sections, including lifestyle, being a son, being a partner and being an employee. I set up these four sections on the basis of previous reading around Chinese masculinities, as well as my knowledge about and experience with young men in China. In particular, 'softer' questions about pastimes were designed as an ice-breaking device to ease interviewees' discomfort or nervousness. Following these topics, I planned to ask respondents if they could identify any recent special events or personal transformations that marked a transition or carried particular significance for them. Based on their answers, the interview was then able to move towards questions about either the family or their work. As T. May (2002: 231) argues, qualitative researchers should structure their interviews 'in ways which are meaningful to interviewees' while trying to 'minimize

their own role in the process of structuring and in the sequencing of the dialogue'. In the first few interviews, I actually found it rather difficult to leave more space for participants themselves to guide the topic. As I accumulated more experience in the field, I gradually managed to produce more flexible interview dialogues, along with gauging the progress and quality of our conversations.

Although all research starts from 'imagined research subjects' (Rosenblatt, 2001: 898), qualitative interviewing especially encourages participants to interact with the researcher, and pays attention to the dynamics of the interview. Following feminist values of privileging the respondent's own voice and Holstein and Gubruim's (1995) suggestion of 'active interviewing', my questions were almost all designed to be open-ended and encouraged alternative narratives or changing directions of story-telling. This certainly posed a challenge to the assumption that the researcher always holds more power and authority. Rather, feminist researchers emphasise 'the personal over the professional' (Sprague, 2016: 191). In fact, I always had to prepare myself to tackle the challenging task of being dragged into different, or probably oppositional, interview realities that were different from my own (Rosenblatt, 2001). Conducting feminist research therefore involves much emotional labour and reflexivity throughout the process of interviewing in the field.

Conducting Fieldwork

Recruiting participants: ease and difficulty

Having decided to gather ordinary young men's perspectives, the process of recruiting participants proved to be generally smooth and straightforward. Before I went back to China, I had already asked my family and friends to help me in looking for young men who met the age requirement between 22 and 32. With their help, I managed to contact a number of interviewees and started work immediately after I returned home. The fieldwork was conducted in the summer of 2015, during which I spent half of my time in Shenyang and the rest in Shanghai. In total, I interviewed 30 young men, with 15 in each city. All of them accorded with my understanding of '*putong*' or ordinary, that is, neither too poor nor too rich and

living a comfortable life in the city. I intentionally avoided using ‘middle-class’ to describe them, since the meaning of this term appears to be ambiguous in contemporary China for both academics and the general public (Chapter 2). While my participants could be generally categorised as middle-class, they differed from each other in terms of income, qualifications, profession and family background. Moreover, they offered diverse perspectives on the meaning of ‘middle class’ during the interviews.

More specifically, I adopted purposive sampling to identify prospective interviewees, which is ‘essentially strategic and entails an attempt to establish a good correspondence between research questions and sampling’ (Bryman, 2004: 323–4). Purposive sampling is also practical and efficient when the researcher is seeking to approach a specific group or ‘hard-to-reach’ population for study (e.g. Abrams, 2010; Taylor, 2011). In Park and Lunt’s (2015) discussion of recruiting respondents in Confucianism-informed South Korea, they acknowledge the advantages of using purposive sampling through personal networks when selecting interviewees. Although this approach may be criticised for its ‘cherry picking’ convenience for researchers, Park and Lunt (2015) argue that it perhaps fits ‘somewhat more naturally with Confucian mores and expectations rather than attempting to recruit unknown individuals who lie outside networks’. Drawing on these insights, I employed a similar method for contacting interviewees in urban China. The process of recruiting respondents can generally be divided into two stages. At the earlier stage of fieldwork in both cities, I did not set up specific demographic requirements except age, but rather simply looked for young men who were willing to participate. After conducting several interviews, I further selected potential respondents based on existing interviewees’ information in order to reach a variety of individuals, especially in terms of occupation and marital status. Furthermore, although I was not intending to explore fatherhood and fathering practices in particular, I became increasingly interested in this theme after I interviewed a few fathers. Therefore, I also tried to identify young fathers or expectant fathers to join this study.

Table 1 Participant Profile

Name	Age	Site of fieldwork	Occupation	Educational Background	Income	Marital Status	Children or not
Aaron	25	Shanghai	Join business in mobile application development	Bachelor	10000+	Relationship	N
Albert	24	Shanghai	Student	Postgraduate	0-3000	Relationship	N
Alex	32	Shenyang	Hospital staff	Part-time postgraduate	8000-9000	Married	Daughter
Carey	26	Shanghai	College teacher	Bachelor	4000-5000	Married	Daughter
CC	25	Shanghai	White collar	Bachelor	0-3000	Single	N
Danran	31	Shenyang	Civil servant	Master	3000	Married	Daughter
DX	26	Shenyang	Constructing equipment inspector	Master	3000-4000	Married	N
FN	22	Shenyang	Student	Undergraduate	0-3000	Single	N
Frank	25	Shanghai	White collar	Bachelor	4000-5000	Relationship	N
Jack	29	Shenyang	White collar	Bachelor	3000-4000	Single	N
Jia fei mao	32	Shenyang	High school teacher	Bachelor	3000-4000	Married	Daughter
Jiang feng	23	Shanghai	Student	Undergraduate	0-3000	Relationship	N
Jim	25	Shanghai	White collar	Part-time undergraduate	10000+	Relationship	N
JJ	29	Shenyang	Student	Bachelor	N/A	Single	N
L	23	Shenyang	Student	Undergraduate	N/A	Relationship	N
Lee	27	Shenyang	Assistant Party branch secretary	Bachelor	4000-5000	Single	N
Leery	32	Shanghai	Military officer	Bachelor	10000+	Married	Daughter
Leslie	31	Shanghai	Senior banking manager	Bachelor	10000+	Married	Daughter
Misery	25	Shanghai	White collar in a state-owned company	Part-time undergraduate	4000-6000	Single	N
Neyo	29	Shanghai	Airplane maintenance	Bachelor	6000-7000	Relationship	N
Rocky	28	Shanghai	Self-owned hair salon	Secondary school	10000+	Married	Expectant father
S	31	Shanghai	Senior bank clerk	Bachelor	7000-8000	Married	N
San pangzi	32	Shenyang	Engineer	Bachelor	3000-4000	Married	Daughter and son
Sean	31	Shenyang	Bank clerk	Master	4000-5000	Relationship	N
Simon	27	Shenyang	White collar	Bachelor	3000-4000	Relationship	N
TMB	30	Shenyang	Civil servant	Bachelor	0-3000	Single	N
Xiaozhu	31	Shanghai	White collar	Bachelor	3000-4000	Married	Son
XiXi	30	Shanghai	University lecturer	Doctor	4000-5000	Married	Expectant father
Zhi	27	Shenyang	Elevator maintenance	Secondary school	0-3000	Married	Expectant father
2881	28	Shenyang	Self-owned business	Bachelor	5000-6000	Married	Son

Since I had asked my family and friends to introduce me to potential participants, I realised that the word 'interview' sounded too official and therefore people might be scared off. As a result, I invited my personal contacts to ask young men whether they would like to 'have a chat with me' and to 'help me with my dissertation'. Such colloquial phrases served to reduce people's concern about becoming involved in potentially troublesome issues. During this two-stage process, I also found it particularly challenging to balance the occupational distribution of participants in Shenyang. I tried to find young men who worked in professions such as advertising, website/mobile application development or marketing based on what I knew in Shanghai, but this turned out to be surprisingly difficult. In comparison, recruiting participants working in these white-collar or high-tech industries in Shanghai turned out to be much easier than in Shenyang. On the one hand, this might be due to the limitations of my personal network. On the other, and perhaps more importantly, Shenyang used to be one of the leading heavy industrial cities in China, and manufacturing has remained its leading industry until now (Hu & Lin, 2013). As R. Williams (1993: 6) notes, every human society has its own shape, its own purpose, its own meanings. In this sense, adjusting the fieldwork process within individual cultural settings is a crucial step towards exploring the identity constructions of local men. Having realised the historical and cultural particularities, I decided to give up my previous plan and follow the existing pattern of occupational distribution.

It is important to note that I did not try other methods of recruiting participants, but rather straightforwardly resorted to my personal network, or *guanxi* in Chinese. Some young men were directly introduced by my family members or friends, while others came from more complex relationships, such as a family member referring me to a friend, or a friend inviting a colleague's husband to join the study. There were also a number of participants reached through snow-ball sampling. Because of my limited time in the field, this was the most efficient way of reaching eligible respondents. Moreover, sampling by *guanxi* network appears to be the primary method resorted to by researchers in East Asian contexts due to the common Confucian values of courtesy, reciprocity, collectivism and respecting

elders (Park & Sha, 2014). Indeed, within Confucian ethical principles, individual members' rights are contained within their relational partners' responsibilities (Hong, 2004: 57). It is this crucial value of interpersonal relations that gives rise to researchers' heavy reliance on personal contacts to reach prospective participants across Confucianism-informed societies. In the context of Japan, Dasgupta (2013: 109) confirms that 'having pre-existing networks was immensely beneficial [...] in opening doors and allowing me access in ways that would have been far more difficult otherwise'. Likewise, Park and Lunt's (2015) experience with a research group in South Korea reveals that respondents contacted through personal networks appeared to be more willing to talk in detail and for longer times. Liu Jieyu (2007) also records her experience of asking friends and relatives to suggest potential contacts when she tried to find interviewees in urban China. For my own fieldwork, owning *guanxi* enabled me to effectively recruit interviewees and build up rapport. At the same time, most of the young men were willing to talk with me because they valued and trusted such personal bonds. This was affirmed by one of the respondents, Leslie (31), who commented:

If you are a trustworthy friend, like today, the obstacle between us disappears right away, because you were introduced by Z (the intermediary). But if, you know, you asked me to do this interview on the street, I would just say, sorry I don't want to help. This is the importance of *renmai* (interpersonal connections) and *renji guanxi* (interpersonal relations).

In this sense, conforming to the interactional norms in China was of great significance in pushing forward the research process. As a native Chinese, I felt it necessary to take into account these specific 'cultural codes' (Hall, 1997) while complying with the ethical requirements of the University. As Hall (1997: 4) reminds us, members of the same culture must share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly similar ways. However, relying on personal contacts to recruit participants also had its pitfalls. For example, some of the young men seemed to be reserved and uncomfortable when talking about their private lives, probably due to the concern that their accounts might be disclosed. A few participants

straightforwardly confirmed with me that I would not repeat what they said to the intermediary. In other circumstances, I needed to avoid being affected by what the intermediary had told me about the respondents. Sometimes, intermediaries even contacted me after the interview and asked what the man had talked about. To cope with all these situations, I was particularly careful throughout the fieldwork about maintaining the confidentiality of interviewees and conforming to the ethical guidelines stipulated by the university.

Heading for the field

Before actually entering the field, I changed the questions that I would use to start the interview several times. In my interview guide, the opening questions were initially drafted as: 'What's your view of *diaosi*? Do you self-identify as *diaosi* and why?' At that time, I believed *diaosi* would be frequently used in young men's daily lives and might help to create a relaxing atmosphere. However, after conducting two pilot interviews and talking to my peers in China, it became clear to me that this question might sound rude to some young men who construct themselves as being distinct from those self-belittled 'losers'. Obviously, I could not start with questions from the couple relationship or family sections, as those would be better discussed after building up rapport. Just before the first interview, I finally decided to open the conversation with 'Can you tell me about any impressive television programmes, films or any other visual media that you have watched recently?' I thought this type of casual talk about pastimes would be a suitable question for ice-breaking. In fact, it worked really well to begin the dialogue between participants and me.

Another issue that concerned me prior to fieldwork was the interview location. As a young female researcher who would be facing male participants in their 20s or early 30s, meeting in a public place seemed to be the safest and most feasible plan. Although traditional methodology textbooks recommend that researchers conduct interviews in a private space, I had to be more flexible and found alternative ways of conducting fieldwork ethically and productively. This is confirmed by Rapley's (2006: 18) argument that 'we don't and can't always arrange

interviews in “private” spaces—the point is to be aware of your immediate environment and how that can and does affect you and the interviewee’s talk’. In D. Lee’s (1997) study of men’s and women’s experiences and understandings of sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace, she also maintains that meeting male informants in a restaurant and having a cup of tea together serves to break up the uneasiness and promote mutual trust between interviewer and interviewee. She further emphasises that ‘women interviewers must exercise the level of caution that makes them feel safe’ (Lee, D., 1997: 563). Drawing upon these authors’ arguments and experience, almost all of my interviews were conducted in public or semi-public places. In Shanghai, 12 of the 15 interviews were conducted in cafes named by participants, whereas in Shenyang there were only five of these. Instead, I met seven Shenyang participants during the day at their workplace; most of these men had positions in governmental departments or public institutions. In other words, they worked in the so-called *danwei*⁸ system that was frequently discussed during the pre- and early reform period. While the working unit of *danwei* has largely lost its all-encompassing functions after the market transition, to a certain extent it retains its privilege and importance (Naughton, 1997). It was apparent that young men working in *danwei* were less stressed during work and were able to manage their time more flexibly, which was almost impossible in Shanghai. Considering that most of the young men were white-collar employees and usually very busy and fully booked during the daytime, I could hardly meet them at their workplace⁹.

In the list of techniques offered by Schwalbe and Wolkomir for interviewing men, they advocate that interviewers should ‘dress in a style befitting local culture and circumstance that conveys a businesslike seriousness of purpose, without crossing into off putting formality’ (2003: 209). However, I suggest that this strategy does

⁸ As Xie and Wu (2008: 561) explain, prior to economic reform, almost all urban workers were organized as part of a *danwei*, be it a factory, a store, a school or a government office. The *danwei* organization had multiple social, political and economic functions, and was a permanent ‘membership’ of life employment. Workers and their families were totally dependent upon their affiliated work units for material resources and career opportunities.

⁹ The time and location of each interview are briefly recorded in Appendix 3 Sketches of Participants.

not necessarily apply to every scenario of female interviewer vis-à-vis male interviewee. In my case, firstly, I did not want to set a serious atmosphere during the interview, but rather a relaxing and comfortable environment that I believed would be more helpful for gathering data. Because my interview topic mainly focused on young men's daily identity constructions that were usually practised in a 'natural' mood, I hoped to create similar settings during our encounters. Secondly, as most participants were introduced (directly or indirectly) by my family members and friends, being friendly rather than overly solemn was my way of treasuring the *guanxi* between the participants, intermediaries and me. Thirdly, I did not wish to be seen as the bookish stereotype of a well-educated woman in the public imagination. I believed that this was the least I could do to challenge existing gender-biased assumptions as a feminist researcher. Of course, this was significantly linked to the fact that my research did not touch upon any sexually sensitive issues. Additionally, because almost all of the participants were introduced by acquaintances, many of the young men were carefully protecting their own face and maintaining the face of the intermediary. A further protective device was the relatively conservative perceptions of gender and sexuality in China. This largely minimises the risk of female interviewers being sexualised, as warned by researchers predominantly in the Western context (Kitzinger, 1994; Lee, D., 1997). Hence, most of the time I dressed in the way that I usually do whilst avoiding being sexually provocative. Indeed, none of the young men demonstrated any form of flirting or disrespect to me. Nevertheless, my fieldwork was far from a smooth process, but rather mingled with frustration, embarrassment, surprise, confusion and sometimes irritation. Although I was not researching highly sensitive topics, there were still various unexpected and difficult moments during interviews.

Dealing with unexpected and difficult moments

Undertaking qualitative research can pose manifold challenges for researchers (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Gilbert, 2001) and, not surprisingly, I was faced with diverse unanticipated conditions. For instance, two interviewees were more than twenty minutes late without any contact in advance, or the cafe where we had

decided to meet was not open at the time we arrived. There were also several occasions when the interview site turned out to be noisy throughout the interview. At a more sophisticated level, talking properly to 30 different participants was not an easy task. The length of my interviews with the young men ranged from around 30 to 90 minutes. After conducting nine successful interviews, I started to feel more confident about myself as an interviewer, until the tenth interviewee brought me much frustration and embarrassment. He was a 30-year-old man introduced by another participant, working as a civil servant as well as being an out-of-work theatre director. The interview lasted only 35 minutes, and I wrote in my field notes for that day:

He was really different in terms of personality and ways of speaking compared to the other participants so far. He was not that kind of 'easy-to-talk-with' person and I felt uncomfortable and nervous. While his answers were short and brief, I frequently felt embarrassed when he just answered five words to my question, and failed to add more follow-up questions. In addition, he appeared suspicious and critical of some of my questions and explicitly pointed them out during the interview. After the interview, he even suggested that we exchange our roles as interviewee and interviewer and asked me to answer the questions myself.

Although this was an unusual case, a number of my interviews were rather short. On these occasions, I had to deal with the men's emotional reticence or simply distrust of a stranger. More often than not, I was defeated by the silence and failed to push the conversation further. During the transcription, I asked myself numerous times: why didn't I add more follow-up questions after a short answer? Whilst this outcome partly resulted from my lack of experience in designing questions and conducting interviews, it was also due to male inexpressiveness as an established belief of masculinity. In Sattel's study of taciturn men in the USA, he suggests that male inexpressiveness is actually 'learned as a means to be implemented later in men assuming and maintaining positions of power' (1976: 471). Despite cultural and historical distinctions, Sattel's arguments shed light on the painful moments I experienced during the fieldwork. Some of the young men refused to talk in detail about things like fashion or intimacy as a form of masculine performance. Moreover, my trouble in dealing with the emotional reticence of

these young men could also be ascribed to my reluctance to leave my 'comfort zone'. In other words, I chose to follow the preconception that men simply talk less and that is the way they 'do' masculinity, instead of challenging such normalised understandings.

However, male inexpressiveness is not necessarily a fixed and stable condition but is rather a *situational phenomenon* (Bridges, 2013). Apart from the few occasions when I was troubled by the reticence of men, most of my participants were actually articulate and willing to share their views with me. Especially when I interviewed the young fathers, several men were extremely enthusiastic about telling me of the delight and pride brought by their child. This was not only because they had a lot to say as fathers, but also due to the particular context. Facing a young woman, some participants might have found it more comfortable to touch upon certain topics that they probably had little opportunity to discuss in their daily lives (Broom et al., 2009). The two impressive cases were my conversations with Jia fei mao (32) and San pangzi (32), both of whom started to talk so much about their children at the very beginning of the interview that I decided to simply follow the flow. This flexibility to adjust the interview structure is one of the advantages of adopting a qualitative method in research, as it can respond to 'the direction in which interviewees take the interview' and leaves space for 'adjusting the emphases in the research as a result of significant issues that emerge in the course of interviews' (Bryman, 2004: 320).

Throughout the fieldwork process, I was constantly facing another problem—the language. Since the interview outline was drafted in English, my original translation was formal and literary. After entering the field, I adjusted my way of talking via several methods. For instance, although I was born and grew up in Shenyang, since entering university in Shanghai I usually speak standard Mandarin when talking with people. However, when I went back to my hometown for interviews, I found it necessary and helpful to recapture the Shenyang accent. In fact, a Shenyang-born person speaking Mandarin may be read as ostentatious or arrogant by local people. Switching to the Shenyang accent allowed me to demonstrate my

embeddedness within the local network as well as my friendliness towards participants. In Bradby's study of identity and socially supported wellbeing among Glasgow Punjabis, she points out the long neglect of language in sociology, arguing that 'the complex and strategic blending and switching of vocabulary, tone and accent is one means through which identities and support networks are negotiated and affirmed' (2002: 842). In this sense, adopting the local accent was a crucial part of the process of producing knowledge, in that 'meaning is constructed in rather than expressed by language' (Barrett, 1992: 203). At the same time, I paid great attention to choosing the words I used to show my solidarity with local realities and my respect for participants. For instance, the word 'wife' has several different translations in the Chinese language—*airen*, *qizi*, *laopo*, *xifu*, with the first two being relatively formal and polite and the latter two usually used in colloquial language. Therefore, I adjusted the word I used to stay in line with participants.

Moreover, as my whole research plan was developed in English and I have acquired almost all my academic knowledge from British institutions, I sometimes found it difficult to translate some sociological terminology into Chinese. Simon (1996: 138) suggests that translators must constantly make decisions about the cultural meanings that language carries, and evaluate the degree to which the two different worlds they inhabit are 'the same'. This is especially vital in terms of talking about the most fundamental concept in my research—masculinity. Because there is no equivalent vocabulary in Chinese, I would usually use two translations—*nanzihan qigai* (macho masculinity) and *nanrenwei* (manliness) when it was necessary to use this word. However, it appeared that a number of participants regarded *nanzihan qigai* and *nanrenwei* to convey different meanings. At these moments, I usually invited them to explain in detail their own analysis of these terms. Later, I realised that my translation of 'masculinity' into Chinese was problematic. While the original English term does not designate any particular type of characteristic associated with men, my translation of it into Chinese indicated a prioritisation of macho masculinity. To cope with this situation, I tried to insert this concept into various topics to elicit participants' views on masculinity. For example, I invited participants to talk about their understandings of 'good Chinese men' in

general, and whether they saw themselves as 'mature men'. Additionally, I asked the young men to describe how they perceived the notion of 'being a good son' and 'being a good partner' instead of using academic language such as 'familial masculinity'. In their study of the translational dilemma in qualitative research, Temple and Young (2004: 175) argue that translation itself has the power to reinforce or subvert longstanding cross-cultural relationships. My experience of dealing with the translational problem reminds me of the importance of reflecting on the particular terms that I will use in future research. Importantly, it is sometimes the 'inapplicability' of some Western concepts, such as masculinity, in the Chinese context that may extend or challenge current academic debates.

Conforming to feminist articulations of reflexivity, I also kept fieldwork notes throughout the interview period. I usually wrote down my initial thoughts and feelings right after each encounter, including whether the conversation was different from previous ones, whether the interviewee and/or I behaved in a particular way, any difficult moments or problems, impressive stories and accounts, and also any other points that I found it necessary or interesting to record. Overall, these field notes served as an alternative site for me to reflexively evaluate my performance in the field, and also provided valuable reference material to draw on in later research. In addition, writing field notes was a form of 'self-care' for me (Rager, 2005). Recording the unexpected difficulties that occurred in an individual interview helped me to release some of the pressure and accumulate research experience.

Emotional labour

Although my research rarely touched upon any sensitive topics, conducting interviews still required various forms of emotional labour. The complexity and significance of dealing with emotions in the research process have already been substantially discussed by qualitative researchers (Gray, B., 2008; Jenkins, T., 2006; Kvale, 1996). Indeed, if we undertake to study human lives, we have to be ready to face human feelings (Ely et al., 1991: 49). The 'human side' of qualitative studies inevitably entails researchers' own emotional investment as well as that of the

researched. At the most basic level, establishing a rapport with respondents is considered to be one of the most essential aspects of emotional labour (Ceglowski, 2000; Hubbard et al., 2001; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Building a level of rapport between the two parties in an interview interaction is argued to enhance the quality of the conversation and disclosure (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). During the interview process, emotional labour may also involve respecting the feelings of participants, facing researchers' own emotional ups and downs, and a certain level of self-disclosure, as well as recognising how emotion actually plays a role in the production of knowledge.

Having familiarised myself with the key role played by the rapport-building process, I employed various strategies to deepen the mutual trust with participants. While many of my preparations worked well, my encounters with different young men throughout the fieldwork taught me several valuable lessons. In the first interview I conducted, Misery (25) told me the moment we sat down at the table that it reminded him of the treatment sessions he had with his psychiatrist. Although the interview went smoothly, his comments prompted me to think again about young men's feelings in joining this study. Indeed, the opening performance of an interview—my initial greetings, the introduction to this study, filling in the consent form, setting up the digital recorder and so on—served to create 'a particular social context for the interview communication' (Warren, C., 2002: 91). This particularity of the interview arrangements might cause an alien feeling to some men. On the other hand, what concerned participants could be a sense of uncertainty or unsafety about the kind of questions they would be asked afterwards. As a result, a few of them asked me to introduce the interview questions before I started to record. For example, Danran (31, civil servant) especially wanted to make sure that I would not ask questions about 'politics' or 'social issues'. In the field notes of 25 June 2015, I also wrote about my encounter with Albert (24), who told me before the interview that he was really worried about whether I would ask him questions about relationships and marriage. It was obvious that participants of different ages and from diverse social backgrounds worried about the interview in varied ways. To minimise the discomfort felt by participants, I tried to chat with them on

random topics before the actual interview started. I also reassured interviewees that our conversation would only be used for my research, and that they could refuse to answer any questions that were sensitive to them.

In accordance with the ethical committee's regulations, I offered every participant the information sheet and, if they were willing, asked them to read and sign the consent form. Thorne (2008: 461–2) points out that these procedures can be regarded as 'revealing the attitude of the researcher towards his/her interviewees, to show respect for interviewees' autonomy and dignity'. While people's reluctance to sign the consent form has been noted in Wei's (2011) qualitative interviewing with Chinese women, it rarely happened in my situation. However, throughout the fieldwork, I noticed that many participants did not bother to read the information sheet or consent form. A number of the men asked me 'shall I just tick all?' when I asked them to read and sign the consent form. In these situations, I would summarise the content of the form to make sure that they understood their rights and responsibilities in this research. Although it worried me a bit during the interviews, now I feel that it is a way in which participants showed their trust in me. In Fei Xiaotong's influential work, *From the soil*, he incisively points out that Chinese society is a 'familiar society', in which social norms 'rest not upon laws but, rather, upon rituals and customs that are defined through practice' (1992: 42). Consequently, people build up mutual trust through their own circles, which are interrelated with each other across time and space. Offering one's trust to those introduced by an acquaintance is a ritual that has been long established in Chinese society. In this sense, since I approached participants through established networks and connections, our relationship was underpinned by existing 'familiarity'. At the same time, when offering participants the information sheet and consent form, I also gave them a small gift (usually a packet of shortbread) I had bought in the UK. While participation in the research was completely voluntary, the giving of a gift at the beginning of the interview was a way to show my respect and friendliness. Broadly speaking, it also demonstrates the researcher's appreciation of interviewees' help in China and other East Asian countries (Liu, J., 2007; Park & Lunt, 2015; Wei, 2011). Similarly, gift-giving proved to be an important and

practical step in terms of enhancing rapport and helped me to make a good impression on participants.

Being occasionally disturbed by male inexpressiveness during my fieldwork, I found that undertaking some level of self-disclosure was a useful strategy to elicit participants' responses. Daly (1992: 5) argues that qualitative research should conform to the principles of 'fair exchange'. Although traditional research methods expect researchers to 'keep their "selves" out of the interview process' (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995: 13), self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer has gradually come to be regarded as an appropriate and helpful strategy (Reinharz & Chase, 2003). Feminist writers, in particular, have long been aware of the benefits of sharing our own stories, which can potentially remove the hierarchical boundary between the two (Levy & Hollan, 1998). In my own experience, sometimes participants clearly expressed their desire to know my view on a given question. In such circumstances, sharing my own stories served to establish further rapport and show my understanding and respect. However, the researcher's strategic self-disclosure is not without limitations or ambiguity. While excessive exposure of personal stories may lead to the researcher's vulnerability, it is also likely to be interpreted differently by interviewees (Abell et al., 2006). Yet, in my experience, talking about my own stories and views with young men was generally positive.

Because they trusted me as a researcher introduced by their friends, many participants were willing to detail their happiness, confusion and moments of struggle at home and work. A great outpouring of emotions happened when they talked about their parents, and I felt especially sorry and guilty when some of them mentioned that their parents had passed away not long before. At these moments, I would remind my participants that they could terminate this topic at any point if it made them uncomfortable. Meanwhile, there were several times when an interview suddenly arrived at an embarrassing situation. I could feel some young men's alertness when I raised some topic that might be sensitive or painful to them, such as intimate relationships, work, and housing mortgages. I was directly questioned several times like 'So what? Why do you ask this?', usually by

participants who were older than me. To some extent, this echoes Smart's (1984) comments on men's domination of interviews in her study of the development of law and its relation with marriage and the patriarchal order (see also Lee, D., 1997). I immediately felt nervous and embarrassed under the interrogation of participants. While I would explain my question again and remind them of their right to refuse to answer the question, my lack of experience in tackling such scenarios might have prevented me from digging deeper.

My experience of dealing with my own emotions during interviews points to the increasing awareness of paying attention to the long-term neglect of interviewers' vulnerability in qualitative research (Behar, 1996; Rager, 2005). The researcher's position in the broader social reality may place them in an unequal power relationship during particular moments of the interview in terms of gender, sexuality, age, class, disability, etc. In addition, when listening to other people's stories, especially depressing experiences, researchers are 'opening up in an embodied and personal way to the suffering of that other person', which may reveal their own vulnerability (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007: 342). If we understand emotion as productive and interactive, emotional labour during research inevitably generates a powerful impact on conducting and interpreting interviews. In this sense, the feelings of both respondents and interviewers require more consideration and protection. Research is simultaneously an embodied, emotional, mindful and political activity, and emotions, precisely because they overflow with culture and society, can energise action in the world and are central to knowledge production (Gray, B., 2008: 947; see also Illouz, 2007). Not only did I see the interview process as an interaction between me and my participants that collectively developed knowledge, the way in which I undertook emotional labour also constituted a crucial resource for understanding and interpreting the narratives of respondents.

Power dynamics in the interview

Prior reading on methodology had reminded me of the social nature of interviews and of unstable power relationships (Denzin, 2001). The interview context, the

relationship between the researcher and the researched, and verbal interactions during the interview may all affect the outcome of a qualitative study (Manderson et al., 2006). However, it was not until my actual encounters with the young men that I began to truly understand these arguments. The power dynamic between me and each participant was profoundly affected by the subjective positions we occupied out of the interview context. As the majority of my participants were recruited through family and friends, our interactions were further complicated by prior *guanxi*. For instance, I usually felt more relaxed and comfortable in interviews if the participant was very close to the intermediary, or if the intermediary was in a relatively higher social position than the participant. This was due to the long-lasting interactional order in China, and potentially other East Asian countries, which emphasises social hierarchy and respect for the superior. However, my 'comfort zone' was constantly challenged by other factors, such as occupation and personal character, which created intertwined relations of power. For example, although both Simon and Leery were introduced by family members, my interview with Leery (32), who worked in the military office, started with an awkward silence. In comparison, the encounter with white-collar worker Simon (27) was a pleasanter and easier experience. This was partly due to Leery's reluctance to talk about his work in detail, and also, Simon was a more talkative and easy-going person. Because of our similar age, he seemed to treat me as a peer and a friend, and asked me about my studies and my life as we entered the room for the interview. Thus, power dynamics in the interview process cannot be simply summarised as the powerful interviewer versus the powerless interviewee (Stanley & Wise, 1993). Rather, it can be negotiated through a more nuanced and complicated interplay of identity elements brought into the interview by both sides (Gatrell, 2006; Riley et al., 2003).

As Arendell (1997: 342–3) reminds us, researchers bring to the research encounter considerable social, historical, and cultural baggage. This baggage—personal history and identity, themselves interrelated—inevitably influences the interactional process and the ultimate research outcome. The multidimensionality of my identity—a young, middle-class, highly educated (with overseas experience)

and city-born woman—all exerted different impacts on the fieldwork depending on the context. I remember clearly that, after my conversation with Danran (32), I heard him talking loudly to the intermediary in the corridor: ‘The conversation was generally good, although she was too young to understand some of my words.’ In fact, throughout the interview, Danran presented himself as a powerful and knowledgeable man by challenging my questions, going off topic and reminding me of my young age when I asked him about becoming a father. It is true that my age and experience limited my comprehension of some topics, but what emerged from this scene was how Danran intended to make his superiority explicit to me. In another instance, when I talked to Jia fei mao (32) who was rurally born and older than me, he emphasised his expert knowledge of rural China and positioned me as a little girl. On several occasions, Jia fei mao smiled and shook his head, starting to answer my questions by stating ‘What you or your young generation don’t understand is...’ These performances of masculinity echo Pini’s (2005) notes on how male participants, who were mostly in their 50s or 60s, implicitly treated her as an innocent student or daughter by acting in a certain manner and guiding the questions. In comparison, Liong (2015) notes that his young age and embodiment of *wen* masculinity enabled him to be accepted and welcomed as a son-like friend by Hong Kong fathers. What further compounded the two instances that I mention here was not only age, when in fact the two participants were only six or seven years older than me. In addition, it was also linked with my identity as a city-born young woman without children. With different aspects of identity formation intersecting with each other, my family background and personal experience intensified the extent to which I was located in a less powerful position.

Moreover, the power dynamics of an interview are saturated with structural relations in the wider social world (Gailey & Prohaska, 2011). Even though I was aware of the hierarchical features of the interview situation, it was indeed impossible to completely remove this ‘reproduction or replication of contexts from another time and space’ from the interview context (Holmgren, 2013: 99). In my field notes, I wrote about the occasions when I felt more confident—usually when I was able to take up a privileged social position, such as my urbanite position versus

migrant men from rural China, or my richer experience of education compared to those younger than me. Recognising the source of my confidence reaffirmed to me that this study is situated within 'larger social, economic, and political currents' (Harding, S., 1991: 162). However, my hold on power was also temporary and unstable due to the complex configuration of social forces. As exemplified by Jia fei mao's attitude, my urban background, which usually signified a privileged social status, was likely to be held up as a limitation in my knowledge. In another interview, when I met undergraduate student Jiang feng (23), my advantageous educational level did allocate me a powerful position. Yet, it could not compensate for my lack of work experience compared to the wide range of social activities and internships in which Jiang feng had participated. These research experiences underscore that power dynamics in the field are produced through the interplay of manifold axes of identity, which can be highly unstable and fluid.

Gender relations and gender performance

While the power dynamics in the interview context of my study validated a complex intersection of age, class, gender, personal history and educational experience, gender was probably the most visible aspect. Previous studies on methodological dilemmas in cross-gender research have warned female researchers about frustrating and unpleasant scenes when interviewing men, including male inexpressiveness (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993), sexualising the encounter (Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Pini, 2005), interrogation and challenge from participants (Arendell, 1997; Lee, D., 1997), and other difficulties due to the female researcher/male participant relationship. Nonetheless, interview relations in cross-gender research are also subject to negotiation or generate positive results. In her own study of interviewing fathers, Gatrell (2006: 248) records that all the interviewees were 'thoughtful and courteous', and there were no unpleasant comments with sexual implications. Moreover, Williams and Heikes acknowledge that women interviewing men is a common preference for both qualitative and survey researchers due to the general perception that 'men are more comfortable talking about intimate topics with women than they are with other men' (1993: 281). Reading methodology textbooks and other researchers' experiences

prepared me for dealing with gendered dilemmas in fieldwork with an awareness of my potential advantage as a female researcher.

My encounters with different young men were generally pleasant and smooth. Most of my participants were friendly and polite, and nobody showed a particularly offensive attitude or flirted with me. In this regard, conducting empirical fieldwork in China, or within the East Asian context, is likely to extend or even challenge current discussions on interviewee (women)/interviewer (men) relations. Due to the profound influence of Confucian values and relatively conservative attitudes towards sex, flirting or making sexually explicit comments is not commonly seen when a woman and a man meet each other for the first time. As West and Zimmerman (1987) suggest, individuals do gender by performing socially appropriate forms of masculinity and femininity, which is usually achieved through particular body language and conversation. In fact, many of the young men were conscious of presenting a civilised, ritualised, and socially appropriate masculine self to me. Beyond the interview, participants also raised the vital importance of embodied civilisation and ritualisation in their everyday experience (Chapter 4). Moreover, the strategy of recruiting participants—usually through my personal network and mutual intermediaries—created additional protection for the research relationship. In this study, although intermediaries did not work exactly as gatekeepers, they were able to reassure both the participants and myself as to each other’s credibility and trustworthiness (cf. King & Horrocks, 2009). In general, regardless of a number of unexpected and difficult moments caused by the gender difference, I actually benefited from my position as a female researcher.

On doing masculinity in the interview context, Holmgren (2013: 92) reminds researchers to pay attention to ‘practices of privilege, of doing dominance in the conversation and of deciding what perspectives and interpretations are the “right” ones’. For young men in my research, gender performance predominantly involved various strategies that asserted a conventional sense of superior masculinity. One of the ways in which the men performed gender was by taking control of the conversation, which has also been noticed by other researchers doing qualitative

interviews with men (Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Pini, 2005). For example, a number of participants in my study frequently went off topic until I reminded them what my question was. In some cases, I acknowledge that it was more of an unconscious exposure of their feelings than a deliberate gender performance, such as young fathers continually referring to their children. Nevertheless, there were also moments when it became clear that participants were trying to steer the conversation in a direction that they favoured. Meanwhile, some of the men tried to dominate the encounter through challenging my questions or professional skills. They sometimes interrogated me: 'This questions sounds very odd' or 'Why do you want to ask this?'

Another illustration of performing masculinity was to construct themselves as powerful and busy men. In the pre-interview contact, some interviewees were extremely slow in replying to my message or changed the schedule several times. Although I got in touch with the participants in advance and let them choose the proper time and place for the interview, there were still unexpected interruptions. During interviews, a few respondents frequently checked the time or answered the phone. In the last interview, S (31) even left for a while because he had to 'talk to a friend in response to an emergency'. Additionally, in a rather subtle way, participants performed masculinity by adjusting the 'unmanly' talk, such as over-exposure of personal feelings, to reassert socially desirable masculinity. Observing interviewees' narrative strategies reminded me to 'treat the unfolding social contexts of the interview as data' (Warren, C., 2002: 91). For example, participants' emphasis on their register with mainstream masculinity was demonstrated through demarcating themselves from any homosexual or unmanly inclinations. When asked about their opinions towards androgynous men or if they used skincare or make-up products, many participants, without any hesitation, emphatically replied 'I don't like them' or 'I never bother using skincare products, not to mention make-up'.

At the same time, in both unconscious and intentional ways, I was performing femininity during the interviews. From choosing interview locations to the careful

consideration of my appearance and demeanour, everything was more or less related to the gendered characteristics of the project. Moreover, when listening back to the recordings, I was surprised to find that I laughed a lot. Even when there was nothing amusing, I seem to have used a smile or laugh as a way to present myself as a humble and friendly woman. In other cases, despite feeling irritated or shocked, I listened placidly to participants' accounts asserting male superiority and dominant power in order to facilitate the interview. Although the young men were generally polite and respectful, I came across manifold gender-biased accounts, including consistent complaints about their partners, a traditional division of gender roles in the domestic setting, young fathers' gendered expectations of their children and so on. Seen from these cases, I was simultaneously doing the emotional labour that is a crucial part of performing femininity. These uneasy feelings have also been documented by other researchers in a similar situation, who argue that being a silent audience to men's sexist statements engenders a sense of powerlessness and serves to perpetuate gender stereotypes (Aredell, 1997; Riley et al., 2003). As D. Lee contends rather pessimistically, for the sake of facilitating the interview, the most appropriate strategy for a female interviewer to take is to laugh at this point (1997: 559). Since I believed that it was not my role to change the views of my participants, what I usually did during the fieldwork was to record my feelings after each interview and reflect upon both pleasant and frustrating experiences. Drawing on other feminist writers, Campbell (2003: 287) reminds us that 'the methodological value of "experience" rests with the degree to which that "experience" is subjected to rigorous and critical analysis.' Recognising how gender dynamics shaped the conversations in the field confirmed to me that masculinity (as well as femininity) needs to be explored as a relational concept that is situated within a specific context.

Beyond the dichotomy of insider and outsider

Reflecting upon my experience of managing the multifaceted prism of identity in the field motivated me to rethink my relational position to participants. With continuous shifts in the ways in which I presented my identity and participants' (different) perceptions of my displays of identity, I could in many instances be both

an insider and an outsider. Identity boundaries became blurred in light of the inevitable oscillation between different positions and, consequently, my membership status in relation to the Chinese young men was under constant negotiation. Indeed, it is necessary to problematise the binary understanding of the researcher's identity in qualitative research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Subedi, 2006). A dichotomous perception of being either insider or outsider may 'essentialise categories, overlooking the significant differences within as well as between groups, and failing to take account of the flexible and multifaceted nature of identity' (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008: 53). Similarly, my study also highlighted the unstable nature of the border with the 'other', which was hardly a fixed category, but rather transformed under the intersection of gender, class, age, experience, educational background, language (accent) and probably other relations of power that I did not recognise.

Despite my general familiarity with local specificities, the young men identified me as an outsider in various situations. For instance, participants sometimes referred to my overseas educational experience to distinguish themselves from me. Moreover, there were a number of times when aspects of identity that I shared with respondents—such as nationality, experience, and class—were overshadowed by my gender as a woman. I observed this by noticing participants' slippage in the use of the personal pronoun from 'I' to 'our men' when discussing topics such as being a good husband or men's homosocial activities. Interestingly, gendered difference could also be remedied by other aspects of identity such as age. For example, DX (26) said 'you must understand this as we are of the same generation' when discussing the widespread use of mobile phones. These 'in-between-nesses' of my fieldwork experience could be accurately conceptualised as being a 'halfie' (Dasgupta, 2013). According to Abu-Lughod (1991: 137), halfie refers to 'people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education or parentage'. As a researcher who grew up in China but acquired almost all of my academic training in Western academe, going back home to research generated a strong sense of being a 'halfie' for me. Subedi (2006) reminds us that halfie researchers may face daunting tasks in the field because of the multiple

identities they embody and the floating position they occupy. Accordingly, my identity in the field appeared to be unstable and fluid because of my halfie position. Revisiting a familiar setting with new intentions and in a new incarnation to a large extent transformed me into a 'strange insider'.

My contingent membership of the same group as participants offered me some positive opportunities to negotiate my interactions with the Chinese men. Being a native researcher was advantageous in building up rapport and mutual trust, which facilitated my access to the groups of young men. Meanwhile, it also guaranteed my familiarity with and appropriate comprehension of the local context, in regard to 'both the culture and the symbolic and concrete meanings of words and also the use of body language in communication' (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008: 13). During the moments when I was perceived as an outsider, especially in terms of gender, age and experience, the distance between the young men and me invited participants to explain their personal feelings in detail. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009: 60) point out:

There are complexities inherent in occupying the space between. Perhaps, as researchers we can only ever occupy the space between. We may be closer to the insider position or closer to the outsider position, but because our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher (which includes having read much literature on the research topic), we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions.

With the increasing global links and heterogeneity of values in societies like China, a rigid demarcation of insider or outsider is either difficult to achieve or insufficient in reflecting researchers' impact on the production of knowledge. In this sense, as halfie researchers who return to their home country to conduct fieldwork, we should pay greater attention to the ambiguity of our perceived status. Occupying 'the space between' may offer more opportunities to push forward conversations and discussions. However, it may also generate complicated dynamics of power that demand careful handling. Beyond the fieldwork experience, my halfie identity also generated a continuing impact on transcription, data analysis and the way in which I represent ordinary Chinese young men.

Transcribing, Coding and Interpreting

In order to avoid accumulating a pile of recordings to work on, I started to transcribe interviews while I was still conducting fieldwork in China. Transcribing a few interviews during the early stages allowed me to adjust my fieldwork outline and add follow-up questions. It also enhanced my ability to reflect on my own performance as a researcher, tracking my progress or problematic situations. But, overall, most transcriptions were completed after I returned to the university. I transcribed every interview word for word, as the significance of producing accurate accounts of what happened in the field has been commonly acknowledged (McCracken, 1988; Patton, 1990). In addition, Sprague (2016: 91) suggests that researchers should be sensitive to 'not just what people say, but how they say it, seeing hesitations, meta-statements, and the like as cues to the working of power in their lives'. Following this advice, I also documented silence, pauses, repetitive words, as well as participants' evident emotional changes, such as laughter or sighs. These details allowed me to replicate the interview interaction in the form of a transcript as much as possible, which appeared to greatly benefit my data analysis and writing. In places where I found the men's narratives to make an important point, I recorded the accurate time in case of any necessity to check the original recording later. Moreover, I also wrote down my comments during the transcribing process in order to accumulate potential material for subsequent coding and analysis.

After finishing the transcription, I started coding manually with the aid of NVivo software in a thematic way. It is argued that NVivo is becoming more popular among qualitative researchers and provides multiple forms of support for data analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). I found that NVivo helped me to organise large amounts of data and tease out noticeable themes at the beginning. However, I still found my own manual and memory work to be indispensable. I only used NVivo to produce a list of selected codings and extracts when starting to draft a new section or chapter. After this, I usually turned to the original transcripts, reading them again and again to familiarise myself with the characteristics, life experiences and personal biographies of participants. I also referred to my initial comments during

transcription and field notes for inspiration and reference.

The coding process was far more time-consuming and frustrating than I had expected. Until this stage, the biggest challenge I had ever encountered was my obsession with theory. Upon my return to the university during my second year, I continued my work routine of reading extensively alongside transcribing, coding and interpreting data. Before I started the coding work for Chapter 4 on the male body and embodied masculinity, my head was already filled with conceptual terms such as 'the absent body', 'the reflexive body', 'the lived body' and so on. Honestly, I was excited at that time to discover different theoretical stances on the body and I believed they would be useful to my thesis. As a result, I created codes based on these theorised accounts. As my supervisors commented, the first draft chapter read as 'theoretically sophisticated but you need to let your data speak'.

Apparently, I am not alone in confronting such confusions. For example, Kelly (2011) notes the way in which she came to approach economically dependent women with her own assumptions about women's suppression under male power, rather than hearing what was actually being said by women and their male partners. While I did start my fieldwork 'with an open mind rather than setting out to prove a particular hypothesis' with a feminist researcher's spirit (Gabb, 2008: 97), I must admit that I tried to squeeze participants' accounts into the boxes that I had designed for them during the earlier period of this study.

Back (2007) has suggested that sociology is best envisaged as a 'listener's art'. By inviting researchers to do sociological listening and artful description of social realities, he argues:

Conceptual and theoretical work should not climb to a level where the voices of the people concern[ed] [*sic*] become inaudible. Rather, theoretical ideas and concepts hover above the ethnographic ground in order to provide a vocabulary for its explication. This is a kind of description that is committed and dialogic but not just a matter of 'letting the research subjects speak'. (Back, 2007: 21)

Thus, I started recoding and re-listening to what the young men were talking

about, while deepening my critical understanding of their accounts. Having realised my over-reliance on theory, I decided to abandon all the existing codes and re-examine my transcripts. Indeed, my focus should be to minimise the extent to which this thesis will 'transform those researched into objects of scrutiny and manipulation' (Acker et al., 1996: 63). Still in a thematic manner, I restarted from open coding (Fielding & Thomas, 2008; Mason, J., 2002). Rather than depending on theoretical stances, I identified specific codes from the men's recurrent expressions, such as 'health is more important than body shape', 'men should be the family mainstay', or 'not to make my parents worry about me'. Subsequently, I organised these codes alongside my interview outline to check if some of them could be made into a larger theme of a chapter. By doing this, I was able to identify more intriguing themes from the Chinese men's own words and phrases. I believe that this was certainly a better way to make sense of young men's everyday lives.

During constant re-listening to my data, I also became interested in *how* these men told their stories apart from the content of those stories. Therefore, I read my data at different levels: literally, interpretatively and reflexively. As J. Mason (2002: 149) explains, literal reading examines the 'words and language used, the sequence of interaction, the form and structure of the dialogue', interpretative reading means to construct 'what you think the data mean or represent', while reflexive reading will 'locate you as part of the data'. A combination of these approaches enabled me to conduct both narrative and thematic analysis of the young men's accounts. In other words, I investigated both the men's everyday lives as they narrated them and considered the interview setting as a social site where men constructed masculinities. Adding a narrative angle to explore the configuration of identity revealed how young men craft their masculine selves by drawing heavily upon indigenous cultural meanings. For example, participants' particular ways of talking during interviews—changing personal pronouns from 'I' to 'our men', contradictory accounts, repeated terms, hesitance, ambiguity and so on—vividly mirror men's strategic gender narratives. As Riessman (2003: 342) maintains, narratives are a particularly significant genre for representing and analysing identity in its multiple guises in different contexts. Furthermore, paying attention to narrative identity

also underpins relationality as a central feature of Chinese masculinity: Chinese men's identity making is inherently a dynamic, temporal, and situated process. Chapter 6 concentrates on narrative masculinity through telling (past) stories of one's family and is particularly relevant to this perspective. Moreover, because we 'draw on discourses culturally available to us in order to construct narrative accounts' (Jackson, 1998: 47), examining participants' techniques of telling stories unravelled their relationships with the masculine ideal and wider social backdrops. As such, men manipulated particular styles of storytelling to perform desirable masculinity, which is clearly evidenced in participants' attitudes towards distinct male bodies (Chapter 4).

All the interviews were initially transcribed into Chinese (Mandarin) until I identified selected extracts to be included in the thesis. Poland (2003: 272) has noted several challenges during the transcription process, including the fact that researchers always 'find it difficult to resist the impulse to tidy up their transcriptions so that the participants do not appear so thoroughly inarticulate'. While I did my best not to eliminate participants' words in the original Chinese transcripts, the subsequent translating practices inevitably involved adjustments and alternative expressions. Some terms were especially difficult to translate or lacked equivalent English vocabularies. This impossibility of literally translating the source language into the target language has also been noticed by other qualitative researchers conducting cross-cultural studies or working with multiple languages (Evans et al., 2017; Lopez et al., 2008; Temple, 1997). During the whole data analysis and interpretation process, I frequently resorted to dictionaries and discussed particular translations with my supervisors. I hoped to ensure the reliability and validity of transcripts without losing the nuances and subtlety of the young men's own accounts. Being both the researcher and translator, I found that the translation process provided a unique opportunity to check and enhance the quality of my interpretations (Young & Ackerman, 2001). Moreover, it also inspired me to closely scrutinise cross-cultural meanings and logics (Temple & Young, 2004). Following my supervisors' suggestions, I used *pinyin* (romanised Chinese) for untranslatable Chinese terms, followed by a literal translation in English. At the

same time, I added footnotes to elaborate the underlying connotations of particular terms and to explain the context where necessary. As the analytical process moved on, I also adopted some Chinese terms, such as *shenti* (Chapter 4) and *you dandang* (Chapter 5), as core conceptualising tools. On most occasions, these culturally and historically rooted words and phrases show great potential to shed light on the identities and experiences of Chinese young men.

Drafting and Redrafting: Fieldwork as a Continuous Process

During the process of interpreting data and writing up, the formation and content of this thesis have undergone enormous transformations. For me, writing is indeed a productive tool to stimulate new thoughts and generate new ideas (Zinsser, 1989). The analysis chapters were surprisingly different from what I had originally planned. Three years ago, I never anticipated that I would immerse myself in Confucian thought and conventional Chinese philosophical textbooks. I believe that most of these changes happened because of numerous discussions with supervisors, drafting and redrafting, constant reflections and ongoing reading. They are also related to several visits back to China, during which I was able to relocate myself into similar contexts to those in which my participants spent their everyday lives. As Aitken (2011: 96) argues, the so-called field resolves itself as everywhere and at all times. What we do next—thinking, compiling, transcribing, reflecting, writing—is as much about the fieldwork as being there, engaged and connected. In my own experience, the research field, life and work overlapped to a large degree.

Many of my analytical ideas were informed by talking with friends, spending time with my parents and other family members, participating in leisure activities during my time in Shanghai and Shenyang, as well as other mundane practices such as reading the news, watching Chinese entertainment shows, or eating out in restaurants. Truly, qualitative research is ‘a process involving a variety of interested parties and a process which shows, in all cases, an enrichment of understanding as a consequence of these various encounters’ (Morgan, 2011c: 27). While it is impossible to accurately identify how these activities shaped my analysis,

considering 'fieldwork' as a continuous process did enable me to develop sounder understandings of my data and read them in a dynamic and multi-dimensional way. Recalling my analysis and writing process, I felt strongly that my familiarity with given topics, such as marriage and parent-child relationships, influenced my analysis. In turn, examining Chinese young men's identities and experiences also had a great impact on my own attitudes. This blurring of the line between the subjective and the objective position has been widely pointed out by feminist researchers (Acker et al., 1996; Jamieson et al., 2011a; May, V., 2011a; Smart, 2011). We appear in our texts as thinking, acting—and feeling—participants rather than as disembodied reporters of collected facts (Charmaz, 2012: 475). Therefore, I regard the personal baggage that I brought into this research as providing a positive opportunity to engage in consistent reflexive scrutiny of both myself and the data (cf. Fonow & Cook, 1991; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

A significant shift during the process of writing was the increasing attention I paid to the local context and historical legacy of Chinese culture. At an earlier stage of writing, I was often irritated by the men's announcement of women's 'natural' caring role, or found it difficult to interpret participants' views, such as that a man's inner traits are more important than his outside. Nevertheless, many of these accounts started to make sense when I situated them within the contemporary Chinese context and linked them with core cultural values informed by Confucianism. Meanwhile, my growing recognition that many of my own perceptions were rooted in Chinese culture and the current social context also supported my comprehension of the data, and this offered historical depth and cultural specificity to my analysis. In this way, my position was often 'linked aesthetically, politically, emotionally' with the Chinese young men I was writing about (Richardson, 1993: 705). Given the empathy I felt for my participants and, on occasion, sympathy with their anxieties and frustrations, my analysis moved beyond evaluating the masculinities of Chinese young men by employing generalised gender values. I became more and more convinced that participants' accounts required critical and reflexive consideration instead of naming them unambiguously as 'patriarchal' or 'male privilege'.

Thus, following feminist scholars' insights on 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1991), I hoped to conceptualise the masculinity of ordinary Chinese young men from their own accounts. This was achieved through continuous contemplation on the process of knowledge production, and closer engagement with the historical, social, cultural and structural forces that have shaped men's gender identities. However, I found there to be a lack of academic vocabulary to describe the population of which my participants were indicative—the young generation of urban Chinese men who are regarded as normal, ordinary, not 'in crisis' and therefore largely excluded from sociological examination. Meanwhile, I found that existing concepts do not have the potential to encapsulate the complicated configuration and fluidity of these men's masculinity. Inconsistencies are everywhere, both with regard to the group's diverse reactions to the same topic, or an individual man's shifting attitudes in different situations and social spheres. Yet, I do not want to overstate these men's reflexivity or resistance, nor do I intend to obliterate their gender privilege. After all, many of them indicated their vulnerability in the face of various constraints and challenges or reaffirmed men's authority.

I therefore came up with 'elastic masculinity' as the key analytical concept to elucidate how young men perceive and construct masculinities in contemporary China. In particular, the term 'elastic' is an appropriate metaphor to capture Chinese young men's gendered strategies in everyday life. Essentially, an object or material that is elastic can be stretched or compressed because of its softness or malleability. This feature is analogous to the masculinity of Chinese young men, which is not a static entity but appears to be an unfinished project and open to being worked upon. Meanwhile, I describe Chinese masculinity as elastic because the gendered identity of young men is flexible, accommodating, adaptable, and encompasses considerable variety. On an individual level, each Chinese young man may strategically perform different forms of masculinity depending on the context. Collectively, these men no longer adhere to a universal standard, but do everyday gender in heterogeneous ways. Furthermore, the concept of elastic masculinity highlights that it may resume its original shape after reaching its maximum stretch

or being exposed to outside forces. In this sense, I am suggesting that young men's masculinity-making process cannot always be creative or arbitrary. These young men are subject to structural forces, cultural traditions and a range of contemporary social conditions. The adaptability of elastic masculinity runs throughout this thesis, and I will start by exploring the Chinese male body and embodied masculinity.

Chapter 4

Making the Chinese *Shenti*:

Body and Embodied Masculinities in Men's Everyday Lives

Introduction

When I search my memory for the initial motivation behind this research, it was the body that first stimulated my thoughts. When I went to Shanghai as an undergraduate, I was struck by the distinct appearance of young men on the streets. Most local Shanghai men were shorter and slenderer than those I knew in northern China; they were also softer in voice and accent whilst transmitting a less aggressive aura. For a young woman who was born and grew up in north-eastern China, where the macho type of masculinity is pervasive and often celebrated (Moskowitz, 2013), such curious contrasts seemed worthy of more exploration.

On a broader level, the body has long been a serious matter for Chinese people. Traditionally, a typical Chinese way of greeting is asking each other: 'How's your eating going?' (*chi le ma*). Despite being gradually abandoned among the masses, in a sense this greeting highlights the central importance of eating practices and associated bodily functions for ordinary people in this country. Some researchers have even gone further, to argue that Chinese culture is characterised by its 'somatisation' of many aspects of social life (Sun, 2004 [1983]; Brownell, 1995). In light of these cultural discourses around the body, in this chapter I want to explore how Chinese young men construct and live with their bodies in everyday life, what masculinities are formulated in a myriad of embodied experiences, and how their perceptions and practices are informed by, and also contribute to, shared aesthetics of the male body and packages of cultural particularities (or commonalities) compared with other societies.

Overall, this chapter is located in a Chinese cultural, philosophical and sociological framework of *shen* or *shenti* (body, body-person) while engaging with Western theorisations of self, body and embodiment. My analysis was structured in this way due to the consideration that the Chinese language itself has a rich set of

expressions related to *shen* and *shenti*. For example, a general search in the original Chinese transcriptions of interviews showed the young men's frequent adoption of *shen*-related terms to describe diverse aspects of their personal lives. More importantly, traditional Chinese understandings of the body intrinsically differ from most Western philosophical traditions, especially in terms of body-mind unity and the social, reflexive and relational features of bodies (Ham, 2001). While it is true that 'Western' philosophy is not monolithic, and recent sociological work on the body has raised alternative theorisations of the body and embodiment (e.g. Crossley, 2001, 2005; Entwistle, 2000; Jackson & Scott, 2007; Spencer, 2009), I suggest that a Chinese conceptualisation of *shenti* has more capacity to explain men's relationships with their bodies. By doing this, my analysis sometimes seems to move away from viewing the body as a material existence and does more to explore personal characteristics or auras. Such an abstract perception used to be excluded from existing sociological theories on 'the body'. Nevertheless, this distinct stance is rooted in Confucian thoughts on body-self or body-person, and has a significant impact on Chinese men. Moreover, in order to develop a critical understanding of the relationality and situational complexity of Chinese *shenti*, I treat the interview as a relational event, during which the male body is constantly in the process of being made and displayed. In particular, I will focus on three aesthetics of *shenti*—*du* (degree, extent), *li* (ritual, propriety), and *he* (harmony)—that buttress participants' narratives about bodies and embodied masculinities. Originating from classical Confucian ethics, these three concepts also evoke popular male body discourses that are circulating elsewhere in the world, including self-responsibilisation, healthism and men's growing consciousness of body shape. In this way, I will investigate how ordinary Chinese young men negotiate between indigenous *shenti* discourse and global male body images to construct desirable masculinities.

Weighing *Du*: Bodily Moderation and Regulation

In Chinese cultural aesthetics, particularly with reference to Confucianism, all ranges of things are differentiated based on their 'numerous positions on the continuum' between extremes rather than solely defined by their absolute position

(Farquhar, 1994: 32). Accordingly, a unique tool for measuring balance and appropriateness is phrased as '*du*', meaning degree, position, quantity or proportion. The tenet of *du* is thus about restraint and control. For instance, Confucius explained the importance of managing a moderate sense of emotional *du* as 'pleasure not carried to the point of debauch; grief not carried to the point of self-injury' (*Analects*, 3.20). Such a view further informs Chinese medicine, which views excess in almost anything as negative to *shenti*. For example, 'excess in thinking may be harmful to one's heart and spleen, while excess in eating and drinking hurts one's spleen and stomach systems' (Zhang, Y. H., 2007: 47). However, *du* should not be reduced to a wholly repressive or normative concept, but should rather allow individual and situational adjustments. Through participating in social interactions, individuals are advised to develop contingent *du* for various circumstances. It is this flexible and interactive nature that marks *du* as an enduring and meaningful concept for Chinese people. In both their mundane lives and the particular interview setting, participants appear to make consistent efforts to present socially appropriate masculine bodies in order to adhere to this concept.

Identifying a masculine du

In general, the Chinese young men identify the *du* with which they can make sense of embodied masculinity carefully and consciously. Four interrelated yet distinct themes were frequently drawn upon to talk about and experience the body: health instead of body shape, inner traits more than bodily appearance, 'not being bothered' and a discourse of normality. Most evidently, notwithstanding my straightforward questions, such as 'Do you think men's body shape (*shencai*) is important?', I found participants much preferred to describe the male body in an instrumental rather than aesthetic sense. It was apparent that commenting on physical fitness was considered masculine but certainly not physical beauty. For example, TMB (30) staunchly denied that he paid any attention to body shape: 'That doesn't matter at all. The key thing is to be healthy.' Moreover, since the Chinese term *shenti* (body) and *shencai* (body shape) have the same root and similar pronunciation, a few participants seemed to regard these two as

interchangeable notions. When asked whether he valued men's body shape, Simon (27) said:

I...I've just had a small operation recently. And honestly, I suffered a lot. This made me feel that having good body quality (*tizhi*), or body vigour (*tipo*) is very important. In order to cope with some situations, especially when facing unexpected pressures, that's very important. I mean, your *shenti*.

Without answering my question on *shencai*, Simon unhesitatingly referred to his recent illness, which had prompted him to rethink *shenti* in an instrumental way. In addition, since the Chinese language has a remarkably rich range of vocabulary to describe one's body, Simon also mentioned *tizhi* (body quality) and *tipo* (body vigour)—both words that designate smooth bodily function, while *tipo*, in particular, conveys the meaning of a vibrant and healthy male body. Moreover, *shenti* was not seen as having an isolated existence, but rather as being located within a particular social context. This can be seen from Simon's emphasis on the fundamental role of *shenti*—strong and healthy enough to bear pressure—within a framework of the modern risky social environment (Beck, 1992). As Simon continued to explain, the 'unexpected pressures' largely derived from work overload: 'During the whole second half of last year, I was busy with several big projects in the company. It gave me a sense of fulfilment, but I frequently worked overtime, had almost no weekends.' If acknowledging the dysfunctional and ill body triggered a feeling of vulnerability and, potentially, unmanliness, the embarrassment was mitigated by Simon's linking it with professional development. In this way, appropriate embodied masculinity was doubly secured by foregrounding a discourse of health within the interview environment and training the body in everyday life for the sake of men's careers.

Chinese men are certainly not alone in feeling ambivalent about the male body. For example, in the Canadian context, Norman (2011: 431) argues that men are 'simultaneously compelled to both achieve culturally privileged male bodies at the same time that they are interpellated to maintain a functional, aloof, and distanced relationship to their bodies.' This contradictory stance can be accurately captured

by the importance of *du* that underpinned my participants' attitudes. Leery (32) remarked: 'Well, it [body shape] is important in a way, but that's more for your *shenti*, for your own healthiness, right? Do more exercise and visit the doctor less, I think that's important.' Thus, healthy masculinity is addressed in order to inscribe a masculine *du* on one's body, which obviously excludes excessive attention to body shape. Albert (24) explained this in more detail:

Do you mean if it's important that men's body shape *looks* good to others, or if men's body shape *is* good? [...] It's like the difference between bodybuilding (*jianmei*) and working out (*jianshen*) [...] For me, I don't really care about how I look, as long as it doesn't disgust others. Um...as to *shenti*, I think health is quite important. I mean, you should do some exercise and maintain a good *shenti*. Because, you know, when you have a good *shenti*, or to say you build up body quality (*shenti suzhi*), you won't have a bad body shape.

It needs to be clarified that in daily Chinese language, 'a good *shenti*' often refers to health rather than body shape, which forms a linguistic presupposition for the men's prioritisation of health. For Albert, good body shape was considered to be a by-product during the process of body training; that is, enhancing the physical fitness of one's body would automatically lead to a good body image. Nonetheless, exercise should never transgress a certain *du*. As Albert implied, bodybuilding, as a form of immoderate work on *shenti*, was viewed as decreasing one's masculinity. Similar to Simon, Albert stressed that negotiating the *du* of training one's body was not at all a private or personal issue, but mattered significantly in terms of fitting into the group. This is manifested through his downplaying of body shape, joking that 'as long as it doesn't disgust others'. Therefore, the Chinese male *shenti* is intensely relational and exposed to the scrutiny of the 'generalized others' (Mead, 1934). This perspective is strongly evocative of the Chinese self, for whom social relationships are integral to the identity-making process (Tung, 1994). Although Albert highlighted that health-promoting practices were an individual and autonomous choice, they were carried out both for oneself and for others. However, Brownell (1995) has noted that the Chinese form of bodily training used to be a less practical activity before the increasing Western influence of physical education. Working on one's *shenti* was more a matter of subjective experience

that contributed to the cultivation of an individual's inner self. In fact, traditional male scholars, who proudly embodied *wen* masculinity, rarely participated in any physical activities or competitions (Yu & Bairner, 2011). But most participants have apparently abandoned such a metaphysical understanding of body training, acknowledging the pragmatic aspect of exercise in a taken-for-granted way. In this regard, contemporary Chinese young men appear to have absorbed both the Chinese philosophy of *shenti* and the Western emphasis on the functional body, which work together to reshape men's perceptions of embodied masculinity.

Another discursive resource deployed by Chinese young men was to foreground masculine traits rather than the appearance of the male body when measuring a masculine *du*. This point is arguably unique in Chinese culture compared with research on the male body and health in other societies. As *shenti* is imprinted with the cultural and social attributes of manhood, my participants usually attached more significance to what a man's body *carries* than to how the body *looks*. For example:

Alex (32): The main thing is your inside, disposition (*qizhi*) and discretion.

Jim (25): Men should be tidy, especially your style of doing things.

S (31): I'd say men's inner quality (*pinzhi*) is more important, like whether you are generous and bright in front of others.

Here, the intense relationality of Chinese *shenti* came to the fore again, as these participants stressed that it was important for men to leave a good impression on others through displaying culturally expected male traits. These parallel perspectives mirrored the enduring domination of *wen* (cultural, talented) masculinity in Chinese history—mostly exemplified by scholars and intellectuals—which differs from the Western celebration of the macho male type (Louie, 2002). Yet, similar to perceptions of physical activity, the right *du* of constructing oneself as a Chinese scholar has dramatically transformed. In conventional literary romance, the homoerotic value of '*nan feng*' (male fashion) indirectly but significantly contributed to the shaping of the clichéd aesthetics of a scholar's

shenti, characterised by the 'rose lips, sparkling white teeth, jasper-like face' (Song, 2004: 126). Such a portrait of the beautiful scholar has gradually lost its influence and was widely denied by my participants. But young men are willing to embrace Confucius's depiction of *junzi*, who is virtuous but not physically delicate. In comparison, *wu* (martial, military) masculinity, which has long been overshadowed by *wen* masculinity, continues to be less popular among Chinese men.

In addition, some participants seemed to affirm the value of bodily appearance, but obscured their accounts by connecting it with men's inner traits. Jiang feng (23) replied: 'Many people around me think it [men's body shape] is important. You must be...well, you don't have to be muscular, right? You want to be sort of healthy and sunny and that's enough.' Here, the body was not merely seen as a material existence, but also as containing its own attitudes of being 'sunny'. As Ham (2001: 317) notes, the Confucian body 'can be "read" or "decoded" by others. Even my virtue, my inner thoughts, and my intentions are always exposed and revealed through the body.' By downplaying male muscularity, Jiang feng stresses the physical function that can serve to justify one's good personality. In other words, what truly matters to a Chinese man should be holding the right *du* for physical and psychological well-being instead of his bodily appearance. Likewise, CC (25) commented: 'If you are too fat or too thin, that'll make you look lacking in energy (*mei jingshen*)'. For CC, owning a healthy-look *shenti* was indicative of men's inner power. Therefore, a well-functioning male *shenti* is believed to play an integral role in conveying one's masculine traits, which would otherwise be invisible to other people.

The third popular way to identify a masculine *du* in talking about, experiencing and constructing male *shenti* is to declare that men have more important things to concentrate on. Participants frequently used excuses like 'I'm too busy with work to spend time on exercise' to validate their distance from *shenti*. As XiXi (30) typically put it: 'You won't believe that I used to do muscle training [...] Now...too busy. I can only do radio calisthenics (*guangbo ticao*) in the office.' Frank (25) similarly recounted: 'I went to the gym regularly when I was at university, but there

was no time to do that after I started working full time.’ This avoidance of intentional and excessive work on the body has also been noted in other studies. Among British men, Grogan and Richards (2002: 228) report that “‘can’t be bothered” discourse serves as explicit rejection of trying too hard to look good.’ Nevertheless, the Confucian cultural landscape endows similar accounts with distinct symbolic meanings. Since Confucian teachings regard men’s investment in work as a form of embodied self-cultivation to accumulate *wen* masculinity, XiXi’s and Frank’s strategy of prioritising work over muscle is likely to enhance their masculine traits. Meanwhile, in contemporary China, where the male breadwinner continues to be celebrated, narratives like ‘too busy to exercise’ may bring a man an equal amount of masculine resources compared with outstanding body shape achieved through regular exercise.¹⁰

More than this, positioning oneself as a busy man is occasionally used to justify an unacceptable body shape. For example, Sean (31), after confirming the significance of body shape and revealing anxieties about being overweight, explained his continuing unwillingness to work out: ‘I don’t have such an interest [in sport], not like those who really love it. Plus I’m sometimes really busy.’ By distinguishing himself from the athletic men and the discourse of keeping fit, Sean reflexively engaged with the culturally constructed masculine ideal and attempted to disavow its influence on his bodily independence. As men’s careers and earning ability are fundamental criteria in evaluating Chinese masculinity nowadays, Sean indicated that he will not lose in the gendered arena only due to being overweight.

Furthermore, the discourse of normality is also repeatedly called upon as a general *du* of measuring men’s perceptions of the body through terms like ‘ordinary’, ‘regular’ and ‘normal’ (*zhengchang*). In relation to the concept of *du*, *zhengchang* means managing to stay at the middle point like the majority, and therefore it epitomises an ideal master of *du*. Neyo’s (29) narrative is typical in this regard: ‘I

¹⁰ Apart from *shenti*-related issues, positioning oneself as a man who is busy with career development is also used by Chinese young men to justify other aspects of masculine performance. For example, although young men commonly agree that constructing family time is important, they see it as acceptable if they need to prioritise work over intimate relationships (Chapter 5).

don't want to be muscular, just regular and well-balanced (*yun chen*).⁷ Unlike the general endorsement of individuality in Western societies, performing normally in social interactions is a key characteristic of Chinese culture, which is underscored not only in the domain of *shenti* but also extends to other aspects of daily life. Being normal means conforming to the mainstream and not standing out. The significance of *zhengchang* in Chinese culture is incisively noted by Fei Xiaotong (1992: 58) as 'No one should lead, no one should follow. Everyone should be the same, and everyone should follow the same path.' This perspective was clearly manifested in S's (31) account when I asked him about his understanding of manliness after a series questions about the body:

I think...including your previous questions about men's personal image and body shape, all this stuff, I think [it's acceptable] as long as you don't reach an extreme. In other words, if you act too feminine I think that's...not good. Other normal ones, everything normal, I think that's not a problem.

Although S suggested that normality, or the standard *du*, was the essential bodily aesthetic in almost every respect, it was hardly an accurately defined notion but rather an ambiguous reference point. Hence, real men's *shenti* could be more easily defined in relation to what *it is not*—that is, in indisputable opposition to the female *shenti* and feminine dispositions. It is true that the normality discourse was originally conceptualised in a relational and situational way. Ching (2010: 4) highlights the contextual specificity of normality, arguing that this concept is 'manifested and negotiated differently at different historical moments, fine-tuned according to the different power structures of each context and making different meanings.' In this regard, while the men's emphasis on presenting a normal male body reaffirms the necessity of conforming to social norms and fitting into the collective, it should not be reduced to the conclusion that individuality is wholly suppressed in Chinese society. Instead, men are granted opportunities to claim their autonomy over the body, which, to be fair, can be creative or distinctive as long as they stay in line with normality. Thus, Chinese men are not passive objects but reflexively participate in bodily moderation, as shown in their narratives. Meanwhile, social normality was not necessarily seen as a constraint by most of

my participants; rather, they more or less agreed that they would obtain social respect or even privileges by being *zhengchang* men. Metaphorically, the *shenti* of ordinary men is therefore malleable and ready to be stretched; but once reaching the extreme, it will usually contract due to either social forces or subjective choices.

More than this, some participants attempted to illustrate the degree to which men could work on the body by criticising others who failed to embody normality. Not surprisingly, obsession with one's *shenti* still evokes a self-indulgent picture that has long been stereotypically feminine or not normatively masculine (Aoki, 1996; Sloan et al., 2010). JJ's (29) narrative stood out in this group of opinions:

If the macho type, like Stallone or Schwarzenegger, if that kind of person lived around me...I would feel...well, those people who are obsessive about going to the gym are very likely to be gay. Why do you love the gym so much? Are you targeting your trainer? I mean nowadays, if you do work out too much, you know...it's not that cool.

JJ was not only sceptical about male muscularity, but described enthusiastic bodybuilding as connoting potential homosexuality. According to him, an immoderate focus on bodily appearance would devalue one's masculine image rather than enhancing the accumulation of masculinity. Similarly, Albert (24) sniffed at those doing muscle-building exercises at the gym, teasing that 'they may actually be weak and lack power'. It was universally believed to be important not to try too hard to modify or train one's body, although participants calculated acceptable *du* differently from each other. While XiXi and Frank, as I have noted earlier, talked nostalgically about regular body training in the past, JJ and Albert stubbornly rejected deliberately working out at the gym. Hence, *du* could operate as a floating, sometimes all-encompassing, reference point for Chinese men to draw upon when negotiating acceptable embodied masculinity in their everyday lives.

Managing problematic du

What if *du* is out of control and produces an undesirable male body? Among participants, there seemed to be a shared view that, in such situations, individuals were obligated to bring moderate *du* back to the problematic body. This self-responsibility for one's bodily wellbeing is advocated in Confucian doctrines (Liu & Zhang, 2015) and also, as Farquhar (2002) notes, back in the 1980s, Chinese medicine meal practices were already being commercially used to allow consumers to put the problematic body 'back into order'. In a way, this is in line with Foucauldian scholarship that conceptualises the internalisation of macro power and the disciplining of one's own body (Crawshaw, 2007; Rose, 1989). However, as I shall explore, the autonomous governance of *shenti* in the Chinese or Confucian sense is embedded in men's everyday bodily practices. It is a matter of lived experience more than compelling discourse, and reflexive engagement more than self-regulation.

Throughout the interviews, many of the men agreed that an illegitimate body image that went against standard *du*, predominantly marked by being overweight and other unhealthy signs, was likely to trouble their masculinity. Subsequently, a man ought to scrutinise his *shenti* and undertake self-improvement. Xiaozhu (31), who was dissatisfied with his body image, admitted that:

I was much leaner as a student when I still had stomach muscles. Working full time has made it totally different. Sitting in the office all day, now I feel my belly is getting bigger. I really need to exercise, otherwise the belly issue will just get worse. I really care about this.

Although Xiaozhu was not at all overweight from my point of view, apparently the 'belly issue' had become a source of anxiety. Comparing his current bodily status with the muscular body that he used to have, Xiaozhu was eager to bring back moderate *du*. On a broad level, it is true that obesity has increasingly become a contemporary problem for the Chinese. For instance, the prosperity of the food industry can be seen from the extending waistlines of Chinese people (French & Crabbe, 2010). In a survey about the waistlines and obesity of adults in nine

provinces between 1993 and 2011, Yang and her colleagues (2014) find that the average waistlines among adult Chinese men has risen from 76.5 cm to 84 cm, while the percentage of central obesity among men has shot up to 30.4 in 2011 compared to 8.4 18 years previously. Since starvation is no longer as threatening to urban Chinese as in the past, greeting each other with 'how's your eating going' has lost its popularity. Instead, *Xiaozhu* represents growing numbers of people who have shifted their attention to health-promoting practices as a new label to mark one's moral decency and, implicitly, class identity. This is because weight management is becoming more difficult to achieve so that those who are able to control their *du* gain new social privileges. While the ethical characteristic of self-restraint is integral in classical Confucianism, this virtue has gained new meanings in contemporary Chinese society.

In order to improve a problematic *shenti*, acquiring or demonstrating expert knowledge is a validated strategy. If explicit discussion of the body runs the risk of being seen as feminised, some participants decorate it with masculine features by employing professional terminologies when talking about their relationship with *shenti*. As a result, healthy masculinity becomes a site that requires constant self-management under the proliferating media discourse of *yangsheng* (preserving health, nurturing life) (Hao & Yan, 2010), and also modern scientific knowledge about keeping fit. At times, the men's display of expertise was phrased through indigenous medical knowledge. DX (26) told me that he had gained much weight after leaving his parents to go to university. As he explained:

You know what was the main reason? The main thing was that your normal timetable (*zuoxi*) was interrupted. Hanging around with friends until midnight...and staying up late especially made you fat. Because the detoxification of your body (*paidu*)...well, to put it simply, you didn't *yangsheng*. You didn't develop yourself towards the healthy direction, so you became fat easily.

Thus, lacking the parental supervision of a regular timetable was believed to be the primary reason causing DX's failure to preserve an appropriate *du*. Consequently, living against the law of *yangsheng* produced an undesirably fat body. Rather than

a personally owned materiality, *shenti* denoted lived experience embedded in, and constructed through, relationships. In particular, DX adopted a Chinese medical discourse of bodily detoxification and nurturance to describe his unhealthy lifestyle. *Yangsheng*, literally meaning nurturing life, is widely recognised as a Chinese tradition. Rooted in Chinese philosophy, *yangsheng* is never only about improving the biological and material body, but is also about ‘the enhancement of vitality that defines the shape and vector of Chinese medical thinking’ (Tu, 1992: 90). This rhetoric of *yangsheng* is echoed by CC (25): ‘Our Chinese way of *yangsheng*...well, I mean this traditional culture, is good for everyone, from little kids to adults. I believe that learning this stuff will benefit both your body and spirit (*xiu shen yang xing*).’

Farquhar and Zhang (2012: 18), in their book exploring *yangsheng* culture in Beijing, record a short verse that three interviewees recited:

The Way (*dao*) of *yangsheng* is eating and sleeping, talking and singing,
playing ball and taking pictures, writing and painting,
writing poetry line by line, playing chess to banish the blues,
chatting of heaven, speaking of earth.

As can be seen, *yangsheng* centres on the *shenti* but also extends the *shenti* beyond a physical existence. The art of *yangsheng* is situated in mundane everyday activities, including physical exercise, developing cultural attainments or even philosophical conversation with the universe. As multifaceted as this discourse is, *yangsheng* values self-preservation and self-cultivation, which are similarly advocated in Confucianism (although also visible in other Chinese philosophical schools like Daoism and Buddhism). According to Liu and Zhang (2015), Confucian thought emphasises the individual’s responsibility to restrain bodily desire via self-reflection and restricting *du*. It is through these trivial bodily regulations that one gradually learns to practise ritual action and cultivate inner morality, which are all included in the *yangsheng* discourse. In this sense, owning good *shenti* validates one’s acquisition of general cultural values to become a socially responsible person. With such a latent recognition, DX continued to tell me: ‘Now...well, I’m

going to marry and I'm worried about my appearance at the wedding (laugh). I've recently started to go to the gym with a mate.' Although having become dissatisfied with his body shape long ago, DX made the decision to start body training mainly for the sake of a well-mannered wedding performance. By relating body shape to changing life phases, DX implied the situational and interactive feature of *du* as an embodied aesthetic value subject to changing life phases.

In addition, Western knowledge about physical health was also adopted by some participants when discussing body shape and functionality. With growing public awareness of the scientific facts behind obesity, a few men raised this type of perspective to illustrate their (mis)management of *shenti*. Jia fei mao (32) was among those men who asserted the necessity of losing weight:

I'm reaching the extreme now. I must...well, lose some weight. But I can definitely manage to lose some weight in ten days. The reason we are fat is because there's no time for exercise after mountains of work. The more you work, the more you want to eat, and then you can't release the energy at night. So, once you work, there's no time for working out. I'll just wait until the school holidays to do some jogging or fast walking.

More often than not, it is women who are portrayed as the experts in body management or making arbitrary decisions to lose weight (Cairns & Johnston, 2015). But Jia fei mao's accounts show that overlooking men's knowledge of weight control or reducing their governance of the body to wholly rational calculation is also misleading. By stressing the need to exercise and start a healthier lifestyle or diet, Jia fei mao indicated his familiarity with how the human metabolic system works. Moreover, the Confucian endorsement of exemplary men who can look after their *shenti* with ease provides the rationale for him to be intimate with his body. However, by claiming that he could lose weight in ten days and turning the personal pronoun from 'I' to 'we', Jia fei mao also revealed a sense of embarrassment in articulating being overweight and commenting on it. At the same time, such a narrative strategy to enlarge obesity into an issue common to everyone serves to diminish any threat to his own masculinity. If a typically traditional profile of a man is one who is 'relatively unconcerned about his health

and well-being in general and would place little value on health knowledge' (Courtenay, 2000: 11), Jia fei mao appeared to partially align with such an image. The crucial point was to find a balanced *du* between accepting mainstream discourses of keeping fit and continuing the traditional manly lifestyle that pays little attention to bodily appearance. Aaron (25), by contrast, demonstrated intense self-monitoring:

I won't do serious bodybuilding. I might do some aerobic exercises to maintain the cardiopulmonary function, like cycling. The air quality in Shanghai is much better than that in Beijing, so I do some aerobic exercises and improve the immune system.

Both men used scientific discourse, but in rather different ways. Compared with Jia fei mao, Aaron demonstrated a greater sense of control over his body, with less sentiment. He also resembled the Confucian *junzi*, who always practises self-restraint with an appropriate *du*, albeit a modernised one equipped with professional health knowledge. In the Western context, similar phenomena have been interpreted as being informed by neoliberalism through a discursive promotion of self-responsibilisation and governmentality (Crawshaw, 2007; Halse, 2009). For Aaron, the ability to analyse his *shenti* with a cool and objective gaze enhanced his confidence and played a crucial role in the self-making process. Accordingly, Chinese men's management of bodily *du* is contingently expanded to incorporate modern scientific discourses beyond Confucian and traditional medical frameworks.

Generally, the young men I interviewed portrayed their embodied self-management in a reflexive way with different degrees of relationality and autonomy. Chinese *shenti* is seen as located in groups of relations, in circles, and in the voices of the generalised others, but also as subject to personal choice and preferences. Participants tend to move between different types of embodied masculinity when the bodily *du* goes wrong, which do not fall neatly into a singular category. For example, Carey (26) adopted a more individualised position to treat the problematic body: 'Good body image is not only for attracting women, but

sometimes...you...you feel uncomfortable if you are fat. Everyone has the need to appreciate beauty. And your body...is ultimately yours, isn't it?' Perceiving body shape as a personal choice, Carey tried to resist the normalised *du* that a man's *shenti* can be viewed only in an instrumental instead of an aesthetic sense. This capacity of acting back to the social scrutiny and expectations of the male body fit well into an interactionist framework that allows sufficient space for reflexive negotiations and adjustments (Crossley, 2006a). As Carey implied, the overweight body would affect a man's gendered attractiveness whilst having a negative influence on his identity.

Yet, even though Carey's narrative sounds self-centred, it is intrinsically social and informed by the normalised definition of male attractiveness. Indeed, some participants vacillated between being the object of social constraints and the subject master of their *shenti*. This was elaborated by San pangzi (32), who had been diagnosed with diabetes and felt seriously threatened by obesity:

I've been thinking about cycling to work. I'm quite concerned about this. After all, I'm just over 30 and sometimes I feel...um...maybe I should give myself a little more pressure. But sometimes it's still...you know, it's very hard to suddenly change your habits after years. It's not realistic to go to the gym and exercise every day. I think I'll just adjust and control it gradually.

After assessing the risk of diabetes and being overweight, San pangzi presented an ambivalent attitude towards the problematic bodily *du*. On the one hand, he was cautious about warning signs caused by obesity and an unhealthy lifestyle, confirming the necessity of self-surveillance and modification. On the other hand, he found it a daunting project to put his body under severe monitoring and transformation. Despite embracing the neoliberal agenda that requires individuals to 'reflexively monitor their bodies and selves to avoid the potential of future illness' (Crawshaw, 2007: 1616), San pangzi rejected taking on the self-responsibility in a clear-cut way. San pangzi's uneasiness confirms that the regulating power of *du* is rather loose and subject to individual choice. Whilst carrying the meaning of normalised social orders, bodily *du* remains closely

associated with the personal domain. As San pangzi said, even though he had determined to make adjustments, he would do it 'gradually' at a moderate pace. Nevertheless, when I tried to pull the topic back to body shape, San pangzi laughed: 'Of course I'm jealous of those...well, forget it. Never mind.' Here, we can probably catch a glimpse of his awareness or even underlying desire for the socially glorified male body.

Interestingly, being overweight used to signify prosperity and therefore the desirable body shape among Chinese people. In contrast, thinness used to be stigmatised as marking 'bad luck, illness, and early death' (Watson, 2000: 208). Given the long-lasting social upheaval from the late imperial Qing dynasty to the Reform era, the ideal body shape in China carries significant historical baggage. For example, Gilman (2008: 138) notes that in early 20th-century China there was a popular fascination with obesity, perhaps as a result of the images of 'famine' that marked Western views of the pathological body in 19th-century China. Subsequently, the great famine and hardship during the civil war and part of the Maoist period led anthropologist Charlotte Ikels (1996: 55) to observe in Guangzhou: 'In 1980 scarcely anyone appeared overweight. By the end of the decade obesity was officially recognized as a health problem, and consumers were shifting from fatty to lean pork.' Moreover, as French and Crabbe (2010: 31) illustrate, a large proportion of this discrepancy between China's fat cities and lean countryside is due to simple economics. Therefore, we can discover evident class differences and historical evolution in terms of the ideal body shape. In contemporary urban China, at least in Shanghai and Shenyang, a widespread concern among ordinary young men is how to lose weight or keep healthy and thin. This is exemplified by San pangzi, whose narrative reaffirms a normalising embodied masculinity that is healthy, vibrant and disciplined among the current generation of urban young men.

Practising du in style and fashion

Since *du* is a fairly adaptable concept, it permeates many aspects of Chinese young men's everyday bodily experience. One of the clearest examples of practising right

bodily *du* is revealed in participants' discussions about skincare products. Universally, the men either immediately disclaimed using any cosmetics, sometimes scoffing at such a question, or listed particular reasons to justify such behaviour. When I asked if he used any skincare products, Misery (25), after strongly repudiating it: 'No, no, no, never', emphasised: 'These will never be part of my definition of a man.' TMB (30) also replied 'no' without any hesitation and burst into laughter, as if I had asked an extremely ridiculous question. With only one exception—Lee (27), who admitted immediately that he often used Dior or Estée Lauder—the majority of men named instrumental products like moisturiser and cleanser. The right *du* of using cosmetics was simple and clear: real men only use skincare products to keep the skin healthy instead of improving a man's appearance. As CC (25) explained:

No, I never use any [cosmetics]. But I feel you need to put on some sunscreen, including men. Because when I went to an outdoor water park in Nanjing, my skin was totally ruined (laugh). Then I know that no matter whether it's men or women, sunscreen is necessary. It's nothing shameful; otherwise it's you yourself will suffer.

In addition to sunscreen, hand cream, anti-acne or shaving-related products were also included as acceptable cosmetics by interviewees. Again, the masculine *du* of using skincare products is predominantly defined around health issues.

Interestingly, a number of participants commented that they were only reluctantly using skincare products due to pressure from their female partners. For instance, Jim (25) complained: 'I need to please my girlfriend if she buys something for me, just using a little bit. But I really don't want to use those. I just do it in a token way (*fuyan*).' Jia fei mao (32) made a similar point: 'Currently I don't use any. Well, it's mainly my wife who bought those for me.' Such a shared perspective strongly evokes Monaghan and Robertson's (2012a) argument that heterosexual men's intimate relationships with women have significant implications for their health and wellbeing. Jim and Jia fei mao's attitudes to cosmetics add another layer of meaning to their argument, given that heterosexual relationships are likely to reshape men's bodily practices and even bodily aesthetics. Meanwhile, a few

participants attempted to further save their masculinity from the threat of skincare products by using ambiguous vocabularies or stressing the cheap brand:

Jim (25): That sort of wet and moist stuff you use after washing your face.

Rocky (28): My wife bought me a brand...maybe called Biotherm or something like that.

DX (26): That stuff you girls like, such and such cream, such and such lotion, I never use them.

Seen from these accounts, there was a latent indication that using skincare products equated with being unmanly. This would lead to inappropriate practices of *du* and, therefore, illegitimate embodied masculinity. DX, in particular, reiterated the stereotypical view that applying skincare products was closely associated with femininity. As a result, the men found it particularly important to weigh a masculine *du* in order to maintain appropriate masculinity. If Confucian-informed *shenti* is read as a dynamic site to display personal aesthetics and social values (Huang, J., 2009), participants' unanimous rejection of skincare products was therefore a manifestation of the unspoken regulation of the normalised male body. This is clearly at odds with prevailing media representations of the metropolitan male elites in contemporary China (Song & Lee, 2010), who often embody much privileged masculinity than ordinary Chinese young men.

In line with their strong repudiation of cosmetics, participants overwhelmingly distanced themselves from conspicuous shopping and regarded it as women's labour. For most Chinese young men, practices of *du* in style and fashion are simultaneously practices of gender. Specifically, both shopping in everyday life and talking about dress during interviews may undermine embodied hetero-masculinity. The routine was to rely on one's parents—predominantly mothers—before completely leaving home. As soon as they were building up a relationship, the task of shopping was logically transferred to the men's female partners. More than this, there seemed to be few generational or age differences. 30-year-old civil servant TMB replied: 'I just tell my mom I want a certain kind of clothes. Like "I'm

too busy to do the shopping and can you help me buy this?’” Jiang feng (23), a final-year undergraduate student, told me: ‘It used to be my mom [buying clothes for me], now 70% is still her job. She feels my choice is not good enough or it doesn’t suit her taste. Yeah. So I just leave it to her.’ If, as Entwistle (2000: 327) suggests, dress is an embodied social practice, since ‘our dress is structured by social forces and subject to social and moral pressures’, these men’s narratives evidenced intense public surveillance on men’s bodily practice in contemporary China. In terms of shopping and dress, the *du* to engage with these activities must be attentively negotiated in order to justify one’s masculinity. This forms a curious contradiction with the burgeoning male fashion market and escalating emphasis on men’s appearance in various forms of media. In the mundane lives of ordinary Chinese men, however, they continued to restrict the aesthetic gaze on the male *shenti*. Once they step out of the safe zone, these men are likely to face the peril of inappropriate gender performance. This indifference about dressing oneself was demonstrably represented by DX (26), who seemed to even hold a sense of pride:

You know what, this is really funny. I mean...like you just asked if I care about my appearance, for me, I really don’t care. How to explain it...although my family background allows me to wear whatever clothes I want or whatever stuff I want to use, I just wear the same clothes until they wear out, perhaps because I was disciplined by my mom from being very little.

Affirming that financial constraints were certainly not the key reason, DX described it as ‘funny’ in terms of his aloofness about clothes. To avoid overly self-belittling, DX was wary about phrasing his choice as an independent and individualised decision. By articulating his class position, he also managed to distinguish himself from those who cannot afford to be stylish. In this way, the young men’s distance from their bodies could be legitimated as a superior class choice informed by individualism. Therefore, rather than undermining one’s masculine image, lacking good taste in clothes might contribute to boosting embodied masculinity.

Meanwhile, branded clothes were also treated with contempt. As typically summarised by Alex (32): ‘I don’t care [about brands], as long as the clothes are

comfortable.’ Unlike popular depictions of extravagant Chinese consumers queuing up and rushing out to purchase luxuries all around the world, the majority of my participants displayed a sense of anti-consumerist indifference or even disdain towards such behaviour. By resisting branded clothes, the young and mostly middle-class Chinese men marked themselves as distinct from the homogeneous crowd of consumers without unique personality. Thus, the culture of male fashion became a counter resource that participants utilised to highlight an acceptable bodily *du*. For example, Danran (32) pointed out: ‘I prefer clothes with the logo as small as possible. I’ll tear off the label if there is one. I feel...(sigh) big or evident logos are simply meaningless.’ Since branded clothes, to a certain extent, signify an embodied self-presentation that exceeds a moderate *du*, big logos even brought a sense of embarrassment to Danran.

Alternatively, Lee (27) linked his rejection of branded clothes to male maturity: ‘I feel that only adolescent boys care about brands, like Adidas and Nike. These athletic clothes, we...if I want to exercise, of course I have these, of course. But I don’t buy them blindly.’ Similar to DX, Lee stated that he was not restricted by insufficient economic capital from purchasing and wearing branded sportswear. On the contrary, it is exactly the option of wearing what he prefers instead of only what he can afford that creates the distinction (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). The practice of downplaying high-street fashion or branded sportswear thus makes a contribution to the men’s social identification; as F. Davis (1992: 25) notes, dress ‘comes easily to serve as a kind of visual metaphor for identity’. Presenting themselves as rational and superior customers, the men claim their social privilege through intentionally resisting the numerous temptations produced by the booming market in China. Additionally, Lee’s emphasis on his mature manhood sheds light on the notion that the Confucian *shenti* embodies one’s life course. In *Analects* (16.7), Confucius says:

There are three things against which a gentleman is on his guard. In his youth, before his blood and vital humours have settled down, he is on his guard against lust. Having reached his prime, when the blood and vital humours have finally hardened, he is on his guard against strife. Having

reached old age, when the blood and vital humours are already decaying, he is on his guard against avarice.

Thus, the bodily *du* evolves throughout different life phases, during which the male *shenti* is always in the process of adjusting and remaking itself. *Shenti* does not only mirror time elapsing between birth and death, but also occupies time (Tu, 1992). Indeed, I suggest that this temporal and especially life-course perspective on *shenti*, and masculinity in general, is a central feature of Chinese young men's gendered practices. This argument is also validated by men's kinship narratives (Chapter 6) and underlined by different understandings of men's responsibilities in intimate relationships (Chapter 5). In this way, the Confucian *shenti* is supposed to be gradually cultivated and realised, in the sense that it is capable of acting appropriately across diverse temporal contexts during a man's life course. This is a crucial signifier of acquiring mature manhood for Chinese young men.

Cultivating *Li*: The Ritualised and Moral Body

Li, translated variously as 'ritual', 'propriety' or 'etiquette' (Dawson, 1981: 26), is one of the most fundamental concepts in the Confucian social self. In order to behave correctly within a social relationship, individuals must perform 'with the appropriate demeanor, including dress, the bearing of the body and the expression of the face' (Stockman, 2000: 71). Importantly, *li* is an intrinsically embodied virtue and can only be learnt and displayed through physical actions (Ames, 1993a, 1993b; Ge & Xu, 2011). As such, the *li*-informed body is no longer the purely biological body, but also acquires the function of displaying moral responsibility and cultural values (Huang, J., 2006).

Along with *du* and, indeed, the whole set of Confucian ethics, *li* is contextually specific and can only exist relationally. It seems as though *li* is repressive and deprives individuals of their individuality through imposing common values and social regulations (Li, X., 2011), and this type of perspective has indeed been widely shared within Chinese intellectual history. However, a close reading of Confucian texts will uncover the creative and flexible side of *li*; that is, ritual actions are not merely disciplinary norms but also accommodate negotiation and

transformation. As Ames (1993b: 170) notes, Confucian individuals ‘pursue “rightness” and “significance” both in an imitative and a creative sense.’ Since the meaning of *li* has changed dramatically in the contemporary world, here I use the term in a broader way to explore how Chinese young men reinvent, yet at times reinscribe, traditional moral values and hierarchical social orders into their construction of embodied masculinity. Despite the common acknowledgement that *li* was a key aesthetic value of *shenti* and contributed positively to embodied masculinity, it is interpreted and practised with considerable variety according to men themselves.

Displaying the ritualised body

While orthodox ritual actions were generally absent in participants’ narratives, the importance of displaying ritualised *shenti* in mundane lives retained its value to some extent. A few men talked about this in a nostalgic tone in terms of the disciplined body following cultural rituals in their childhood. Jia fei mao (32), who grew up in rural Inner Mongolia and appeared to be very proud of this experience, described the hierarchical table manners in rural China:

When I was little, kids were not allowed to sit at the table when the grown-ups ate at a formal dinner. But we didn’t feel disrespected at all. It’s just the natural rule. Adults need to behave in one way and kids in another. There’s clear boundary. Kids couldn’t even eat before the adults finished. There was no need to teach kids the meaning of filial piety. It’s acquired naturally.

Table manners used to be a small but crucial part of Chinese rituals according to Confucian ethics. The way in which individuals conduct themselves while eating is understood as signifying personal characteristics as well as class position and is, therefore, a key indicator defining a Confucian gentleman (*junzi*) (Cooper, 1986). In this sense, teaching children table manners is not merely about the correct disposition of eating, but also enables them to become docile and to respect the older generation. By repeatedly obeying the grown-ups’ instructions, the meaning of filial piety became something that was naturally internalised by children and

part of their sense of self. Thus, mastering rituals is a sign of civilisation and successful personal moral cultivation (Faure & Fang, 2008: 202).

This stance was also illustrated by JJ (29):

My family is sort of...that sort of military family, except my mom [...] I mean, they've all served in the army. And...they're not always strict but they are extremely picky about certain points. Like...um, you need to sit properly and eat properly. Sometimes I sit at the table like, well, like with an arm put down. This is not allowed. And also you have to hold the bowls...in the correct positions. [They have] these sorts of requirements.

Whereas Jia fei mao's descriptions of ritualised performance at the table articulated the hierarchical nature of *li*, JJ shifted the focus to personal cultivation embedded in family traditions. A good boy from a military family should be able to morally discipline himself to learn correct eating postures. As JJ continued to recall: 'You don't need anyone to tell you, but you can feel the atmosphere. You tend to learn it by yourself.' Hence, both Jia fei mao and JJ put great emphasis on 'learning rituals naturally' as children, which is exactly in line with what the Neo-Confucian philosopher Cheng Yi advocates:

When a person is young, he is not master of his own knowledge or thought. Proverbs and sound doctrines should be spread before him every day. Although he does not yet understand, let their fragrance and sound surround him so his ears and mind can be filled with them. In time he will get used to them as if he had originally had them. (cited in Chu & Lu, 1967: 261)

In a way, these perspectives resonate with Bourdieu's theorisation of habitus, which is argued to be a human being's 'second nature' and 'a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions' (Bourdieu, 1977: 82–3). Importantly, the body is the basic bearer of habitus formation and is imprinted with class and other distinctions (Gill et al., 2005: 40). Another relevant Bourdieusian concept here is bodily hexis, which is 'a basic dimension of the sense of social orientation' and 'a practical way of experiencing and expressing one's own

sense of social value' (Bourdieu, 1984: 474). As embodied habitus, Bourdieu uses hexis to 'signify deportment, the manner and style in which actors "carry themselves": stance, gait, gesture, etc.' (Jenkins, R., 1992: 75). Bodily hexis is particularly relevant here, since Bourdieu elaborated it in relation to the child's imitation of the adult's action:

In all societies, children are particularly attentive to the gestures and postures which, in their eyes, express everything that goes to make an accomplished adult—a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expression, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech, and (how could be otherwise?) a certain subjective experience. (Bourdieu, 1977: 87)

Nonetheless, Confucian *li* should not be completely equated with either bodily hexis or habitus. While *li* was originally intended to cultivate middle- to upper-class Chinese gentlemen, it does not always symbolise class distinctions. In fact, people from a variety of social classes may embody the same form of *li*. Lufrano's (1997) study of late imperial merchant culture, for instance, records how mid-level merchants who used to be excluded from the gentleman class reinterpreted Confucian notions of self-cultivation in order to enhance their social class as well as increase commercial gains. In the cases of Jia fei mao and JJ, both men emphasised the significance of table manners and bodily disposition in their own experience. However, Jia fei mao came from a rural background, while JJ was raised in an urban middle-class military family. Hence, the Chinese sense of *li* is more about 'collective social experience perpetuated by a symbolic system and individual memories' (Fei, 1992: 55).

Meanwhile, as the *Great Learning* declares: 'From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of the personal life as the root or foundation' (Chan, W., 1963: 87). Such classical Confucian texts reveal another basic differentiation between *li* and bodily hexis. That is, *li*-related instructions have been widely recorded in written materials and taught in numerous home-schools. *Li* is thus consciously passed on to the next generation under Confucianism as the dominant ideology. But bodily hexis, according to Bourdieu

(1977: 94), is 'placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by vocabulary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit'. In comparison, Confucian rituals are clearly written down and voiced whilst being consciously taught and learnt.

Furthermore, despite their reproductive power, the practices of bodily *li* allow for, and indeed, necessarily require reflexivity and reinvention on an individual level. As Jia fei mao continued in his story:

Jia fei mao: Now, my goodness, my daughter needs to be the centre while eating at the table.

Interviewer: So...have you tried to correct her behaviour?

Jia fei mao: Well, yeah, I thought about this. I've told my daughter that a girl must behave right in a girl's way. But my main requirement for my daughter is like, in terms of developing interests, prioritising those artistic types. She should more or less have some artistic attainments, and then language skills. Um...next is about the body, those interests that are good for health. All the others, like her own interests, say if she's interested in physics, electronics, mathematics, chemistry, that's another issue.

Thus, *li* was no longer a matter-of-fact virtue in Jia fei mao's family. His previous accounts are in line with the Bourdieusian view of the body, which sees it as 'a mnemonic device upon and in which the basics of class and culture (the practical taxonomies of the habitus) are impressed and encoded in a socializing or learning process that begins during early childhood' (Spencer, 2009: 126). But apparently Jia fei mao has planned to train his own daughter differently. Such a conscious and reflexive modification of habitus can be captured accurately with the Confucian bodily aesthetic of *li*. Whereas the Confucian habitus—in this scene, represented by strictly defined table manners—was traditionally stable and fixed, it has been subject to significant changes in present-day China. According to Jia fei mao, he has no intention of instilling orthodox Confucian rules into the head of his daughter. Rather, reworked modern forms of *li* are emphasised based on a contemporary discourse of childrearing. But the underlying cultural meanings mostly remain the same: ritualised *shenti* signifies social privilege and class distinction; parents who embody *li* themselves are able to pass on these privileges to their children. This

confidence in performing a ritualised male body and cultivating a ritualised daughter constitute a crucial part of Jia fei mao's construction of masculinity.

The continuing influence of ritualised and moral *shenti* was repeatedly articulated by a number of participants, who stressed 'adjusting bodily performance on different occasions (*changhe*)'. As the Chinese word *changhe* implicates elements of time and space and, importantly, the social relationships happening on the site, it underlines the intense relationality and contextual specificity of *li*. This contingency of *li* was illustrated by Confucius himself in his *Analects*. For example:

At home in his native village his manner is simple and unassuming...but in the ancestral temple and at Court he speaks readily, though always choosing his words with care. (*Analects*, 10.1)

His bedclothes must be half as long again as a man's height. The thicker kinds of fox and badger are for home wear...At the Announcement of the New Moon he must go to Court in full Court dress. (*Analects*, 10.6)

While formal etiquette, such as complicated procedures during sacrifices or funeral rites, have been dramatically simplified or even abandoned, these daily routines persist and are embraced by Chinese men in the contemporary social world. More often than not, participants talked about cultivating a ritualised body in terms of dressing appropriately in different situations. Albert (24) commented: 'It's boring to pay too much attention to men's appearance [...] But on some occasions, like in an interview, I will somehow...well, at least try to look fresh.' This view was echoed by Aaron (25): 'When you need to meet someone on certain occasions, you should dress smartly.' Both Albert and Aaron tended to agree that the appropriate display of a man's body in particular situations was necessary, predominantly on formal public occasions. If we consider these social arenas, or *changhe* in participants' own words, as fields in a Bourdieusian sense, performing a ritualised body can be interpreted as an individual's strategic response to the specific logic in a given field. As such, the men are required to consciously conduct bodily presentations. These contingent modifications are especially salient because 'the dispositions constituting the cultivated habitus are only formed, only function and are only

valid in *a* field' (Bourdieu, 1984: 94). Disobeying the code of practice in a particular field, as Bourdieu argues, runs the risk of receiving 'opposite meanings and values' (ibid.). As Albert and Aaron illustrate, Confucian social actors need to preserve and improve their position in a specific field in order to gain social approval, which is integral to men's identity formation.

However, while men manipulate ritualised *shenti* in order to meet the logic of a field, they simultaneously reinforce the logic of that field. The rule of performing ritually thus imposes constant regulation on the men's bodily presentation that signifies gentlemanly masculinity. This point was also apparent in FN's (22) account:

You know Jiang Jieshi,¹¹ he didn't pay much attention to wearing really nice clothes. It's all about dressing properly depending on the situation. I totally agree with him. You may have indoor clothes, and outside home you should wear different things in different circumstances. I think this matters.

Evidently, the idealised embodied practices that FN described have much in common with Confucius's demonstration of *li*, especially in terms of wearing the correct kind of clothes depending on private-public differences. In Confucianism, *shenti* is constructed as a living carrier of morality and ritual rather than as an objective container. During the process of performing ritual actions, *li* could be converted into a way of being and living through our embodied experience (Ge & Xu, 2011). Therefore, the process of learning and practising *li* is also the process of forming one's social identity and, equally important, displaying the self to others. During everyday encounters, the male self is responsible for reflexively working on his *shenti* in fields governed by different sets of logic. Meanwhile, he is also the object in relation to others, prepared to be read and interpreted by others by conforming to a particular disposition of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). According to FN, dressing properly was seen as a key aspect of self-making and was endowed with symbolic significance about one's masculinity.

¹¹ Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) was a Chinese political and military leader of the Chinese National Party from 1928 to 1975.

Moreover, naming Jiang Jieshi as his role model reflected FN's personal aspiration to become a strong, powerful but also Confucian-style gentleman. Notably, Jiang Jieshi himself is acknowledged to have been a follower and practitioner of Confucianism, as shown in his enthusiasm to reinterpret Confucian classics and *The New Life Movement* led by Jiang's government that aimed to rebuild the Confucian moral and social order (Dirlik, 1975). FN's account therefore highlights a dynamic interplay between conformity and individuality, tradition and modernity in the contemporary display of Confucian *li*. As Wilson (1995: 265) puts it, a commitment to the efficacy of tradition and a commitment to the activation of the individual agent's deepest and most personal motives are both necessary conditions for full ritual participation. Although such a *li*-coded body is under regulatory surveillance to a certain extent, it also contributes to increasing a man's possession of socially appreciated masculinity.

Routes towards bodily li

According to participants, there are various routes towards learning and displaying bodily *li*, which can be navigated by cultivating *wen* or *wu* masculinity. Throughout Chinese history, the talented and intellectual scholar (*wen*) has generally received more social appreciation than the physically strong man (*wu*), therefore obtaining higher social status (Louie, 2002). In Confucian orthodoxy, *wen* masculinity is also more closely linked with *li*. According to Confucius, 'If you do not learn the Rituals, you will not have the means to take a stance' (*Analects*, 16.13). Subsequently, the paramount importance of extending one's knowledge in order to become a moral man was further advocated among Neo-Confucianists (Chu & Lu, 1967). Hence, the Confucian virtue of *li* can be interpreted as physical acts, intelligence, and also moral codes. It might be intangible and abstract, denoting the 'inner traits' upon which Chinese men place enormous emphasis.

Although the young men identified both *wen* and *wu* masculinity as contributing to producing bodily *li*, enhancing one's cultural attainment appeared to be a more popular strategy. Bodily *li* is not simply about civilised behaviour or a gentlemanly disposition that can be observed by others, it also incorporates the personal

atmosphere a man can transmit through the mastering of rituals. Alex (32), whose work involved advanced medical technologies, replied: 'Every time I attend a conference or academic event, I feel that I know too little. I need to spend much more time reading and studying.' Here, Alex invoked the classical figure of Confucian *junzi* who was dedicated to self-improvement and moral cultivation. This stance was echoed by FN (22), who was preparing for his Master's entrance exam at the time of the interview:

I usually use my phone to search for information about the exam. Otherwise...I'll use it to download books to read. Above all, I think the phone should be used to study and improve yourself. Sometimes many people just use it to play games, but I actually feel that I should use it in the right way, in a realistic way, such as broadening my personal network or acquire more knowledge.

If we view the phone as an extension of the human body (Balsamo, 1996; Oksman & Rautianen, 2003), it apparently plays a crucial role in FN's daily accumulation of *wen* masculinity. The embodied experience of using his phone for self-improvement generated a sense of superiority over those who used it in a 'wrong' way. In this sense, the inculcation of *wen* masculinity into the *shenti* still symbolises privileged social status. Leslie (31), with a professional job in the Internet financial industry, also said: 'The phone enables me to get more information in a faster way. Sometimes you don't even need to search by yourself. What you want to learn might just appear through the push notification.' However, it should be noted that such an intimate attachment to the Confucian scholar who highly values literary attainment is not universally shared among the Chinese men. After all, contemporary Chinese society measures a man's 'stance' less in terms of performance in rites or proficiency in Confucian texts, than by prioritising career achievements and economic accumulation (Louie, 2015). As a result, the meaning of *wen* masculine traits has been enormously rewritten. This is exemplified in some men's depictions of leaders in the workplace or other powerful men as the ideal man. For example, Carey (26) said:

He's one of my mother's friends, like her teacher. My mum used to take me to his place for instruction and to learn his way of coping with problems. He's that intelligent type. The books he has read are like dozens of times more than what I have [...] He's a human-resource manager in a nationally owned company, deciding which employees to select [...] He has his own way of thinking and making decisions, which I think are brilliant.

Describing his role model as an intelligent man who reads widely, Carey revealed an admiration for his personal style and working logic as a human-resource manager. This contemporary portrait is not entirely new for a Confucian scholar who embodies *li*. Tu (1985: 97) notes that *li* is 'intended to transform the body into a fitting expression of the self in our ordinary daily existence. The practice of ritual [...] trains us to perform routine functions in society as fully participating members.' Therefore, Confucian rituals fundamentally serve to enable self-actualisation through righteous performance in social interactions. What has gradually evolved is the decreasing importance of learning literary texts, replaced by more practical skills that can boost successful masculinity. Rather than losing its close link with the acquisition of *li*, *wen* masculinity is still valued by most Chinese men as a way to become a socially approved person, although the meaning of both *li* and *wen* are becoming more pragmatic.

Occasionally, developing *wu* masculinity was also included as a significant part of cultivating ritualised *shenti*. Misery's (25) account clearly supported this position. While self-labelled as *diaosi* and excluding himself from the middle class, Misery's leisure interests like riding horses nonetheless revealed his distinctive tastes: 'Very few people enjoy riding in Southern China. If you go to the farm alone, they won't allocate you the same horse every time. It's not possible to have your own horse and deepen the mutual bond.' Ames (1993b: 173) suggests that rituals provide 'a formal apparatus for realizing and displaying one's own aesthetic, moral, and rational meaning.' For Misery, riding was named as such an apparatus to display his advantageous class background. The sense of superiority is achieved by stressing the difficulty of finding riding companions, that is, people with a similar distinctive taste. Unlike the conventional type of *wu* masculinity, which used to be less valued in the hierarchy of embodied Chinese masculinity, modern sports as indications of

being middle to upper class have recreated the rule. By demonstrating his familiarity with horse-riding, Misery consciously presented a *li*-coded body despite his strong resistance to taking on a middle-class identity. This veiled performance of classed *shenti* emerged again when I asked Misery if he cared about men's appearance. He said: 'I usually buy clothes like Armani [...] But I don't think men's appearance matters, as long as you look clean.' Overall, looking 'clean' was foregrounded by many participants as a key standard to measure embodied masculinity. Thus, Misery's account could be read as a display of conformity to collective values, although Armani is clearly a symbol of privileged social class. In this regard, his *shenti* is highly malleable, and can 'access, know, participate and feel confident about using a wide variety of cultures (from low to high)' (Skeggs, 2004: 143).

Interestingly, some of the men articulated a specific route towards cultivating ritualised *shenti*—behaving like a Western gentleman. In these scenarios, *li* was usually inscribed with the meaning of modernity and civilisation. Sean (31, Shenyang) pointed out that most north-eastern men just 'pretend to be manly'. As he explained:

I think a real manly man should have that sort of gentlemanly aura. Because it's...we've reached that social stage now [...] But most north-eastern men haven't reached that stage. You must know it better than me. Your place is full of that kind of gentlemen (laugh).

Aware that I was studying in Britain, Sean jokingly called it a place 'full of that kind of gentlemen'. For him, the new standard of ideal male *shenti* should be the Western civilised type. In comparison, north-eastern men are seen as embodying male chauvinism—aggressive, tough and macho—which is associated with *wu* masculinity. By demarcating the body of a 'gentleman' from those of local others, Sean implies that *wu* masculinity is to be despised and censured; it is an outdated style of *shenti* in need of improvement. But his narrative is rather vague, with generally sweeping remarks such as 'gentlemanly aura' or 'that stage'. It seems to be much easier to identify the problematic male body than to clarify the

appreciated type. The gentlemanly *shenti* was thus a flexible signifier that he used to mark the class distinction of the ideal male body in his imagination. In a similar tone, Neyo (29) explained his understanding of a real man: 'Like Federer, I liked his tennis playing from long ago. He's very gentlemanly. You should go to see his competitions as you are in the UK.' Therefore, a modern gentlemanly body is central to the Chinese young men's constructions of ideal masculinity. This attraction to Western gentlemen was further elaborated by Jack (29):

A truly masculine man should be brave about taking responsibility. If there's anything that needs you to shoulder or even to resist, you should bravely stand up to it. Secondly, you have to be rational [...] Thirdly, you should have meticulous sensitivity. This can be seen in all kinds of aspects. For example, if I meet a girl for the first time, like today I met you, when I arrive I might need to consider if I've dressed properly to show my respect to you. Also, if we walk out together and there's a puddle, but you didn't notice it, then...I need to think about how I should remind you. Shall I say it straightforwardly or in such and such a way? I think Britain has a more complete set of [standards to define] gentlemen.

Here, Jack adopted the gentleman label as an all-encompassing concept that designates an almost perfect man. Importantly, both *wen* and *wu* masculinity are included as key features of the ideal man, who should be brave, rational and also sensitive. Moreover, the masculine traits embodied by a real gentleman are relational and connote social roles that are all evocative of the bodily aesthetic of *li*. This is especially evident in his illustration of the imagined scene in which he meets a girl for the first time. From appropriate demeanour and dress to the way of talking and behaving, *shenti* is understood as a lived experience during which *li* should be fully performed.

For these men, the pursuit of a *li*-coded body appears to intertwine with an admiration of Western manhood and a rejection of indigenous masculinity. In other words, cultivating the Western gentlemanly body is believed to be a direct route towards the ritualised *shenti*. Dating back to the early 20th century, weak and fragile Chinese male bodies were repeatedly compared with powerful and confident Caucasian bodies with the humiliating title 'the sick man of East Asia'. In

light of such a contrast, ‘the manliness embodied by the western Other was not only made explicit but also clear that those were the types of bodily style that should be embraced’ (Chong, 2013: 259). As to my participants, they could also be recognised as making efforts to align Chinese *shenti* with gentlemanly attributes by naming the Western gentleman as a contemporary masculine ideal. Additionally, the interactions during interviews should not be downplayed. It is possible that these men deliberately alluded to ‘the gentleman’ to illustrate the desirable masculine body based on their awareness of the location of my institution. Actually, a number of other participants solicitously asked me about my life in Britain either before or after our conversations. While there was no way to determine whether they would use the same examples if facing another researcher, these unique accounts reflect certain levels of ritualised masculine performance in a particular interview setting.¹²

Performing bodily li in the workplace

Traditionally, *shenti* is viewed as a political field that bridges the private and public spheres in Confucius’s teachings. By linking personal bodily cultivation (*xiushen*) with serving the country (*zhiguo*), Confucian *shenti*, which is saturated with morality and rituals, is able to stretch and expand to form a whole organism with the country (Huang, J., 2006: 24). While hardly any of the men talked ambitiously about serving their country during the interviews, performing a moral *shenti* in the workplace—a narrower sense of public space compared with the country—recurrently emerged as an imperative issue. In spite of their divergent occupations, many participants stressed ‘fitting in’ to the workplace through an embodied presentation of the self. This is an integral part of cultivating *li*, since Confucian rituals ultimately aim to train an individual’s *shenti* to respond properly to all kinds of social situations. Nonetheless, men’s conscious bodily performance at work is not a unique Chinese phenomenon. For example, in his ethnographic research on the massive institutional constraints placed upon hospital porters in Scotland, Rapport (2009) documents how male porters are sometimes at pains to conduct

¹² In Chapter 3, I have given detailed reflections on gender performance, power dynamics and the ambiguity of my own identity during interviews.

body work in a hierarchical professional environment. Although male bodies are less of an 'object-for-others' compared to those of women, culturally produced discourses on the normalised body and embodied practice have placed men under increasing control (Monaghan, 2005).

Compared with talking about skincare products or body shape, participants seemed to feel more comfortable discussing bodily performance in the workplace. Potentially due to the close relationship between career-related achievement and successful masculinity (Liu, F., 2017), admitting that they paid attention to their *shenti* as employees triggered less of a threat of being seen as feminine. For instance, a number of the men mentioned that dressing properly to meet work requirements was an essential part of their everyday embodied practices. Lee (27) worked at a rail depot station as assistant Party secretary, and he said: 'You have to convey a very good sense of spiritual condition (*jingshen mianmao*) to others. Without that kind of spirit, you look improper wherever you work.' For Lee, working for a public institution meant that conforming to the occupational regulations on one's bodily style was a key element of constructing respectable masculinity. The term 'spiritual condition' used by Lee is reminiscent of the ideal masculine image of the Chinese Communist Party. He should be 'a plain-looking and casually dressed working-class individual engaged in production' (Tan et al., 2013: 241). In a sense, a Party branch in government offices continues to be an institutional space where mutual scrutiny between employees is intense. Consequently, dressing neatly and behaving professionally carry even higher levels of significance. While much of the Communist agenda that pertained during the Maoist era has been dramatically converted by contemporary consumer discourse, the emphasis on 'plain-looking' remains salient. As Lee indicated, a plain-looking Party branch worker needs to be familiar with the rituals and rules in the workplace, through which he can prove his working ability. The compulsory internalisation of workplace rules into the body thus justifies the relational nature of embodied masculinity, which might entail 'unwilling conformity' (Robinson & Hockey, 2011). This point was elucidated from an opposing stance by Zhi (27), who was an elevator maintenance worker:

Before this job I worked in a hair salon and I read fashion magazines a lot. Like, a range of magazines, yeah. In that environment there was a higher standard for the clothes you wore. Unlike now, I'm married and doing an untidy job. Honestly, I get grubby while working. Well, I might have sunk (into clumsiness) [...] I've said goodbye to that stage and there's no chance to wear (smart clothes).

Hence, conforming to occupational norms occasionally required men to 'dress down', regardless of personal preferences. The embodied experience of dress is integral to Zhi's construction of workplace masculinity. Here, clothes could be interpreted as constituting a central part of the 'personal front' in the theatre of everyday interactions (Goffman, 1959). By asserting the centrality of bodily performance on the stage, Zhi indicated the existence of multiple dimensions of the self that can be switched depending on particular social expectations and rituals. In the complex performance of masculinities, the surface of the body undergoes transformation in a reflexive manner that tends to 'incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society' (Goffman, 1959: 31). Therefore, Zhi was compelled to conduct conscious body work to accommodate to his changing workplace environment, which validates the continuing relevance of performing ritualised *shenti* in contemporary Chinese society.

Elsewhere, monitoring one's body in the workplace may carry a deep sense of moral obligation. As explained by Simon (27):

I work in a Chinese-foreign joint company and I often need to attend meetings with, for example, foreigners or clients. During the meeting, you know, you must pay enough attention to your bodily appearance. And also...well, things like whether your hair is tidy, whether your face is clean, whether you had a shower and how you smell. These are not only a responsibility for yourself, but also a respect for others.

By exerting self-scrutiny and management of his appearance, Simon actively took part in performing the proper 'social front' as a well-behaved employee. His bodily work can be read as a 'collective representation' that gives rise to normalised expectations of professional men. Crane (2000) points out that men's clothing style in the occupational sphere is a vital marker of social hierarchy. With clothing

fashion becoming an increasingly crucial part of masculine identity, men will 'alter their clothing style depending upon the social characteristics of the individuals they expect to meet on a particular day' (Crane, 2000: 175). Entwistle (2000: 327) also suggests that the body is 'heavily mediated by culture and expresses the social pressure brought to bear on it'. Simon's account appears to underline these arguments. Read from a Confucian perspective, Simon exemplified how the personal regulation of *shenti* is an essential part of internalising common values (Huang, J., 2009). Meanwhile, Ham (2001: 317) argues that the Confucian self is usually 'confirmed by the "look" of others, in whose intersubjective field of vision my body, and hence myself, is recognized and given a place in the order of things'. Seen in this light, Simon's emphasis on presenting a respectable body for others is demonstrably in parallel with this relational paradigm of the self. In addition, articulating the need to be 'responsible for yourself' mirrors the modern individualised model that encourages everyone to conduct self-regulation and improvement. The majority of my participants are constantly reinventing and reinterpreting the Confucian ethics of self-cultivation to benefit themselves in the modern workplace. Thus, the Chinese male body is crafted as a *shenti* ready to be forged flexibly for moral and pragmatic needs, but also able to be compressed due to its relationality and embeddedness within particular contexts.

Nurturing *He*: Embodied Harmony and Relationships

Apart from *du* and *li*, *he*, *hexie*, or harmony, was another bodily aesthetic that evoked wide sympathy among my participants. The pivotal significance of harmony is visible at different levels of Chinese culture. As the cardinal cultural value in Confucian ethics (Chen, G., 2001; Chen & Starosta, 1997), harmony has been promoted by the state since its introduction of 'Harmonious Society Construction' in 2004. During the interviews, many young men also used the vocabulary of *he* or *hexie* to describe idealised intimate relationships and social interactions (Chapter 5). S (31) particularly stressed that harmony represented the ultimate goal of his life:

[My ideal life picture is] Simply one word, *hexie*. I mean, I think if everything is *hexie*, that'll be a perfect picture. There's no need to be dramatic or whatever. Whether at work or in the family, I just hope to have harmonious relationships. That's enough.

Although not every man articulated the salience of *he* as explicitly as S, they more or less agreed that living in amity with other people was a major factor in measuring one's masculinity. According to Zhang Yanhua (2007: 49), harmony is a widespread concept in Chinese society 'from highly ritualised ceremonial performance and structured social relations to mundane practices of the everyday'. Nevertheless, *he* does not equate with sameness or conformity. In Confucian philosophy, harmony is rather about bringing together contrasting existences to enhance collective wellbeing (Li, C. Y., 2006). In other words, without diversity there will be no foundation to build up harmony. Importantly, *he* has a close relationship with *du* and *li*, in that these three bodily aesthetic values exert mutually beneficial effects upon each other. As to the construction of embodied masculinity, the operation of harmony was evidenced by the way in which Chinese men seek balance within their personal and social relationships through bodily experience, as well as their attitudes towards other types of male body.

Body work as a filial son

Rather than 'being a distinct and separate individual', a Chinese individual is 'conceived largely in the continuum of "two persons"' (Sun, 1991: 2). Examining Chinese men's body construction in personal relationships is thus particularly illuminating when seeking to understand embodied masculinity. Above all, family connections delivered vital significance for almost all the participants in this research. In all likelihood, the proverb 'harmony in the family is the basis of success in everything' (*jiahe wanshixing*) continues to be influential among Chinese young men. In order to achieve harmonious parent-child relationships, the young men emphasised the importance of embodied filial piety¹³, which entails both a perception of the parent's body and the performance of their own.

¹³ Filial piety will be further analysed in Chapter 6 in terms of young men's practices and narratives of masculinity through kinship ties. The discussion here focuses particularly on the embodied aspect of filial piety.

While participants' own illness or obesity often elicited strong identification with the male *shenti*, this seemed to work similarly in the men's perceptions of significant others' bodies. Typically, Albert (24) described his feelings after his mother's surgery the previous year: 'After my mother's illness, like during that period, I suddenly felt I needed to grow up. I mean, I felt more responsibility on my shoulders.' Tung (1994: 490) notes that the Chinese concept of the body is the thinking, experiencing, feeling, intuiting 'self' responsible for social and ethical concerns. In Albert's case, he exhibited vehement emotional commitment and moral duty as a filial son by reflecting on the bodily suffering of his mother. Similarly, Zhi (27) recalled sympathetically: 'My mother was diagnosed with terminal disease last year. That...gave me a heavy hit. Since then I have felt strongly that as long as everyone in my family is healthy, life is...um, life is already good enough.' When, later in the interview, we talked about his understanding of being a good son, Zhi said:

Um...after all, we are two generations. Actually I want to take my parents out to travel and do such and such. But sometimes, their way of thinking is just hard to convert. So what I can do now is to make them...feel happy [...] You know, in order to make my mother happy, I choose to have a child now. Otherwise this was not in my plan.

Having been born and raised in a small town near Shenyang, Zhi left home around the age of 15 and has since taken various jobs in Shenyang. In light of his acknowledgement of the generational gap, Zhi chose to give up his own logic of kin practices. Instead, he compromised by having a child to comfort his mother. Certainly, continuing the family line has long been an integral part of a son's responsibility in traditional Chinese culture. However, having left home more than 10 years before, Zhi indicated that he had become a 'modern man' (Lin, 2013), whose own perception of a filial son has transformed enormously. Indeed, his preference for accompanying his parents to travel as a modern form of filial practice echoed that of many urban participants. Despite some unwillingness, a commitment to embodying *he* impelled Zhi to display filial piety by producing offspring *for his mother*. Here, the fertility of the male *shenti* gained exceptional

value that was manipulated in order to strengthen the harmonious parent-adult child relationship. Nonetheless, the hierarchical nature of *he* should not be overlooked. Fundamentally, maintaining harmonious relationships with others is achieved through respecting the superior and following their authority (Yan et al., 2005). As a result, embodying *he* in young men's filial practices might generate a degree of repressive impact on their identities.

Body work as a filial son is not merely evoked at extraordinary moments, but also came to the fore in men's mundane lives. As Li & Wang (2012) notes, Confucianism views the initial existence of *shenti*, and therefore the self, through parent-child connections and filial relationships. At the start of *Classic Filial Piety*, Confucius states that 'filial piety is the root of (all) virtue, and (the stem) out of which grows (all moral) teaching'. Jack's (29) comment clearly illustrated this point:

Like the traditional Chinese way of thinking, I think I need to fulfill filial piety before my parents' knees (*xingxiao xiqian*). I mean, I need to keep them company. So a large part of my future plan will be arranged around my parents. Many people say to me that you are almost 30, so you should marry and establish a career. But what most concerns me is to return to my parents' bodily side (*shenbian*) as soon as possible.

At the time of the interview, Jack was working in Shenyang while his parents lived in his hometown of Fuxin, a smaller city in the same province. Jack described himself as 'a family-centred man' and 'emotionally attached to my parents'. From the extract above, it is notable that Jack portrays his relationship with his parents using a series of *shenti*-related expressions, such as 'achieve filial piety before my parents' knees' and 'return to my parents' bodily side'. In this sense, the embodied aesthetics of harmony 'finds its full expression in Chinese family ethics that guide the way the family members care for and interact with each other according to their places within the family' (Zhang, Y. H., 2007: 50). Since the child's body is conceptualised as a gift endowed by the parents in Confucian orthodoxy, supporting one's parents in person is highly valued in measuring one's morality (Harrison, 2005). Accordingly, filial obligation is supposed to be completed through embodied practices.

In general, participants agreed that it was imperative to maintain physical proximity to their parents, although many of them found this unrealistic to achieve, at least during this phase of their lives. For instance, Frank (25) confessed: 'I know my parents don't need me to give them money, because they expect me to go back home [...] But I can only stay with them occasionally because of work.' As a result, bodily presence in a harmonious family is negotiated to make concessions to the men's modern lifestyles. In many instances, the young men prioritise pursuing personal development in larger cities, which are sometimes far away from parents. But choosing an individualised life trajectory is not always in sharp conflict with conventional cultural values on men's part, as shown in Frank's narrative. Embodied parent-child relationships are open to being recreated, especially among those holding a weaker sense of traditional values or financially capable of moving their parents into the same city. Thus, instead of losing its symbolic meanings under increasing globalising influences, core Confucian values, such as filial piety and harmony, appear to be reworked and to coexist with modern lifestyles for Chinese young men (cf. Yan et al., 2005).

Embodied intimacy and romance

In addition to being a filial son, familial masculinity as an embodied construct is articulated in participants' stories about intimacy and romance between couples. The everyday embodied practices of participants' intimate lives are characterised by considering each other's needs, negotiating divergence of views, and achieving *hexie* relationships. On the one hand, men attribute different degrees of importance to physical attractiveness when talking about expectations in romantic relationships. Although most men said little about this point, a few single young men touched upon this point. For example, TMB (30) said: 'She needs to be pretty and thin.' CC (25) replied more moderately: 'I don't need her to be too pretty [...] but at least we should form a good match in terms of appearance.' However, these narratives are usually accompanied by a following emphasis on the equal, or even greater, significance of women's inner characteristics and whether they can truly get along with each other. Louie (2002) argues that both the *wen* Sage Confucius and the *wu* Sage Guan Yu have been constructed as being indifferent or even

resistant to women in Chinese cultural discourse. Indeed, the majority of interviewees are careful about distancing themselves from the image of a man who is only motivated by his biological drive to pursue female beauty.

On the other hand, young men's perceptions of the ideal male body are shaped by the attitudes of their female partners or women in general. This was sometimes mentioned in relation to generalised female others. For example, L (23) explained his understanding of body shape in relation to the changing expectations of women: 'Girls often say that they like tall, white and thin guys in high school [...] Well, in university, you are expected not to be that pale, but still tall and ideally, strong and slightly muscular.' Rather than naming particular individuals, L illustrated his view with reference to an obscure category of 'girls'. What underlies his comments is the recognition that constructing one's *shenti* in line with women's expectations contributes greatly to accumulating appropriate masculinity. Potentially, such embodied gender practices will also improve interpersonal harmony in an individual's daily interactions.

Monaghan and Robertson (2012b) invite researchers to employ an 'embodied sociological approach' to studying men's everyday heterosexual lives. As they argue, such investigations can 'foreground different men's corporeal meanings, practices and relations' beyond 'hegemonic heterosexual configurations' (ibid.: 161). During interviews, many participants did refer to various expectations of their *shenti* from their wives or girlfriends and implied that they were willing to undergo bodily transformations in order to achieve a harmonious intimate relationship. When I asked 2881 (28) if he thought men's body shape was important, he said:

2881: Of course, it's very important. Now my wife sort of said she likes men with stomach muscles.

Interviewer: If she said so, does it affect your view?

2881: Yeah. I told her I once had.

Interviewer: What about men's bodily appearance?

2881: Appearance...that's not important in today's society, as long as you have money.

Earlier in the interview, 2881 explained to me that he had only suspended working out recently because he was suffering from pneumothorax as a result of excessive body training. But it was clear that 2881 straightforwardly alluded to his wife's admiration of muscularity when delineating his understanding of men's physical figures. At the same time, he drew on general social standards of preferred masculinity to justify the lesser importance of men's bodily appearance. In Confucianism, the self-cultivation of *shenti* essentially contains the meaning of being influenced by and benefiting others. Neo-Confucianists also place enormous emphasis on seeking harmony between the internal and the external through the embodied practice of rituals (Chu & Lu, 1967). The male *shenti* is intensely relational, performed in certain ways to comply with varying requirements at the individual, familial and social level. Reading the above extract from another perspective, at the heart of 2881's account is a reflexive engagement with the perspective of a significant other. As Mead (1934: 164) puts it, selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves. During the reflexive conversation between 'I' and 'Me', individuals 'play the roles of different interlocutors, generally modelled on people we know, making points, responding to them, replying to responses or making further responses and so on' (Crossley, 2006a: 88–9). But the meaning of such a framework is not rich enough to explain the moral dimension of the relational body. As a result, while Chinese men's *shenti* as relational existence resonates with the interactionist theorisation of self, it can be more accurately interpreted according to the Confucian body ethics of pursuing interpersonal harmony.

Both the interactionist body and Confucian *shenti* are reflexive and require individual autonomy. However, it is true that the embeddedness of *shenti* in webs of relations and the endorsement of *he* in Confucian ethics sometimes leave the body with less independence.

Albert (24): I don't care about the brand of my clothes, but my girlfriend does [...] She'll buy me clothes from stores like H&M and Uniqlo. But personally, maybe...because my family is not that well-off, you know. I've never cared much about it since I was little.

Jiang feng (23): My girlfriend wants me to eat more and become physically stronger [...] It's really hard for me. But this is her most urgent demand.

Thus, Albert appeared relatively passive to the degree that he just accepted choices about clothes made by his girlfriend. The situation was further complicated by the financial gap between their native families. While sighing that gaining weight was not in accord with his own wishes, Jiang feng also indicated that he was making an effort in order to satisfy his girlfriend. In both cases, Albert and Jiang feng present a relational construction of masculinity that encompasses the expectations of their female partners. Notably, remaking the male *shenti* is also included in this process. While a certain degree of self-transformation or mutual sacrifice may be common in a relationship or marriage (Amato, 2007), Albert and Jiang feng's bodily adjustments are also made in order to preserve and promote *hexie* in intimate relationships, as informed by traditional Confucian ethics.

More than this, the relationality of men's *shenti* when seeking romantic relationships appears to be multi-dimensional. It is not merely informed by normalised expectations of the ideal male and female beauty, but also involves other family members. Lee (27), who was single and being prompted by his parents to find a girlfriend, replied:

I was actually quite picky [about finding a girlfriend] when I was much more slender. But now my family has told me, look at how fat you are and how dare you be that fussy. Just find a moderate one as long as she's pleased with you.

Lee did not deny the negative, or even slightly insulting, comments about his body from other family members, but rather used them to illustrate the ideal girlfriend. It is also likely that Lee referred to family members in order to implicitly express his own discontent with the overweight *shenti*. In either case, the body is not a personal consideration, but subject to the surveillance of familial relationships and constituting these relationships. Lee's account underlines how romantic relationships remain deeply interwoven with existing family relationships in contemporary China (Pimentel, 2000; Risey, 1994). Rather than a type of 'private physical nature', the Confucian conception of *shenti* 'exists through functioning in a

network of relationships' (Li, X., 2011: 49). From this perspective, the self is someone living in families and society, who should be responsible for family members and, ultimately, contribute to the wellbeing of the whole society (Liu & Zhang, 2015). Therefore, while regulating one's *shenti* is mostly seen as a personal responsibility, it is sometimes done for the *he* of the family. By the same token, family is liable to promote the wellbeing of an individual's *shenti* according to Confucian ethics (Li & Wang, 2012). Lee's answer reflects how the lack of embodied harmony on a personal level might be enlarged as a collective issue within the family.

Seeking harmony with distinct male shenti

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that the young men held diverse perspectives on their own *shenti* and that of others. They frequently drew upon other men's (and sometimes women's) bodies to distinguish themselves from undesirable bodies or to align with appreciated ones. But even when they intended to show disapproval, participants were cautious about wording and phrasing¹⁴. According to Confucius, the capability of practising *he* is essentially about negotiating a balance between different elements, which serves as an indicator of the exemplary person: 'The true gentlemen is conciliatory but not accommodating. Common people are accommodating but not conciliatory' (*Analects*, 13.23). While *he* plays an integral role in men's everyday practices of *shenti* as a form of bodily aesthetic, it also shaped the narratives of masculinity in the interview interaction when participants were asked to talk about different bodies. Here, I view each particular interview encounter as a relational event that the men experienced through their *shenti*. And at the same time, they consciously demonstrated the male *shenti* to me. In this sense, I am attempting to unravel harmony-coded masculine performance at the fieldwork site in order to develop a more complex and multifaceted picture of the relationality and situatedness of the Chinese male body.

¹⁴ This reluctance to openly criticise others is also manifested in young men's narratives about kinship experience. Even when some participants seemed to express complaints against their parents, they were very cautious about how to articulate these attitudes (Chapter 6).

He as a prevailing narrative strategy was evidently manifested in participants' comments on the dissident heterosexual masculinity represented by *zhongxing* men. *Zhongxing* literally means 'neutral gender/sex' and designates a lack of legitimate masculinity (or femininity). It has been a widespread topic in Chinese media recently, especially in talent shows (Zheng, T., 2015a). Yet, my interview data revealed that young men's attitudes towards this softer form of masculinity were ambiguous and sometimes even antagonistic. Actually, the majority of participants explicitly identified *zhongxing* men as embodying problematic masculinity. The two most frequently used descriptive terms were '*niang*' and '*yanggang zhi qi*'. *Niang*, literally referring to a mother or young woman, is commonly used in colloquial Chinese to refer to a man who is effeminate or lacking macho masculinity. *Yanggang zhi qi* is traditionally attached to a Chinese man who is tough, strong, brave and resolute, emphasising psychological status more than physical features. Accordingly, *zhongxing* men are usually portrayed as *niang* without *yanggang zhi qi*. Xiaozhu (31) and San pangzi (32) were both critical of *zhongxing* men:

Xiaozhu: I don't like that *niang* type. Because, after all, you are a man. A man should be...more *yanggang*.

San pangzi: I absolutely can't accept that...that *niang* type. Maybe because I'm traditional. You can joke about it or whatever, but I...um, I don't like them. I think a man, even if you can't be fearless or heroic, needs to have *yanggang zhi qi*.

Although, earlier in the interviews, Xiaozhu expressed dissatisfaction with his 'belly issue', and San pangzi was perplexed by diabetes and obesity, the problem of *zhongxing* men was considered to be far more serious. Since perceptions of sexuality are closely associated with moral control in China (Sigley, 2006), *zhongxing* men connote immoral sexuality. Indeed, regardless of the extent to which interviewees felt dissatisfied with their own *shenti*, it seems as though they still regarded themselves as representing authoritative masculinity. By contrast, *zhongxing* men were deemed to be lacking fundamental characteristics of men. For instance, Carey (26) was eager to maintain the essentialist heterosexual norm: 'I don't like them. I think...since nature has divided human beings...well, actually

almost all the creatures into male and female, then why...do you try to pull together the opposite sides?’ Seen in this light, the danger of *zhongxing* men lies in their transgressive potential of heteronormative sexuality that is a fundamental measure of embodied masculinity. At least among participants who represent ‘normal’ men and, therefore, ‘normal’ sexuality, *zhongxing* challenges their heterosexual authority. Stockman (2000: 90) points out that Confucian doctrine places great weight on hierarchy in all social relationships as the bedrock of social order and stability. As a result, *zhongxing* men were denigrated as embodying an illegitimate masculinity that is ranked remarkably low in the masculine hierarchy, sometimes even being excluded. If telling stories about ourselves and others is a key moment for identity construction (Kuhn, 1995), these young men’s disavowal of *zhongxing* men needs to be perceived as a meaningful masculinity-making process. Performing heteronormative masculinity during the interviews thus reinforces their masculine privileges in everyday life and the masculine hierarchy.

But the majority of participants—all self-defined as heterosexual—attempted to maintain ‘surface harmony’ with *zhongxing* men (Huang, L., 1999). Rather than harshly criticising the sexually deviant *zhongxing* body, the young men I interviewed maintained a restrained manner when discussing this topic. One narrative strategy to express muted dissent towards *zhongxing* was to phrase it as acceptable but not at all desirable. CC (25) remarked:

Zhongxing...well, I, um, I can’t really accept that. I don’t mean I can’t accept them, but I myself wouldn’t dress or behave like that [...] I’ll simply stay away from them, but there’s no need to interfere too much. If you want to control everything that bothers you, that’ll be endless. But if they disgust me, I’ll feel annoyed.

Obviously CC was striving not to show overt contempt towards *zhongxing* men, and therefore he vacillated between hesitant acceptance and explicit dislike. In a way, the tension between heteronormativity and *zhongxing* was weakened through such faltering speech. CC carefully phrased his comments to avoid falling into the domain of homophobia, which is not supposed to be demonstrated by a

cultivated gentleman who appreciates diversity and autonomy. Likewise, Leslie (31) said: 'I can accept it [the *zhongxing* phenomenon], but I don't desire to be like that. I won't do anything to you, but it's on the basis that you don't affect me.' Both men's perspectives are bolstered by the virtue of *he*, which addresses the need to 'maintain a mutually respectful relationship and a common concern for humanity and morality' (Leung et al., 2002: 201). By subtly expressing their objection towards a male *shenti* that lacks standard manliness, the young men managed to establish their own masculinity as superior and legitimate.

Potentially, participants' ambivalent stance towards *zhongxing* men is buttressed by Confucian philosophy. On the one hand, Confucianism encourages 'confrontation, debates, and disagreement in the pursuit of benevolence and righteousness' (Leung et al., 2002: 201). As Confucius teaches his student *Zilu* in section 10 of *Doctrine of the Mean*, 'the gentleman harmonizes without mindlessly following others' (cited in Li, C. Y., 2006: 592). On the other hand, the valorisation of interpersonal harmony requires individuals to control potential conflict through reducing threatening messages such as disagreement (Chen & Starosta, 1997–8; Wei & Lin, 2013). In this sense, participants' seemingly paradoxical remarks about *zhongxing* male bodies could be understood as a Confucian-informed way of doing masculinity in the interview setting.

The rivalry between Northern and Southern men

Another recurrent topic that entailed harmony-informed masculine performance was the distinction between the Northern and Southern male body. Cultural differences between Northern and Southern China have long been a popular theme in media representations, especially TV series exploring family relationships and ethics (e.g. *Double Sided Adhesive Tape*, 2007; *A Tale of Two Cities*, 2011). More often than not, geographical diversity is represented as eventually leading to intense conflict within the family, between generations or between couples. This rivalry between the North and the South was widely recognised among my participants when talking about men from the other region. Not surprisingly, bodily differences usually came to the fore as icons of the geographical tension:

XiXi (30, Shanghai): The Northerners are...well, relatively bold and forthright. And also, their accent is that macho type, as well as their attitudes. Of course they're different in terms of physical features as well. They're taller, straightforward and the voice is louder, maybe, yeah.

Lee (27, Shenyang): Southern men...I think...I think they're so mean (laugh). They also appear cunning. Anything else...well, they're short with a bigger forehead (laugh). I don't like the Southern type of men.

As one of the practical codes of *he*, controlling strong feelings has been valued in Confucianism as the first and foremost solution during conflicts (Hwang, 1997–8). But apparently such a virtue is no longer treasured as much as before among the younger Chinese generation. Both XiXi and Lee felt free to highlight the bodily characteristics of men from the other side of China with reference to height and voice. While XiXi adopted a mild tone, Lee was almost unreserved in mocking Southern men as 'short with a bigger forehead'. However, a shared perception beneath their comments is to consider it as habitual for other men to embody geographical differences. While the *du*-coded and ritualised *shenti* also exhibits such a feature, the division between Northern and Southern Chinese *shenti* tends to be more fixed and incontestable. Moreover, contrasting the appearance of the male body is extended to illustrate psychological and moral status. Consequently, Northern men are considered forthright and macho while Southern men are cunning and shrewd among participants. Unlike other aspects of the male body, the geographically different *shenti* is depicted as natural and non-reflexive instead of a lived existence that can be cultivated through Confucianism.

This rhetoric was evoked again in terms of the sharp differences between Northern and Southern dialects and accents. Some participants claimed that the dialect of the other region was difficult to accept. For example, a number of the men interviewed in Shenyang pointed out bluntly that they found Southern dialects 'uncomfortable' and 'inaccessible'. As TMB (29, Shenyang) put it: 'I can't understand them, so there's no way to communicate.' By contrast, the Northern accent appeared equally unappreciated. For example, Rocky (28, Shanghai) said: 'I think Northern men speak in an unnatural way. Their tone, or maybe it's their

dialect, I don't like it.' The way of speaking, especially linguistic accent, is a crucial aspect of the bodily properties commonly used to divide social classes (Charlesworth, 2000; Skeggs 1997). Nonetheless, the symbolic division of accents in Chinese society is more complicated. Specifically, Beijing Mandarin—the basis of many Northern dialects—has been standardised and institutionalised to be the basis of standard Chinese since the early 20th century. Moreover, the Northern part of the country has witnessed a series of crucial political and industrial transformations throughout modern history. However, Southern China, especially the Eastern coastal region, is acknowledged to have experienced earlier and more rapid economic development after the Reform era. Therefore, some Southern linguistic varieties, like the Shanghai dialect and Cantonese, pose a challenge to the normativity and superiority of Mandarin-based Northern dialects (Zhang, Q., 2017). As a result, it does not make complete sense to mark class identities with regard to accent or dialect, and men from both regions felt entitled to claim privilege. The disharmony between Northern and Southern male bodies demonstrates both the resilience and the rigidity of *shenti*. Hence, examinations of *shenti* need to be located in specific contexts, while taking account of individual differences.

Apart from a few participants who harshly disparaged men from the other side of China, such as Lee and Rocky as I have noted, the majority retained an implicit and restrained manner in discussing this question, regardless of their standpoint. Along with the common narrative strategy used in talking about *zhongxing* men, the young men often combined neutral or sometimes positive commentary together with expressions of dislike.

Jack (29, Shenyang): I hate Southern men's insincerity and excessive calculation on everything. But let me put it fairly, after all, we are all Chinese. I just hate some points in their personality, but it doesn't mean I hate the whole group.

Neyo (29, Shanghai): Northern men are rough, loyal and drink a lot. But I feel they are sort of stubborn.

Here, *he* is less about a standard of embodied masculinity than a latent code of behaviour that underpinned the men's self-presentation during the interview encounter. Since excessive criticism of men from other regions might devalue their masculine performances, both Jack and Neyo were cautious about controlling the *du* of their negative remarks in order to preserve a sense of harmony between themselves and the Southern/Northern other. This was evident when Jack stressed that 'it doesn't mean I hate the whole group', and Neyo referred to the masculine trait of loyalty (*yi*), which is valued by Confucian ethics, to compliment his counterpart. By downplaying their criticism, both Jack and Neyo managed to present themselves as ritualised Chinese men who embodied the notion of harmony.

The ability to control aggression and violence as well as other outbursts of emotion is one of the crucial aspects of identifying the civilised body (Elias, 1994; Elias & Dunning, 1986). As Shilling (2003: 131) acknowledges, the civilised body should be able to 'monitor its own actions and those of others and to internalize a finely demarcated set of rules about what constitutes appropriate behaviour in various situations'. To a certain extent, this concept of the civilised body echoes the discourse of *suzhi*, literally meaning quality in Chinese. Centring on the body, *suzhi* represents a civilising ability to internalise social standards that is not merely corporeal, but also social, emotional and moral. According to Murphy (2004: 2), historical antecedents for *suzhi* can be seen in Confucian teachings that each individual is malleable, trainable and obliged to self-cultivate, and that all subjects share responsibility for the fate of the empire. Therefore, the Confucian orthodoxies of practising *du* and *li* in order to achieve *he* could be partly translated as cultivating *suzhi* into one's body in contemporary Chinese society.

Suzhi was used by some participants as a taken-for-granted standard to measure geographical masculinity. For example, Jia fei mao (32, Shenyang) said: 'I feel that Southern men have lower *suzhi* compared with Northern men, especially in public places. You know, that kind of self-centred behaviour. They are bad at maintaining *suzhi*.' For Jia fei mao, exhibiting one's *suzhi* was imbued with vital importance in

social interactions. The reiteration of 'public places', that is, locations where individual behaviour is under the gaze of strangers, suggests that *suzhi* is heavily relational and embodied. As 'corporeal politics' (Anagnost, 2004), embodying *suzhi* buttresses an individual man's maintenance of harmonious interactions.

Elsewhere, *suzhi* is considered in a pragmatic way. Leslie (31, Shanghai) said:

My understanding of Northern China is divided by Xuzhou, which I don't like. Although included in Jiangsu Province, Xuzhou men...are low in *suzhi*. Maybe it's biased, but some Xuzhou men around me are indeed like that. Because the place is economically backward [...] people there may do some illegal stuff, like fraud.

Thus, Leslie associated *suzhi* closely with one's possession of economic capital. As he indicated, lacking financial comfort might even cause moral error. Due to himself possessing sufficient economic and cultural capital, Leslie seemed to feel entitled to make an assessment of low *suzhi* men. If interpreted from a Bourdieusian perspective, this extract reflects how men of a superior class are equipped with dominant habits, which lead to their acquisition of symbolic force over the dominated (Bourdieu, 2001). While men's gendered suppression of women is termed masculine domination, such a form of power also operates within the hierarchy of masculinities.

Conclusion

Shenti is endowed with diverse meanings and substantial values by the Chinese young men. During the interviews, participants frequently adopted *shenti*-related expressions to describe their everyday lives. Moreover, embodied gender resources act as a crucial part of masculinity construction both within and beyond the interview site. With dramatic changes in both social and personal spheres, young men's experiences of *shenti* tend to become heterogeneous. They also employed various strategies to work on and live with their *shenti*. While Chinese men's understandings and practices of the male body are similar to their Western counterparts in a range of aspects, the underlying cultural and symbolic meanings are often different.

The concept of *shenti* denotes the entire person in classical Chinese philosophy and serves as the essential carrier of Confucian values. According to Tu (1985: 113–4), it is through the disciplining of the body and mind that the Confucian acquires a taste for life, not as an isolated individual, but as an active participant in the living community. Therefore, Chinese men are allowed or even required to retain an intimate relationship with *shenti*. Participants' narratives reveal that traditional bodily aesthetics—such as *du*, *li* and *he*—remain prevalent and sometimes even dominant in their perceptions of the body. Instead of a system of knowledge that needs to be instilled into the public, resilient Confucian ethics have become taken-for-granted standards that are generally accepted in today's China (Jackson, 2011; Stockman, 2000; Yan & Harwood, 2004). These 'shared yet usually unconscious presuppositions or premises' play an essential role in Chinese men's construction of their embodied masculinity (Ames, 1993b: 157).

It should be noted that Chinese young men are not passively reproducing conventional values attached to the body, but are rather altering them with contemporary meanings. While interviewees did appear to have inherited certain patriarchal definitions of Chinese men, they also selected and reinterpreted these identity elements as well as absorbing Western concepts of men and the ideal male body. Chinese men move between these traditional and modern masculine traits, which are sometimes not easy to navigate. They want to make cultivated and ritualised *shenti* without resembling the 'slender scholar'; they leave the task of shopping to their mothers or female partners while claiming self-responsibility for bodily improvement; they disavow superfluous effort on the male body like some of their Western counterparts but value appropriate bodily presentations in the workplace. Accordingly, the creation of embodied masculinity among ordinary Chinese young men is evidently diverse and flexible. During the process of *shenti* construction, orthodox Confucian values, whilst remaining prevalent and influential, have been reinvented to benefit men in the contemporary world.

A central theme running throughout this chapter is the relationality of Chinese *shenti*. Even though a man stands physically alone, his body is constantly

intertwined with the surrounding world, ranging from parents and female partners to strangers, and also themselves in the past and future. Such a distinctive feature is supposedly rooted in core notions of Confucianism-informed *shenti*, which is 'responsible, feeling, intuiting, acting, and has its role in society' (Tung, 1994: 488). Indeed, the Chinese *shenti* is 'never merely material and mechanical' (Tu, 1992: 87), but should be understood more in terms of 'embodied selfhood' that emerge from everyday encounters and wider socio-cultural contexts (cf. Jackson & Scott, 2007). By perceiving the interview as a relational event, I could also see how participants mobilised their narratives to present their *shenti* to me. These embodied masculine performances are often controlled, ritualised and in harmony with others. Hence, Chinese men's perceptions and practices of *shenti* draw heavily upon their personal and social relationships and they actively participate in these relationships through embodied experience. In the following chapters, I will continue to examine intimacy and kinship, which are two primary sites where Chinese young men construct meanings of the masculine self.

Chapter 5

Good Men Need to be *You Dandang*: Negotiating Masculinity in Practices of Intimacy

Introduction

During the Christmas holiday of 2016, when I went back to Shenyang, my parents were busy with matchmaking for several single adult children of their colleagues and friends. While they sometimes joked that: 'Luckily we don't need to worry about you', both of them were still drawn into the 'parental matchmaking system' in their personal networks. Taking my parents as an example, the system operates as follows: each parent is either seeking a potential partner for their own child, or holds the personal details of other young adults from their closest contacts, whom they usually know very well. Subsequently, parents within the system will frequently exchange such information as well as broadcasting whose daughter or son is looking for matchmaking. The system therefore gradually evolves to become wider and more diverse, which means that sometimes my parents will introduce a young woman they have never met to a colleague's son. One day, my mother showed me a new message from one of her friends introducing a female newcomer: BA from Luxun Academy of Fine Arts and MA from Australia; currently working as an art teacher in a local high school in Shenyang; height 1.65 metres; fairly well-off family background. My mother immediately sent back: How old is she? Does she hold institutional staff status (*shiye bianzhi*) in her *danwei*? My mother introduced the young woman to a friend whose 30-year-old son was still single. Later, she updated me on the result of this matchmaking: the man's family was not satisfied because the woman turned out to be a contracted teacher in the school without permanent institutional staff status.

I was initially surprised, because there was not a single word in the message about the personality of the young woman herself, but only the educational and economic resources she possessed. However, according to my mother and some of my single girlfriends, such a style is very common in matchmaking. This episode reflects the present-day trend in the Chinese marriage market, at least in a large,

north-eastern city. First and foremost, a single man or woman is evaluated based on educational level, stability of employment, family background, age and probably height. In particular, a governmental or public institutional position remains highly appealing—sometimes even a determining factor¹⁵. Such explicit pragmatic framings of love relationships and marriage are also visible in my interview data, which tells similar stories from the men’s side. Especially in terms of spousal choice, participants emphasised the importance of a mutual match in terms of family background and personal capabilities. Commonly in present-day China, a man (and his family) is expected to provide housing and fulfil the almost obligatory task of becoming the main provider (Zhang & Sun, 2014). As a result, many young men I interviewed are prompted to interpret love and marriage as pragmatic relationships. Nonetheless, according to my participants, this does not undermine the existence of intimacy between couples. Men’s material investments peppered with emotional attachment are considered to be practices that ‘enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other’ (Jamieson, 2011: 1.2).

Unlike the decentralisation of conventional partnerships and the blurred boundary between families and friends emerging in Western societies (Budgeon, 2006; Pahl & Spencer, 2004), couple relationships and other family ties are still identified as the central forms of intimacy in contemporary China. Compared with their female partners or parents, the young men had little to say about friends during interviews. Therefore, in this chapter, I am mainly concerned with Chinese young men’s interpretations and practices of partnership¹⁶. Specifically, I intend to explore how Chinese men navigate various gendered discourses on their roles in intimate

¹⁵ This strong preference for a governmental or public institutional position in Shenyang is potentially a result of the city’s historical status as a prominent heavy industrial city. Before the transition to a market economy, national-owned enterprises provided the majority of work opportunities for the general public. As I have noted in Chapter 3, many participants in Shenyang work in government or public institutions. Although some men have white-collar jobs, their professional industry is often related to construction or manufacturing.

¹⁶ Kinship is certainly a crucial part of Chinese young men’s definitions of intimacy. Since I will consider masculinity and kinship from another perspective in the next chapter, here I mainly focus on couple relations. But, as I will show, there are also overlaps and interplays between these two spheres of intimacy.

relationships and how they construct their present and future identities as boyfriends and husbands. Overall, I argue that *you dandang*¹⁷ (being willing to shoulder responsibility and capable of fulfilling male roles) is the key criterion of masculinity in the intimate sphere. Importantly, *you dandang* needs to be understood as a relational construct within the couple, and is often linked with the wider kinship network. This term was widely deployed by the Chinese young men themselves as a masculine ideal that they wanted to pursue. While exerting some rigid regulations on men, it has also been reworked and reinterpreted in different circumstances. Being a traditional cultural norm and also a contemporary masculine ideal, *you dandang* entails both the material and emotional dimensions of intimacy. Meanwhile, a man embodying *you dandang* cannot be reduced to a simple reading as either patriarchal or egalitarian. These contrasting sets of values might sometimes merge, as reflected in a single man who was seeking both romance and habitual compatibility. In contrast, young men who are not able to be *you dandang* in the normative way need to strategically tackle the situation. Examining the ways in which men make sense of the masculine self in the everyday experience of intimacy may offer an alternative lens for our understanding of the interplay between local traditions, evolving cultural values and transforming socioeconomic circumstances in contemporary Chinese society.

A Pragmatic Framing of Intimacy

Unlike numerous romantic stories in the West, love and intimacy have long been more rational and restrained in China. Compared with impulsive and intense love, reciprocal and respectful connections are encouraged (Kong, W., 2008). According to Confucius, intimate affection should ideally ‘start with love and end with virtue’ (*fahuqing, zhihuli*). Zhu Xi, the representative figure of Song Confucianists, pushed it even further, advocating that human desires need to be exterminated. While modern Chinese society is more open to romantic affection and desire, new cultural frameworks are emerging to define appropriate intimacy. Like the story of

¹⁷ In Chinese, *you* means ‘have’, and *dandang* contains meanings of responsibility, obligation and one’s socially and culturally defined role. In everyday language, *you dandang* (有担当) can be used as both adjective and noun. So I also use this term in both forms.

‘practical matchmaking’ that I introduced above, a few single men in this research exhibited surprisingly similar expectations of their spouse. Apart from TMB (30), who stated that ‘I want to find someone perfect’, most single men offered a highly realistic and rational framing of the intimate relationship. Instead of chasing romantic love, they emphasised the importance of the old saying in China—finding someone from a family of equal social status and financial situation (*men dang hu dui*).

Therefore, before preparing oneself to be *you dandang* as a male partner, Chinese young men hope to ensure that the woman they will be responsible for comes from a similar social and familial background. CC (25) told me that he had recently met someone and was contemplating whether she was the right woman:

She was introduced to me by other people, not that ‘just meeting each other’ type [...] But she’s good. I’ve been to many matchmakings and this one I’m quite satisfied with. She...she’s okay and doesn’t have many...many different thoughts. I mean, I feel we can live life together. Yeah, sometimes, well, we may discuss what to eat, or together find some place to eat, but she won’t think too much or require too much. I think this is very important. It’s like...how was it called, like it was said in the *Canon of Medicine*, keeping a calm mood and fewer desires. As long as we can live a life together, it’s fine. If there are too many desires, perhaps...they’ll be hard to satisfy.

In CC’s depiction, intimacy is mostly about the prosaic side of life. He hardly demonstrated any longing for romantic love apart from the understatement that they were not ‘naturally’ falling in love. Actually, CC’s experience appears evocative of dating practices in previous decades, which was a ‘serious, goal-oriented enterprise, not a casual recreational pastime’ (Honig & Hershatter, 1988: 110). However, since the onset of profound socio-economic reform, courtship culture is acknowledged to have undergone profound changes (Xia & Zhou, 2003). Farrer (2014: 71) argues that Chinese young people ‘found a mythic or metaphysical code of attraction that emphasized the unique, magical, and enduring qualities of attraction, while also embracing a prosaic code of the pragmatic choices and practical efforts necessary for making a relationship work with an attractive partner.’ But CC’s primary concern seemed to be the latter part of this, with almost

no expression of desire or passion. Forming an intimate relationship is first and foremost measured in terms of material needs. Although CC put it in a vague way, he was apparently weighing his own capabilities against the woman's requirements. For him, the woman he had just met was good because they could 'live life' together. Notably, CC referred to the classical Chinese medical text *Canon of Medicine* to uphold his perception of intimate relations. Earlier in the interview, he also told me that he had recently started to read about Chinese medicine while doing regular exercise to keep fit. In this sense, CC's emphasis on 'keeping a calm mood and fewer desires' in intimate practices is also part of the project of constructing embodied masculinity.¹⁸

The notion of finding a woman with 'less desire' is also embraced by Jack (29):

I want to find someone with similar interests and world view. So we can understand each other. The second thing is that, I hope she won't focus too much on pursuing self-interest and earning more money. Let's just live a normal life [...] The last thing is I hope she can respect my parents. Of course I'll respect her parents.

Again, prospective intimacy is depicted as practical companionship, which is based on mutual understanding and compatibility. But Jack also emphasised that he needed a wife who would presumably not push him (or herself) to gain higher social status and income. Johnson and Lawler (2005) observe that vocabulary such as finding 'compatible and comfortable' relationships is about far more than expressions of subjective choice. Rather, these preferences involve 'the use of a social schema for evaluating and assessing individuals in order to discern the "right" sort of person who is in possession of the "right" sort of capital' (Johnson & Lawler, 2015: 3.7). As women in the dating and marriage market are generally expected to marry economically better-off men with housing and a car (Kam, 2015), it is not difficult to understand young men's concern about 'greedy' women with whom they cannot afford to develop a relationship. Status hypergamy, which

¹⁸ This emphasis on self-control and regulation of desires is in line with Chinese men's bodily aesthetic of *du* that I discussed in Chapter 4. The pivotal importance of properly managing the male *shenti* is a crucial part of constructing socially appreciated masculinity.

designates that women should marry men with higher social status, has a long tradition in Chinese marriage and remains a contemporary phenomenon (Xu et al., 2000). Seen from Jack and other single participants' perspective, this cultural tradition might have turned into a source of burden for contemporary young men. Moreover, Jack indicated that he was looking for a filial woman, with whom he could form a harmonious family relationship. This emphasis on respecting parents is rooted in the enduring value of filial obligation and familial harmony in Chinese culture. In this sense, Chinese young men's pragmatic framing of intimacy is a deeply social and cultural practice.

In addition, Jack's hope to find a woman who can share 'similar interests and world views' illustrates what Jankowiak and Li (2017) call the 'emotionally involved' model of courtship and marital relations. As they explain, this model is more prevalent among people born after 1978 in contrast to the 'dutiful model' that prevailed among previous generations. Specifically, husband and wife in the emotionally involved model 'should have conversational intimacy and that both should enjoy and contribute to the warm feelings of being together and the closeness in the marital relationship' (Jankowiak & Li, 2017: 151). In all likelihood, common values and interests may contribute to a couple's emotional closeness and mutual disclosure. Nonetheless, Jack's account reveals that emotional investment needs to be happening alongside, or even on the basis of, practical concerns about marital life. Indeed, participants commonly appreciated women with relatively low material desires. Among the partnered men, some also explained their spousal choice in terms of their match in both a material and an emotional sense. For example, Sean (31) stressed that his girlfriend and he were a 'similar type of people': 'Because I myself don't care much about pursuing material stuff, like car, house, what you wear and what you eat. I'm not picky about these things and I think she doesn't have specific standards in this respect either.' Here, the feeling of closeness is enmeshed in practical concerns. In all likelihood, holding similar material standards for life has significantly fostered the mutual attachment between Sean and his girlfriend. This insight is echoed by Aaron (25): 'I like my girlfriend's personal disposition (*qizhi*). Because she reads a lot, well, I like this type

of woman with a highly literate *suzhi*. You know, in this extremely acquisitive society, it's not easy to find a woman who cares little about material stuff.' As such, the young men are worried about their ability to meet women's material requirements. Since this is a gendered expectation that contemporary Chinese society normally places on a man (Zhang, L., 2010), a pragmatic evaluation of prospective intimacy is necessary for them to construct a harmonious intimate relationship in the future.

Thus, the young men's interpretations of intimate relationships draw upon a range of social standards, including age, educational level, employment, and other material factors such as apartment and car. At the same time, single young men may also turn to their family for advice. Lee (27) told me: 'My mum said, at least find someone with a proper job, otherwise you'll have to earn money for two. So I'll try to meet her requirement, and then see whether we match emotionally.' Having recognised the financial stress associated with couple intimacy in real life, Lee chose to prioritise the material basis of intimate relationships over the spark of affection. The language of 'fewer desires' and 'proper job' raised by CC and Lee point to the underlying concern that they may fail to meet the social expectations of the intimacy ideal, which were evaluated by things like what restaurant to go to and whether the couple matches in occupation. More often than not, the male breadwinner, who is financially capable of looking after the whole family, is still glorified in contemporary China (Hird, 2009). These issues generally affect young men's spousal expectations and choices, which are reinforced by, and at the same time reinforce, power relations in the wider social world. In this sense, the pursuit of 'affordable intimacy' should be perceived as a private manifestation of the public construction of a man's role in an appropriate (middle-class) intimate relationship.

This explicit display of anxiety about the material pressures associated with intimacy were pervasive in interviews. As a result, participants from less well-off families might perceive a relationship as not worth the investment at their current stage. FN (22), a final-year undergraduate, firmly stated that he had not even

thought about finding a girlfriend:

I've never been in a relationship. I think the most important point is that you need to take the responsibility and *you dandang*. Well, I mean, one of the reasons why I don't want to have a girlfriend is because it's a waste of time, money and energy. You'll lose all of these, and maybe end up in a bad mood. Some of my classmates are in long-distance relationships. I know a guy who's just talking on the phone all the time. A man, from time to time, sits on the stairs and cries. Oh my goodness, this got me crazy. Even looking at them got me crazy. I think you need to spend your time and energy on more important stuff. For example, you can read more books and improve yourself [...] Another thing is that I don't agree with using your parents' money for your girlfriend. It's a realistic issue. If you're just immersed in ideality and imagination, that's useless. You'll get nothing. You have to force yourself to face the cruel reality in China.

By framing his current life around self-improvement and regulation, FN cast relationships as not only unaffordable but also unrealistic. For him, the chief goal is to accumulate masculine capital in order to become *you dandang*, while forming intimate relationship is not part of his project at this stage in his life. As can be seen, FN showed disapproval of excessive displays of affection by describing a 'crying-for-love' classmate as crazy. Meanwhile, FN's strong repudiation of spending parents' money on relationships is indicative of his commitment to the individualist spirit. In all likelihood, this is also a display of filial masculinity by not giving extra concern to his parents (see Chapter 6). All of these ongoing anxieties expressed by FN are animated by his awareness of facing 'the cruel reality in China'. Thus, structural factors outside the intimate sphere have profoundly influenced his pragmatic and realistic vision of intimacy.

Nonetheless, interpreting or practising intimacy in a practical way is neither an exclusively 'Chinese' nor a 'masculine' phenomenon, but has been acknowledged in other cultures and among women as well. For example, in Swidler's (2001) interviews with middle-class Americans, she speculates that people usually oscillate between pragmatic and romantic attitudes towards love. Although what she means by 'pragmatic' is more in terms of interviewees' acknowledgement that long-term relationships require intentional hard work, there is clearly a rational

contemplation. Among couples in the South of England, despite the norm of pooling and sharing, the majority often prefer to retain individual control of income after marriage for a variety of reasons (Burgoyne et al., 2006). Carter (2013: 729) also notes ‘pragmatic, objective assessments of emotion’ in her conversations with British women about romantic relationships. In fact, she finds that many of her interviewees struggled to phrase their feelings and there was even ‘a distinct absence of falling in love stories’ (ibid.). Nevertheless, Chinese young men’s pragmatic framing of intimacy does demonstrate some distinctive features, evidenced by the overarching importance of home ownership and the men’s common emphasis on *you dandang*.

‘How can you Marry without *Fangzi*?’

Throughout my interviews with Chinese men, the indispensable essentiality of housing came to the fore again and again. In order to prove oneself as *you dandang* and create a harmonious partnership, providing housing, or *fangzi*¹⁹ in Chinese, is universally identified as the most crucial part of a man’s obligation. All my participants wanted to marry or had married, and *fangzi* represents the material dimension of ideal intimacy between couples. This notion was rarely questioned by the men, even though affording an apartment triggers enormous anxieties and pressures. It is seen as a social norm in practices of intimacy, strengthened by both traditional and contemporary values, and therefore one with which a man is obligated to align.

XiXi (30) had married in Shanghai and already made a down payment for their apartment. He admitted that paying off the loan constituted the major part of the family’s monthly expenditure. Despite the financial burden imposed by purchasing an apartment, XiXi reflected little on the rationale of making the decision:

But you must buy *fangzi*, right? There’s the traditional belief that without a

¹⁹ In Chinese, *fangzi* can refer to both housing in a collective sense, and also a house/apartment or a home for an individual or a family. Therefore, participants might comment on the importance of providing housing for marriage as men in general, and sometimes talked about their own apartment or home.

fangzi...well, maybe it's advocated that you can rent an apartment. But, including yourself and your partner, this sort of belief still matters a lot, especially as a newcomer to Shanghai. I mean, how can you marry without *fangzi*?

Thus, purchasing a *fangzi* is viewed as a precondition for marriage and a taken-for-granted part of normative intimate relationships. XiXi's articulation of his 'new Shanghainese' identity also highlighted the prevalent belief that only with a *fangzi* can one truly settle down in this metropolitan city. The necessity of *fangzi* for marriage is produced through the interplay between cultural traditions, the market economy, institutional discourse and women's demands. For instance, the men's emphasis on buying an apartment before marriage is likely to be influenced by the changing legal regulations on equitable distribution upon divorce. According to Article 18 of the 2001 Revision of the Marriage Law, premarital property is explicitly defined as personal property. Regardless of the diverse reasons and motivations, this almost complete overlap between marriage and owning an apartment is a common concern among urban young couples (Zavoretti, 2017).

For most of the men, *fangzi* can offer a private space for accommodating a family, and also a sense of safety and self-fulfilment that is difficult to achieve in alternative ways. Furthermore, a man and his family's ability to purchase a *fangzi* acts as an imperative element to increase his competence in the marriage market. Zhi (27) had managed to buy an apartment in Shenyang with his parents' help, and he continued to tell me the story of his cousin:

In our society, yes I believe *fangzi* is the precondition for marriage. My cousin still lives in our village and these material requirements are even more complex in rural areas. My uncle has built a big new *fangzi* for him in the village, but you know what, no one introduced him to any woman! It's unbelievable. At last, they bought another *fangzi* in the town centre. Right after this, the matchmaker came to introduce single women to my cousin. It's crazy I think, and a total waste of money because they won't live in the town. But they have no other choice. People won't even be prepared to meet the man or his parents. They always start to judge you on material terms.

Zhi felt lucky that he had moved to Shenyang and settled down, so he would not

need to prepare two *fangzi* for marriage. The story of Zhi's cousin echoes Shi's (2017) research that revealed the skyrocketing cost of supporting sons to marry among parents in rural China. Because of the imbalanced sex ratio, young women require an increasingly high brideprice from the groom's family, in which housing is often an indispensable item (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012). This phenomenon is argued to cause long-term bachelorhood for poor men and even the emergence of 'bare branch' villages, where a large proportion of male villagers over a certain age are, often involuntarily, unable to find a spouse and thus live by themselves (Jiang et al., 2011). Because they have no wife or children, these men are compared to a 'bare branch' without leaves or fruits. On the other hand, while women seem to have gained more opportunities to bargain with the patriarchal system, they also reinforce patrilineal and patriarchal traditions by potentially promising their future contribution to the groom's family. This lingering patrilineal way of thinking generates the expectation that the husband and his family should bring more material resources to a marriage (Kipnis, 2017). However, Siu (1993) suggests that providing a new house for the bride in the post-Reform era cannot be reduced to a historical continuation of brideprice payment, but rather reflects how individuals and families are thrust into the reconfiguration of social class. Indeed, many young men in the interview regard their ownership of a good *fangzi*—not only the property itself, but also the location, price and neighbourhood—as a crucial indicator of being middle class.

The marital norm of building a new house in a rural area or purchasing an apartment in urban China highlights that the expectation for a Chinese man to buy an apartment is inherently a relational construct; it is not only linked with young women's expectations in the marriage market, but also situated in personal networks distributed around a man. In other words, purchasing *fangzi* usually matters beyond the couple's own needs, which makes it even more difficult to negotiate. CC (25) said:

To be honest, personally I'd like to rent a *fangzi*. But, there's a 'but' here. But most women I know, they have the idea that they want to be more stable. It's

true. On this issue men and women are different. I've asked many women [...] most of them want a home. No matter whether it's a big one, a small one, or just an old and messy one, they want their own home [...] In this respect, I feel I should compromise.

Thus, buying an apartment is interpreted as realising women's dream of having a safe haven as home, which brings both emotional comfort and a private space. To some degree, this can be seen as a reinvented form of the patrilocality that prevailed in China for centuries (Feng et al., 2014). Certainly, contemporary postmarital living arrangements have transformed enormously, as evidenced by CC's recognition that a woman commonly requires to live away from her parents-in-law. In contrast to virilocal residence in the past, which meant that a married woman had to replace her own network of kith and kin with that of her husband, contemporary women's desire is to maintain a certain distance from the groom's family whilst retaining her own webs of family and friends. As Feng et al. (2014) acknowledge, such a transformation in the Chinese family structure is especially evident when the new couple are both the only child of their native families. Seen in this light, the male-oriented family system has apparently loosened, and this was accepted by the men themselves as well.

Consequently, providing independent housing for the new couple has subsequently become the new masculine norm. DX (26) replied: 'A man without a *fangzi* is not a decent man. How can you marry without your own place to live? [...] From a woman's point of view, she also needs independent housing.' For DX, possessing a *fangzi* straightforwardly increases his masculinity and implies moral obligation. It is a relational consideration according to the female partner's requirements, which weighs heavily on a man's own identity-making. Jiang feng (23) also commented: 'I believe I have to buy *fangzi*. This may sound very traditional, but...your parents hope so, people around you hope so, and your mother-in-law will hope so, right?' Although there seemed to be a sense of reluctance or embarrassment about locating himself as a 'traditional' man, Jiang feng nonetheless chose to follow the normative trend. B. Zhao (1997: 47) raises the notion of 'Confucian consumerism', which 'bears the imprints of China's long-standing values concerning families and

human relations.’ This is revealed, for instance, in the state promotion of ‘four major consumer items’—colour televisions, refrigerators, washing machines, and hi-fi systems—for the family during the 1980s and families’ enthusiasm about spending for the only child. Following Zhao’s argument, contemporary Chinese’s strong desire for *fangzi* could be seen as a current manifestation of the Confucian pattern of consumerism. This is intensely informed by traditional marital values, which emphasise the integration of two families instead of the new couple alone. Accordingly, the groom’s parents, parents-in-law, and potentially other kin, may all participate in the decision about buying a *fangzi*. Given that many young women and their parents expect potential male partners to provide housing in the current marriage market (Eklund, 2016; Li & Xu, 2004; Zhang & Sun, 2014), Jiang feng’s compliant attitude represents a common response from single men.

Practically speaking, many Chinese consider buying a *fangzi*, even with only a down payment and subsequent 20-year loan, as a better choice of financial management than renting an apartment or other investment. Leery (32) had bought a small apartment in suburban Shanghai before marriage. He explained:

We don’t live in that *fangzi*. Actually we are now selling it [...] At that time, compared with just leaving your money in the bank, I thought it was better to buy a *fangzi*. The money will devalue if you just leave it there, right? So it’s a better deal to pay the housing loan slowly. It’s just this sort of financial consideration.

Therefore, purchasing a property is not only an imperative issue within the intimate sphere, but is also closely linked with extra-household factors such as the housing market and the economic structure as a whole. Leslie (32), whose daughter was born a week before the interview, gave another reason: ‘My wife hopes we can change to a larger *fangzi*. We want our child to go to a good school, so we plan to replace the current *fangzi* with one located in a better school district (*xuequ*).’ Educational resources, especially prestigious schools, have been argued to be a key contributing factor to the increase in the cost of housing in urban China (Niu & Liu, 2017). More importantly, the belief in ‘never letting a child fail at the

starting line' increases the desirability of such houses for investors and parents (Wen et al., 2014: 155). To be a responsible husband and father, Leslie thus believes that it is his obligation to carefully plan his daughter's future, albeit at a surprisingly early stage. Having been financially supported by their own parents through their education, the young generation of men are now starting to feel concerned about investing for their own children. Thus, apart from the core motivation of providing the material foundation for an intimate relationship, other considerations such as self-validation, financial investment and preparing for their children's education are also raised by participants as causal factors in the purchase of a new home.

For some participants, especially those I encountered in Shanghai, purchasing *fangzi* is a rather bitter topic. Considering the extremely high housing prices in Shanghai, even a small apartment can be beyond the reach of ordinary families. In fact, along with the increasing commercialisation of residential housing, prices have grown faster than individual wages at least since 2004 (Davis, D., 2010). Aaron (25), who called himself a 'budding entrepreneur of the Internet', had moved to Shanghai not long before from Beijing and had been with his girlfriend for several years. According to Aaron, monetary concerns were the main barrier to marrying her: 'The main thing is the material, the material condition. Emotionally, the timing has already been right.' This perspective echoes Cai and Feng's (2014) research on late marriage in Shanghai, which is characterised by an increasing materialisation of love. As they observe, the changing socioeconomic landscape in today's China has turned mate choice and marriage decisions into a rational calculation weighing costs and benefits (Cai & Feng, 2014: 112). Under these circumstances, intimacy between couples is regulated by a range of economic indicators, at times endangering an affective foundation that was initially strong. Aaron continued to explain:

One thing is the *fangzi*, and the other is career. For example, in lower-tier cities, maybe we two would have already established our careers. But now, like me, at a messy stage, I don't think it's the right time for marriage. Although my girlfriend said she didn't mind, I always feel worried.

In Aaron's case, immature career paths and not possessing a *fangzi* were the key factors that impeded his further commitment. This underachievement led to uncertainty about his own masculinity. Aaron regards house ownership and a stable career as symbolising culturally preferred masculinity, which, in the contemporary era, explicitly highlights men's earning ability. At a surface level, Aaron should have felt confident about himself—young, a university graduate, knowledgeable, ambitious and enthusiastic. However, his accumulation of sufficient *wen* masculinity, which used to be highly regarded in the conventional masculine hierarchy, appears to be devalued in the current discourse of love and intimacy underlined by pragmatism. It is true that mate selection has been dominated by economic factors rather than love throughout Chinese history (Ingoldsby, 1995). What is different in contemporary urban China is that economic factors have evolved into the principal precondition for the formation of preferred heterosexual marriage. An ideal male partner is depicted as both an active consumer, who is able to afford the *fangzi* (and other material goods), and an eligible producer with an appropriate career. For Aaron, these items were exactly the source of his frustration in failing to be a good boyfriend.

Even for local Shanghai men, the burden of buying *fangzi* is not easy to cope with solely by themselves. Actually, the majority of participants interviewed in Shanghai indicated that their parents had support them to purchase a *fangzi* to marry. However, this shared perception of local privilege brings extra anxieties to those from a less well-off family. Jim (25) was living with his parents and planning to marry his girlfriend when I talked to him, but his parents were unable to provide additional financial help for him to buy an apartment. This situation directly affected his self-evaluation of masculinity:

Honestly, because my parents can't help me buy another *fangzi* in Shanghai, my requirements of a woman naturally drop a lot. Because I think, as a man, at least a Shanghai man, you have to provide *fangzi* in order to marry. Because I'm not able to do so, let's not say my confidence, but my standard for my wife just collapses [...] Like my only standard for my girlfriend is to stabilise your heart. As long as you don't cheat on me, that's enough.

Like Aaron, Jim was actually performing fairly well in work as a project manager. Yet, in an intimate relationship, a man's gendered performance is not only his own task but also includes his parents. Well-off and understanding parents may enhance a man's competence in the marriage market; conversely, as Jim demonstrated, he felt a reduction in the value of his masculinity. Although marriage is less about the continuation of family property than it was in traditional Chinese culture (Bu, 2003), it remains a relatively strong institution exerting normative governance on individuals compared with many Western societies (Yang & He, 2014). The current gender culture puts explicit surveillance on men's (and their families') economic ability to prepare an independent residential space for the couple. While the reconfiguration of the housing market serves as the tangible ground on which class-specific subjects and cultural milieus are fostered (Zhang, L., 2010: 107), it also facilitates the new notion of 'monetary masculinity'. Yet it is not only about money. If wealth accumulation provides the foundation for buying *fangzi*, it is the emotional aspect of such practices that adds another layer of importance. For Jim, providing an apartment for their marriage is a crucial component of displaying affection towards his girlfriend and, potentially, a guarantee of future marital harmony. Drawing on D. Miller (1998), Fleischer (2007: 295) notes that housing consumption in urban China should be understood as 'a socially meaningful, powerfully affective practice which builds and expresses bonds of love and devotion.' Hence, the proliferation of material or pragmatic codes does not mean a depreciation of the affectionate closeness, but is constantly in conversation with emotional ties between Chinese couples.

***You Dandang*: Morality, Responsibility and Obligation**

As the single men are still looking for the right woman, their pragmatic framing of intimacy is generally clear and straightforward. Stepping into the next stage, *fangzi* mirrors the highly pragmatic and materialist side of the men's practices of intimacy prior to marriage. In comparison, most participants in stable relationships or marriage portrayed a complex, subtle and multi-layered picture of intimate practices. Qi (2016: 42) suggests that intimacy in Chinese society has more to do with actions than words, which involves tending to each other's needs and

concerns, involvement in each other's affairs and decision-making, being reliable in a crisis, and similar behaviour. Among the ordinary Chinese young men, these sentiments are often articulated as *you dandang*. This term comprises multiple meanings that are laced with vocabularies of morality, responsibility, and obligation. Importantly, *you dandang* is not as simple as an action-oriented form of intimate practice. The emphasis on courage, self-sacrifice, and other nuanced emotions accompanying *you dandang* marks its cultural specificities in Chinese men's construction of intimacy.

According to participants, creating and maintaining mutual harmony (*he* or *hexie*) can be summarised as the ultimate goal of *you dandang*. The pursuit of harmonious intimacy is visible in a number of the men's accounts of an idealised relationship or marriage. Regardless of their marital status, many participants confirm the necessity of 'guarding a *hexie* family/relationship' that concurs with the Confucian emphasis on familial integration. TMB (30) imagined that: 'There must be places that are not *hexie* if two people stay together. You need to communicate and work out solutions [to be a good boyfriend].' Jia fei mao (32), who had been married for years and appeared fairly satisfied with his marriage, also said:

There used to be a stage in our marriage when we were not that close, because we had our child and both worked hard. As we gradually grew towards 30, then towards the age of 40, we started to feel that marriage needs to be managed (*jingying*) [...] Now we are quite *hexie*.

Thus, a crucial aspect of a husband's role is to attentively manage the marital relationship and maintain domestic harmony, which involves reflexive adaptation. As stated in Neo-Confucianist Zhu Xi's evaluation of the *Great Learning*: 'Wishing to order well their States [the ancients] first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons' (Legge, 1971: 357–9). Accordingly, self-cultivation is seen as the foundation of family harmony, which acts as the prerequisite for broader state harmony in Confucian traditions (Barbalet, 2013). By forming the basis of state governance in contemporary China,

the principle of harmony instructed ‘a highly structured family ruled by a set of moral ethics in which respect and obligation were central to building harmonious family relationships’ (Liu, J., 2017: 1035; see also Mann, 2001). Whilst Jia fei mao admitted difficulty in adjusting to marital life, pursuing mutual *hexie* ensured collective wellbeing between the couple. Importantly, such a change is gradually evolving alongside changes in an individual’s life phases. Even though sustaining a harmonious family has always been valued, Jia fei mao experienced his marriage as having ups and downs. The level of harmony deepened as both he and his wife grew older and entered a relatively more stable life stage.

Another clear example of men as the protector of marital harmony comes from S (31):

One thing [a husband needs to do] is to maintain the harmony and integration of a family, and another important point is to create some sort of romantic atmosphere, which is necessary. I think...familial harmony is the most important. As a man, you must actively lead the family in that direction.

S’s description of a husband’s role reaffirms the long-lasting influence of *hexie* discourse at a personal and private level. In the domestic setting, this sense of harmony cannot be achieved merely through emotional connection, but also demands rational calculation and sometimes compromise or sacrifice. Notably, S mobilised different sets of values to define a husband’s role in practices of intimacy. On the one hand, he embraced the image of a modern husband in media depictions—caring, patient and investing emotional work in marriage, as expressed through the articulation of creating a ‘romantic atmosphere’. On the other hand, there was an enduring internalisation of a man as the authoritative figure in the household, who is supposed to hold the major power in the family. Although romance and passion used to be almost invisible in traditional Chinese understandings of love and marriage (Farrer, 2014), in contemporary Chinese society, these are seen as bonus points to ideal masculine performance in couple relations *on the basis of* fulfilling a man’s duty.

In order to achieve harmony in the intimate relationship, the young men acknowledge that both emotional and material contributions need to be made. Intimate feelings and mutual affection appear to be valued, in that emotional faithfulness was widely identified as an integral element of being a good boyfriend or husband. For instance, Jia fei mao (31) said: 'You can look at a picture of a beauty, but emotionally you should never wander.' JJ (29) commented with a slightly negative view: 'The most important thing is long-term trustworthy relationships on a deep level. But...it's actually very hard not to emotionally betray your partner.' Similar perspectives were widely expressed by participants when naming the worst thing a man could do. As Xiaozhu (31) replied: 'The worst thing is to...have that sort of relationship outside. You know, those affairs that let your family down.' These men's strong repudiation of infidelity could be seen as a response to public discussions about the growing divorce rates in contemporary Chinese society, with infidelity acknowledged as a major causal factor in the separation of a couple (Farrer & Sun, 2003). On occasion, lifelong commitment was regarded as almost the only standard to measure a good husband. As Rocky (28) remarked:

I think...um, the only thing is not to let her down. I mean, like not having affairs outside. And, I think I shouldn't restrict her and should let her do what she wants. Even though...even though I'm not rich enough, I'll let you buy what you want as long as I can afford it. I'll promise I won't do such and such outside the family. I think these are what I can do.

Certainly, both the era of polygyny in feudal China and the Republican cult of extremely free and romantic love have come to an end (Lee, H., 2007). Although keeping mistresses has been found to bolster privileged masculinity in contemporary China (Zhang, X., 2011), this attitude is rarely revealed in the ordinary men's accounts, as exemplified by Rocky. I suggest that this curious contrast is mostly attributed to the class position and intimate configuration of ordinary Chinese men. Specifically, they are neither male elites—namely entrepreneurs, businessmen and governmental officials—who use younger mistresses to manifest their class privilege (Osburg, 2013), nor migrant workers

whose second wives provide emotional comfort and practical support for these men to go through disadvantaged class-coded masculinity (Xiao, 2011). For my participants, although most of them can be categorised as 'middle class', keeping a mistress is potentially beyond what they can afford. This is illustrated by the common financial concern about paying the housing mortgage or raising a child. Besides, unlike migrant workers who keep a second wife around the urban workplace to tackle domestic chores, my participants were all conventionally partnered or expecting to become so, which meant that they would be accompanied in their everyday lives by their wives, girlfriends or parents. In short, rather than lending support to enhance their possession of masculinity, extra-marital affairs are believed to be detrimental to ordinary men's construction of masculine selves. As a result, loyalty and exclusivity take on exceptional importance in their practices of couple intimacy.

However, these men do not deny the possibility of extra-marital affairs; there is a latent recognition that deceit is something to be intentionally eschewed. In a sense, such a self-restriction mirrored the concept of *li* (Chapter 4), which defines 'the boundaries of proper behavior, provides opportunities for satisfying desires of moral agents within these boundaries' (Park & Chesla, 2007: 301). For the men, avoiding infidelity is considered to be an essential part of *you dandang* by repressing any desires that might endanger the stability of a relationship. In Xu's (2007) study on individual attitudes towards lifelong marriage, she finds that the sacredness and permanence of marriage remain widely accepted across generations. In fact, 82% of her respondents strongly identified with the traditional marital value of lifelong commitment. Whereas faithful devotion as a male partner is not pinpointed in classical Confucian ethics, it has become a contemporary standard by which to evaluate masculinity. The moral significance of an exclusive and lifelong intimate relationship for Chinese men is evocative of Bristow's (1997: 202) argument that differing perceptions of gender can and do affect moral responses to sexuality. Thus, the glorification of mutually supportive couple companionship and men's family obligations in Chinese culture both shaped interviewees' belief that 'she is the only one'. At least for ordinary Chinese young

men, infidelity is seen as risky, unrewarding and immoral. By contrast, emotionally stable and exclusive intimate relationships provide a normalised resource to produce legitimate masculinity.

In terms of the material dimension of *you dandang*, being the main financial provider was recurrently articulated by participants. The salience of the male breadwinning role underlines the men's pragmatic consideration of couple intimacy. In comparison, a woman's role in maintaining harmony is first and foremost about completing most domestic chores, coping with everyday details and conducting emotional work. As Aaron (25) said: 'Men should be the major source of financial income, or even cover the entire amount. This is the most crucial obligation.' Zhi (27) also affirmed a man's role as breadwinner 'in order to protect his family'. Leery (32) further linked the breadwinning role to decision-making power, saying that:

Today's society has changed a lot. I think a man should take up probably 60 percent of the family responsibility. How to divide the responsibility? That is to say, you should have the ability to make big decisions in the family. But...how to put it, the economic base determines the superstructure, you know. If you earn less than the woman, you need to listen to her. This is a realistic issue. If you earn more than her, you'll be able to have the final say.

Here, Leery suggested that the husband's authority is facing marked challenges in contemporary society. No longer a man's natural right, now he needs to earn himself the privileged position in a marriage. Leery's comments are coterminous with previous findings that breadwinner husbands are able to further strengthen their dominant power within the household (Shu et al., 2012). However, the husband may be equally trapped by the societal gender order in which men are compelled to be powerful and strong in all senses. Zuo (2003) argues that equating men's provider role with advantageous access to marital power overlooks the fact that such a model is a relational construction happening between the couple. It needs to be understood as both privilege and obligation. In fact, Zuo notes that the majority of wives in her study believed that men should be the main breadwinner in spite of their willingness to share financial burdens. Indeed, it is likely that some

men are caught in the dilemma of being the provider, even though they are not capable of or delighted about undertaking such a role. For these men, the tension between their gender beliefs of *you dandang* and real life requires urgent modification in order to relocate the masculine self.

Another strategy suggested by participants to safeguard intimate harmony is constructing quality family time, which sheds light on what is happening in many Western families (Hochschild, 1997; Morgan, 2011a; Warren, T., 2003). Both 2881 (28) and Danran (31) highlighted the importance of 'keeping her company':

2881: To be a good husband...is to spend more time with her and the kid.

Danran: My main role in the future is to spend more time with the kids [...] and fulfil all those different duties of a good man, a good husband or whatever.

Evidently, both 2881 and Danran immediately linked husbandly duties with fatherhood. Danran, in particular, labelled himself as 'a family-centred man' and avidly expressed his confidence and delight in being a good father throughout our interview. Apart from revealing the multi-dimensional features of familial masculinities, their accounts are in line with Confucian individuality, which addresses 'the uniqueness of each person in the performance of the roles they occupy' (Barbalet, 2013: 654). On this occasion, ideal masculine performance in couple relationships is perceived to be inseparable from men's fathering practices. Or, to put it another way, the two parts are identified as both fundamental to *you dandang*, that is, a Chinese man's role in the family. Nevertheless, not every participant actively engaged with this recent call for a caring husband who invests time in being affectionate with his family. Xiaozhu (31) admitted:

I want my wife to give me more free time. Because...she calls me every time I hang out with colleagues and nags like 'where are you? Come back home now!'

Thus, Xiaozhu viewed building quality family time as something stressful to moan about. For him, a hard-working husband deserves some social time that is free from 'the nagging wife'. Although the homosocial pleasure expressed by Xiaozhu is

actually not common among participants, many men did confess that spending time with family was difficult to achieve in reality. They often took it for granted that men had to sacrifice family gatherings for the sake of work, personal development, or simply some private space. In this sense, the harmonious scene of a loving husband routinely accompanying his wife and child is based on a cultural ideal or fantasy, which is not often achieved.

Furthermore, *you dandang* is explained in relation to men's intelligence, capabilities and/or abilities. This justification is closely associated with the traditional notion that men should marry 'lower' (Parish & Farrer, 2000; Zarafonitis, 2017). Ideally, a man should be more intelligent than the woman, capable of making decisions for the couple and protecting the relationship, which are all included as men's responsibility. For example, Neyo (29) explained: 'A man needs to be *you dandang*. You should be decisive, that's very important. I mean, if there's any problem, you should know how to solve it.' Here, a man's duty is characterised by his ability to make intelligent decisions. Whilst it cannot be denied that decision-making is a form of intimate power and privilege, Neyo's narrative reflects its obligatory aspect. Alex (32) similarly mentioned this point: 'To be a good husband...first of all, is to be responsible. You should shoulder the obligation for the family, for the child, and also guide the family in the right direction, well, discussing with others if needed.' Despite positioning himself as the family authority, defined by a conventional gendered model, Alex shifted the tone towards being an egalitarian husband who was willing to relinquish some decision-making power. In this regard, gender-equal beliefs brought by social and cultural transformations seemed to be unproblematically placed adjacent to the patriarchal legitimisation of men's household authority. There was no one-size-fits-all pattern of 'de-traditionalization' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) of masculinities in the modernisation of intimate practice, but rather a competing interplay of manifold values in the Chinese context. Lee (27) also embraced such a mixed model of masculinity:

Men need to protect their women. If you have a family, that'll be about

protecting the family. I think that's what a man should do. It's not possible that you rush up and cover every issue. That's not realistic. Your supreme interest should be your self-interest.

Like most participants, Lee defined the male role as being the protector of his spouse and family. Nevertheless, he firmly declared that pursuing self-interest is an individual's ultimate goal. This appears to be in sharp contrast with the classical Confucian extolling of selflessness and the subsequent Neo-Confucian doctrine that equates personal desire and self-interest with the original source of evil (Fung, 1953). If selflessness used to be an essential value ingrained in Chinese culture (Hall & Ames, 1998), Lee resisted such a moral duty rather strongly and espoused the celebration of personal interest. Although changing modes of individual lives embedded in family culture happens 'only slowly' in China (Davis & Harrell, 1993), the general picture does undergo constant transformation and is evidenced by vast individual diversity according to my participants.

In addition to these elucidations of *you dandang* in couple relationships, at times 'performing a man's role' is used as an abstract concept to describe good practices of intimacy. A few participants recurrently alluded to notions like 'being responsible' or 'fulfilling obligations', but found it difficult, or perhaps unnecessary, to name day-to-day activities in which they should take part. In other words, morality and responsibility become culturally appreciated symbols that men can strategically draw upon to establish themselves as good partners, but they do not always denote actual practices. This view is manifested in Simon's (27) understanding of a good boyfriend:

Well...you need to *you dandang*, yeah. The role is...not only about commitment, but a sort of responsibility. You need to be able to shoulder the responsibility [...] Um...well, so you need to have ability, fulfil your role, and take up your duty.

Here, Simon put great emphasis on a man's role that was coded with Confucian family ethics and division of labour, albeit in an obscure way. In fact, he barely clarified the so-called 'men's duty'. To be a good male partner is to accept the male

role and associated duties defined by cultural norms and general moral codes—ideally to be an omnipotent figure in the family. Potentially, the difficulty of explicating *you dandang* is generated by the rapidly changing gender landscape in present-day China. Just as different generations of Chinese women keep fulfilling their gendered roles that are ‘inscribed with different meanings and possibilities of self-identification and practice’ (Evans, 2008: 116), so young men are challenging fixed and stable definitions of *you dandang*. Although the male obligation to bring material resources remains intact in intimate practices, a unified paradigm of masculinity can no longer suit contemporary lifestyles in urban China.

Positive Mentality, Egalitarian Relationships and Doing a Man’s Best

Despite participants’ universal acknowledgement of *you dandang*, it is true that not everyone is able to construct this ideal form of masculinity. As the realistic dimensions of *you dandang*—purchasing *fangzi* and being the breadwinner—are widely seen as fundamental obligations, they are also young men’s major source of anxiety and pressure. In particular, while most men resort to parental support for purchasing *fangzi*, they can only rely on themselves to become the breadwinner. Furthermore, an individual man’s experience of masculinity construction is profoundly influenced by the wider sociocultural changes in contemporary Chinese society. Considering the increasingly competitive and risky labour market, some young men simply cannot earn more than their female partners. Consequently, breadwinning is sometimes difficult to achieve but, positively speaking, this also leaves some space for negotiation due to the growing challenge.

Thus, a small number of my participants, who are less competent in varying ways, need to relocate and reclaim their masculinity in the intimate sphere. These men have invented varying forms of emotional and practical techniques to confront the increasing challenge of *you dandang*. One of the strategies is to develop a ‘positive mentality’, as expressed by San pangzi (32). Working in a research institute attached to a state-owned enterprise in Shenyang, San pangzi earned much less than his wife, who was a private school teacher. As a result, he explicitly identified his wife as the breadwinner. In San pangzi’s own words, ‘Maybe she’s responsible

for making more money while I'm for looking after the family.' Therefore, he was compelled to forge a more flexible form of masculinity to navigate through the distortion of gender roles. Throughout our interview, San pangzi emphasised several times that he had a 'positive mentality' (*xintai hao*):

How to put this...in my friend's words, I'm that kind of person without much ambition and desire. I mean, like the old saying goes, the ideal life is to have a wife, children and a warm bed (*laopo haizi rekangtou*). I think that's enough. Some of my friends may earn hundreds of thousands of *yuan* a year, but I don't envy them. Maybe sometimes I feel sort of [envious], just joking, for example, maybe...maybe when the money is a bit tight at the end of a month. At that time, I would imagine that, well, if only I could make hundreds of thousands of *yuan* a year. But I just occasionally think about it.

Clearly, San pangzi's articulation of the husband's role was besieged by tangled subjective feelings. Whereas his underlying gender ideology suggested that men should tackle the bulk of financial demands in the household, he had recognised that there was little possibility of him making more money than his wife. To an extent, a 'positive mentality' allowed him to achieve a sense of relief within such a dilemma. Despite his unwillingness to invest more time within the household, San pangzi had to face the reality that there were hardly any alternative choices for him but to accept the changing gender roles with equanimity. By deploying the saying that he was satisfied with life as long as he had 'a wife, children and a warm bed', San pangzi strategically lowered his self-expectations to present himself as a 'good' husband despite his lesser share of masculine tasks, especially in terms of financially supporting the family.

While San pangzi felt it necessary to defend his inability to be the major provider, a few participants gave up the breadwinning honour with ease. For these men, transforming gender roles seem to have had a trivial effect on their assertion of masculinity. 32-year-old Jia fei mao was a politics teacher at a Shenyang public high school, who saw his marriage stepping into a 'harmonious stage'. His experience provides another clear illustration of a positive mentality. Talking about men's duty in the family, Jia fei mao said:

That's to sustain the family. Especially at crucial moments or facing big issues, you need to make decisions for the family. When anything goes wrong, you have to take the responsibility. In fact, the money my wife and I can earn is almost the same. Sometimes she even earns more than me. She teaches English, and her school is better than mine.

Unlike Hird's (2009) report that many white-collar husbands in Beijing are deeply worried about their loss of power in the conjugal relationship, Jia fei mao demonstrated little concern about his lower income compared to his wife's. In fact, failing to be the breadwinner seemed to generate little impact on his masculine self. By naming himself as the decision-maker in the household, Jia fei mao indicated that meeting the financial needs of the family was no longer the determining element in power allocation. Rather, a superior position could be acquired through other forms of capital, such as shrewd acumen and life experience. Another lens of interpretation is that men's authority is seen as an incontestable truth that cannot be easily shaken. While the traditional model of the Chinese individual exists mostly through their role performance in the Confucian system (Fung, 1998), such a definition has persisted until today but has also been reworked on a personal level. Jia fei mao, who was eager to fulfil the role of husband despite ceasing to be the major provider, manipulated other aspects of a husband's duty, including intelligence and rationality, linked with successful self-cultivation, to navigate the masculinity dilemma.

In addition, some participants emphasised that they are pursuing egalitarian relationships as a modern boyfriend or husband. These men usually demonstrated a higher level of reflexivity and tried to rationalise their changing perceptions of *you dandang*. Yet, an egalitarian man needs to constantly compete with the patriarchal mode of intimacy. For instance, Albert (24) talked about a man's position in the family:

I think...you should provide a sense of security. This may sound a bit patriarchal. But I think a man should be the supporter, someone reliable. I mean...a man should be the mainstay of the family. As long as he is there, the family is there.

While affirming the husband's dominant position, Albert immediately added: 'But in fact, ideally I hope the family can be supported by two people together. You know, this is now quite common.' Albert's ambivalent attitude sheds light on the subtle interplay between cultural ideals and an individual man's everyday life. Although male breadwinning was a relatively stable social construct and Albert initially assigned himself such a role, he did not deny the fact that it was also a form of gendered load that he would like to relinquish. In all likelihood, ideal masculinity characterised by the provider image in practices of intimacy may exert a marginal impact upon those who decide to disassociate themselves from such a figure. By naming it as being 'now quite common', Albert tried to rationalise his pursuit of an egalitarian relationship without being seen as transgressing the gender norm. Thus, the breadwinning identity can be seen as a form of hegemonic masculinity in practices of intimacy, which has persisted for centuries in China. The privilege of embodying the major providing role is evident, as Coles (2009: 31) notes, although 'hegemonic masculinity may not be the most common form of masculinity practiced, it is supported by the majority of men as they benefit from the overall subordination of women.' Hence, even if men themselves welcome some reform of existing gender politics, they need to carefully manage the cultural discourse to avoid being seen as not masculine.

On some occasions, a young man's announcement that he is an 'egalitarian' husband is rather ambivalent or even controversial. That is, he can use the terminology to validate the appropriateness of no longer being the breadwinner. For example, Carey (26) worked in a public educational institution in Shanghai and earned almost the same amount of money as his wife. When asked about his understanding of a good husband, Carey replied:

I think now it is equal. I mean...for example, if women can cover a certain proportion of material needs and men can fill the rest, I think that's enough [...] Because there are differences in terms of individual ability, there's no way to pair every strong man with a weak woman. In that way, society will always be unequal for women.

Here, Carey adopted the notion of egalitarian marriage to ease his anxiety about changing power dynamics in the couple relationship. Considering the reality that his income is almost the same as his wife's, changing to an egalitarian husband is both a practical adjustment and an ideational change. Carey's account reflects how an individual man's identity construction is shaped by 'forces outside themselves' (Pease, 2002: 171). In this case, the force entails both a lingering Confucian marital ethics of a division of labour, a wider recognition of gender equality and women's growing power in contemporary China. By shifting to egalitarian practices of intimacy, men like Carey manage to break out of the breadwinning trap whilst retaining their masculinity. Even if they cannot fulfil the breadwinning role, these men will be able to prove themselves as cultivated, modern and civilised men rather than incompetent or vulnerable. However, this image of a modern, civilised and gender-equal husband can sometimes easily become fractured. As Carey said earlier in the interview:

Well, my wife contributes more to the family than me. I mean...like childcare and housework, she does most of that stuff. It's not the case that I can't do it. It's simply...well, you know, men are sometimes lazy, yeah, lazy.

Thus, for Carey, the label of egalitarian husband is more of a helpful concept to defend his masculinity rather than leading to equal power relations in intimacy. This seemingly emancipating form of masculinity performed by Chinese men may perpetuate rather than challenge existing patriarchal gender norms. While Connell (2005b: 1802) notes that 'whether they [men] are willing to open the gates for major reforms is an important strategic question', we need to be cautious because the 'gates' may be opened in order to strengthen men's privileges, with limited potential for a re-organisation of gender relations in the intimate sphere.

Apart from developing a positive mentality and adjusting to egalitarian intimate relationships, some participants reinterpret men's obligation in practices of intimacy as 'doing a man's best'. The underlying fear of failing to be the household pillar in the future—both pragmatically and symbolically—has prompted some

men to recalibrate the meaning of *you dandang*. The rhetoric of 'doing a man's best' is used more broadly to cope with various tensions faced by the young men, which are not restricted to material burdens or the difficulty of being the breadwinner. It is evident that the standard of being a good male partner is gradually opening up to negotiation. For example, Frank (25) was cohabitating with his girlfriend at the time of the interview. He appeared open and flexible about being a good boyfriend:

I think...well, there's no specific standard, is there? But I think I'll try my best to do what I can, like making money for us, accompanying her, and helping her with housework. I won't say things like I'll hang out with friends and you, stay at home. I think this is not good. But it doesn't mean I become completely family-centred. Because as a man, after all, he has to manage his personal networks and career opportunities. But I think you need to create a balance.

Clearly, Frank interpreted *you dandang* as being about more than breadwinning. In fact, although he did not call himself an egalitarian man, his comments demonstrated some characteristics of power-sharing relationships. At the same time, the discourse of doing a man's best is used to justify his potential prioritisation of homosocial activities over practices of intimacy. While constructing quality time is raised as an important part of *you dandang*, it is understood as a sense of responsibility rather than an obligation. Therefore, 'try my best' demonstrates Frank's commitment and great effort in practices of intimacy. As can be observed, he aspired to comply with the patriarchal norm of male breadwinning and at the same time form an affectionate union with his girlfriend. If a positive mentality sounds like a reluctant compromise and an egalitarian relationship may be used as an excuse to shirk the breadwinning role, doing-a-man's-best signifies an active re-negotiation of men's intimate performance in Frank's case.

Frank's account evidences that *you dandang* encompasses more than breadwinning. Ideally, a man's embeddedness in a couple relationship means that he should be able to manage both the emotional and material aspects of everyday life. With dramatic transformations in Chinese family life, men are expected to undertake more tasks. Sean (31), who was in a stable relationship at the time of

the interview, was perplexed by managing the emotional aspects. He differentiated clearly between 'a good boyfriend' and 'a good husband':

In a relationship, you're just two individuals. But once you form a family, more people will be involved, like her parents, my parents, my friends, her friends, and then children. You have to take a good care of everyone. Also, in a relationship perhaps you worry less about life pressures. But when you two truly stay together...well, it's much more difficult to be a good husband (laugh).

Sean's concern about marriage was more in terms of managing the complicated intimate network brought by marriage. Although he also vaguely mentioned the potential monetary load by talking about 'life pressures', coping with the subsequent kinship relations as a family leader appeared to be his major concern. This multifaceted picture of marital life drawn by Sean is quite typical in contemporary China, where marriage still means 'the union of two families' (Xu & Xia, 2014: 40). Notably, familial masculinity is perceived as a relational configuration embedded within the whole kinship network, in which men (and also women) have to involuntarily take part sometimes. While portraying a culturally approved husband as a man who can handle the full range of marital issues, Sean was clear-headed about the various challenges he would face in real life. As he continued to comment on a man's role:

Well, I think a man needs to do his best. I don't believe men have to provide everything in the family, but at least you should complete those aspects that are within your ability. Because everyone's ability is different. As long as you have done your best, I think that's enough.

Hence, the cultural ideals of boyfriend and husband are subject to individual negotiation and everyday realities. While men themselves put intimate masculinity under constant scrutiny, they are also able to adjust and re-invent the ideal performance of *you dandang*. In this vein, 'doing a man's best' serves as another strategy to display *you dandang*—even where men cannot earn enough for the couple, at least they have made enormous efforts. In Graff's (1999: xi) exploration of love and marriage in the West, she metaphorically compares marriage to

Jerusalem, which is ‘an archaeological site on which the present is constantly building over the past’, yet ‘very little else in this city has remained the same’ under profound social and policy changes. In this sense, men who challenge the *you dandang* norm or resort to alternative practices are redefining their masculine role under the same name of ‘husband’. While the walls of Chinese marriage, such as Confucian values and structural constraints, remain solid, participants’ experiences demonstrate both continuities and transformation in the construction of intimate masculinity. These re-ordered meanings of *you dandang* are reflexive and relational, co-constructed with women and other family members. Essentially, becoming a good man in intimate relationships is closely linked with ideal femininity and men’s interpretations of women’s expectations.

Ideal Women and Men

Rocky (28) had just opened his own hair salon in Shanghai when I interviewed him. Roughly at the same time, he bought a new apartment and his wife was pregnant. When I posed the question about his expectations of his wife, Rocky said: ‘Nothing special. I just want her to do more housework and keep our home tidy.’

Sean (31) had been with his girlfriend around one year, and both of them were bank clerks in Shenyang. He imagined their life after marriage: ‘I’m quite traditional and...I don’t have many requirements. First we should respect each other. Also I hope she can look after my family. Well, I mean my parents, and so will I.’

JJ (29) was single at the time of our encounter. When I asked him how he understood men’s expectations of women in general, he replied: ‘Frankly speaking, most families hope, in a very traditional sense, hope the woman will bear children as their offspring.’

Danran (31) was the father of a one-year-old daughter and appeared rather critical of his wife’s mothering practices. He said: ‘I’m not expecting anything special from my wife. I just want her to fulfil...a woman’s role (*benfen*)...She’s not an attentive mother. For example, she can’t comfort the kid when she cries at night.’

People’s social positioning in personal narratives, including how they position themselves and other characters, is a key point of entry to explore particular

patterns of storytelling (Riessman, 2003). In the narratives above, the men hinted at their privileges in intimate relations in contrast to their depictions of women's role, mostly as caregivers. By voluntarily adhering to traditional Chinese values, these participants manipulated such a label to cope with new situations (cf. Harre & van Langenhove 1999); that is, in the wider Chinese society where local traditions compete fiercely with new cultural values associated with economic restructuring and global trends. Nonetheless, the men's positioning of themselves and their partners reinscribes the common patriarchal definitions of both masculinity and femininity with limited changes. Such a narrative approach provides a crucial source of continuing male identities against marked changes in numerous aspects of today's Chinese society. Furthermore, there are certain performative elements in participants' narratives through which they present preferred masculinities (cf. Langellier, 2001). In light of Goffman's (1959, 1981) suggestion that social actors tend to perform ideal selves on the stage of everyday interactions, talking about ideal women in interviews was a meaningful gendered practice whereby these Chinese men could articulate their powerful and dominant masculine selves. After all, not everyone can become the desirable male breadwinner in reality.

Meanwhile, the content of these narratives reflects the enduring impact of Confucian family ethics, characterised by complementary gender roles. Indeed, many participants tend to be surprisingly 'traditional' regardless of their marital status, in the sense that their portraits of an ideal spouse almost replicate the classical image of an obedient, kind, and self-sacrificing woman in Chinese marriages. Her femininity is fundamentally defined by the ability to bear children, look after the elders and undertake a larger share of housework. In short, women's caring ability and willingness to dedicate themselves to the family are major criteria when men contemplate a potential girlfriend or wife. The above narratives were in line with Jankowiak's (2002: 367) study of the public's experience of intimacy in northern China during the 1980s, in which ideal female partners are described as 'beautiful, soft, well-mannered, loyal, virtuous and skilled in domestic arts'. Aaron's (25) comments also powerfully supported this stance: 'I think a

woman...like the old saying goes, needs to support her husband and educate the child (*xiangfu jiaozhi*).’ For these participants, intimate practices afford an advantageous space where men reinstate heteronormative notions and claim their undoubted superiority and competence.

In addition, descriptions of an ideal woman are closely linked with the primary goal of maintaining a harmonious relationship or marriage. From the above extracts, it is evident that participants often shifted their answer to *family*, or *family practices*, although what I asked about was their female partners. Rocky wanted his wife to ‘keep our home tidy’, whilst Sean straightforwardly said ‘I hope she can look after my family’. The centrality of a harmonious and stable family in men’s construction of themselves as boyfriends or husbands is prevalent among participants. Overall, the men agreed that they should be the chief leader for intimate harmony, but ideally women should also make proactive contributions morally, emotionally and financially. For instance, Simon (27) said: ‘I want her to make me feel assured. I mean, in terms of our small family and my extended family, I hope she can take care of both and give me a sense of reassurance.’ While certain aspects of family function have faded under transforming social structures, the symbolic significance of family remains. Indeed, as Yang & He (2014) observes, there are far more continuities than radical transitions happening in Chinese families. As can be seen, Simon located both himself and his girlfriend—who was likely to become his wife—in a family context rather than a conjugal relationship. By doing this, Simon reaffirms the embeddedness of Chinese couple relations in a whole kinship network.

The vital importance of harmony was echoed by TMB (30): ‘Relationships need to be carefully managed. Both women and men should abandon some personal desires, like those that might be harmful to the family.’ Such a repression of individual desire for the sake of family wellbeing was almost universally endorsed among participants, with only a few exceptions. As Morgan (2011b: 3.3) notes, family practices are relational because they are always ‘oriented to another family member’ and, more importantly, ‘in enacting these practices, the other is defined

as a family member'. In this way, the mundane practices of couple intimacy remain remarkably enmeshed in practices of family, through which key Confucian ethics retain their cultural value and persist in shaping men's intimate relationships.

There is ample evidence to underscore the relational feature of ideal masculinity (and femininity) when participants described a desirable spouse. A close reading of the transcripts exposes the hidden notion that the men's declaration of themselves as the powerful figure in the household did not emerge in an entirely subjective channel, but was presumably co-produced with their female partners. In other words, gender beliefs are interactively negotiated between men and women, and also between individuals and the wider social backdrop (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). This is mirrored in the men's conjectures about women's needs in a relationship. For example:

Carey (26): From an ordinary woman's perspective, I think she wants a man to sustain the family and undertake all the material needs.

Jim (25): Basically I think women put a stable life first. That is, to feel reassured and to relieve their anxiety about life.

Albert (24): I think women want the feeling of safety [...] Maybe my perspective sounds patriarchal, but I think women want men to be the mainstay of the family.

Hence, it was clear that the young men not only regarded themselves as obligated to earn for the family, but believed that they should also stand out as a symbolically strong figure in the domestic sphere by creating a sense of stability and safety. Importantly, they believed that these roles were what women pursued in a relationship. The overlap between participants' self-identification and their assumptions about what women want make these men increasingly convinced that they ought to work hard for the family and, therefore, that they deserve male privileges in the relationship. Although this thesis focuses exclusively on the voices of Chinese men, a number of previous studies looking at women's experiences or the interactions between husband and wife have uncovered similar findings. For example, Zuo and Bian (2001, 2005) notice that Chinese husbands tend to be

supported by their wives to be less family-centred in order to fulfil the breadwinning role. By contrast, women who undertake most of the housework are viewed as positively contributing to relational harmony in the family. In her study of intimate relationships in Shanghai, Zarafonetis (2017) also notes that young women commonly list 'responsibility' as a crucial feature of the ideal boyfriend or husband, which typically includes decision-making and ensuring economic security for the family. As to my participants, their positioning of themselves as the chief provider stemmed from their intimate interactions and was encouraged by their female partners, at least *according to their interpretations*.

Another recurrent theme in the men's depictions of the ideal women is understanding and support. For example, FN (22) said: 'The first and foremost thing is to understand me and tolerate my failings', Neyo (29): 'I hope she can give me a hand when I have troubles [...] Especially when I don't know where to go, I want her to encourage me and support me', and Jack (29): 'I probably don't need you to do anything practically. It's just when I feel empty and lonely you can show up at the right time.' Overall, these men articulated a long-lasting theme of women's emotional work in practices of intimacy that involves 'offering encouragement, showing your appreciation, listening closely to what someone has to say, and expressing empathy with another person's feelings' (Erickson, 2005: 339). At the same time, such a perspective is also deeply rooted in Chinese marital ethics and conjugal relations—what appear to be frequently highlighted in relationships are 'respect', 'mutual understanding', and 'support' (Pimentel, 2000: 45). Alternatively, Chen and Li (2007: 394) use *enqing*—'the expression of feelings of gratitude and admiration'—to explain the unique form of marital affection in the Chinese situation. In this regard, Chinese men's expectations of women's affective contribution is dynamically produced through a conversation between indigenous cultural traditions and imported Western values. Especially when the two lines of discourse overlap, gender values like women's emotional and caring 'nature' are likely to be further strengthened.

While men's expectations of women's emotional work represent heteronormative

femininity as considerate, caring and sensitive, actual intimate practices contain more nuanced meanings. Noticeably, many participants considered it of equal importance for men to demonstrate sensitivity as a response to women's spousal expectations. A number of the men described the ideal male spouse as understanding and emotionally expressive in their intimate relationship. FN (22) remarked: 'You need to fulfil women's emotional needs along with supporting her in everyday life.' This was echoed by XiXi (30): 'I think...my wife wants me to care more about her. I mean, before she says anything I've already done it for her.' This 'emotional reflexivity' has attracted increasing interest from researchers in contemporary Western cultures recently (Holmes, 2010; Burkitt, 2012). Potentially, men's recognition of offering affective support to their spouses poses a challenge to the essentialist demarcation of men's and women's roles in a relationship. In her research with British men, Holmes (2015) emphasises the importance of paying attention to men's ability to reflect on and learn to provide emotional support for their heterosexual partners. L. Allen (2007) also argues that young men's interest in constructing romantic masculinity in New Zealand is tightly bound up with women's imagination of romance. In all likelihood, my participants' perspectives deliver the message that they are trying, or at least they see it as necessary for them, to conduct more emotional work in intimate practices.

Emotion, translated as *ganqing* in Chinese, is seen as having an inherently relational existence mostly through social interaction. *Ganqing* is not something simply 'to have', but is formed through the process of 'doing' a relationship in concrete social situations (Zhang, Y. H., 2007: 60; see also Kleinman & Kleinman, 1991). At the same time, participants' recognition of displaying consideration and understanding was reminiscent of Confucius' advice on caring for others: 'You yourself desire rank and standing; then help others to get rank and standing. You want to turn your own merits to account; then help others to turn theirs to account' (*Analects*, 6.28). Accordingly, the Chinese young men's awareness of doing emotion work to achieve ideal masculinity is partly a recurrence of cultural definitions of *ganqing*, rather than a purely new response to changing social glorifications of intimate masculinity. Nonetheless, given that men's ability to 'do

emotion' has gained growing importance in the contemporary world, it is also likely that interviewees consciously resort to a more open exposure of *ganqing* in order to recreate themselves as modern Chinese men. But, to a great extent, performing emotional work is distinguished between men and women. Whilst for women, embodying considerate and caring femininity is vital, it is more of an additional trait for an ideal male spouse.

Furthermore, several participants envisaged an aspirational female partner who was capable of self-motivation and self-governance. More often than not, these men positioned themselves as such a person and hoped their girlfriends or wives would make similar efforts to improve. Alex (32) and his wife both worked in hospitals, and he said: 'My wife needs to study more [...] Now she only reads before exams. Unlike me, I'm usually reading during lunch break.' While Alex's attitude is coterminous with the global discourse of aspiration and the enterprising spirit, it also stems from Confucian traditions that address self-realisation to the greatest extent possible and *wen* masculinity. From a slightly different perspective, S (31) commented: 'My wife is a hothead. There are many occasions when she just makes rash judgements [...] I hope she can try to be more *zhonghe* (moderate and harmonious).' Before this, S actually described himself as a 'slowcoach', indicating that he and his wife both needed to seek *zhonghe* in their personality. *Zhonghe* originates from Chinese philosophy and medical thought, which encompasses both appropriate *du* and *he* (see Chapter 4). Y. Li (1995) argues that establishing moderation and harmony has been an enduring sensibility that guides the lives of Chinese people, ranging from cultivated elites to less-educated peasants. Although S did not show an explicit commitment to Confucianism, throughout our interview he referred to classic Confucian vocabularies a number of times. Here, his expectations of both himself and his wife directly evoked Confucian values as taken-for-granted knowledge that still prevails in many aspects of contemporary Chinese life.

Elsewhere, an aspirational spouse is described as one who can make a pragmatic contribution to the relationship. Compared with Alex and S, who enjoyed a

financially comfortable life, the lower-class men expected realistic forms of improvement from their partners. For example, migrant worker Zhi (27) replied: 'My wife doesn't want me to be too busy at work, but I actually want her to become more motivated in work.' Expecting the birth of their first child whilst looking after his mother, who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness, Zhi was apparently facing intense monetary pressures. Although he also agreed that men should be the major provider, the actuality of their family life made it clear that he needed a wife with higher earning ability. Similarly, final-year student Jiang feng (23) said in a joking tone that 'I just want my girlfriend to find a job like me. She's too lazy.' Being a non-local in Shanghai with limited support from his parents, it is not difficult to understand the anticipated stress in terms of entering the labour market and forming a family that confronted Jiang feng. Hence, what worried Zhi and Jiang feng were realistic concerns about meeting the material demands emerging from their intimate relationships. By attaching professional competence to ideal women, these men implied a sense of financial vulnerability without decreasing their legitimate masculinity. Rather than shirking their gendered responsibilities, their vision of an ideal spouse is a woman who can fight for a better life together with them. Therefore, less privileged young men's desire for ambitious women mirrors the latent instability of the Confucian and essentialist rhetoric of gender roles when faced with the economic reformations in contemporary China.

Conclusion

My participants' accounts reveal that everyday practices of intimacy are meaningful yet diversified experiences, during which Chinese young men construct masculinities and make sense of themselves as boyfriends and husbands. Since all the men I encountered expected to be, or had already become, conventionally partnered, their present or future female spouses are the undeniable leading actress among all their intimates. Therefore, practices of intimacy and practices of family are usually intertwined, and sometimes even seen as the same thing among Chinese young men. Importantly, if intimacy is defined as 'any form of *close association* in which people acquire familiarity' (Jamieson, 1998: 8), Chinese men

achieve this feeling of closeness largely through sharing responsibilities and providing mutual care rather than self-disclosure (cf. Gabb, 2008; Jamieson, 1999, 2011). But it is evident that harmonious couple relationships generate a sense of connection with a special quality for Chinese young men; many participants indicated a subjective sense of intimacy when talking about their girlfriends or wives. Moreover, the process of doing couple relationships contributes significantly to producing the relational and reflexive masculine self.

Informed by Confucian values that highlight role fulfilment and familial harmony, the Chinese young men widely emphasise that *you dandang* is a benchmark to evaluate men's practices of intimacy. This sentiment captures the complexity and nuances of intimate relationships in the Chinese context, which may be bound by both intimate ties and obligations (cf. Liu, J., 2017). In general, *you dandang* denotes a man who is able to sustain his intimate relationship through material and emotional contributions, who appears assertive, intelligent and psychologically (but not necessarily physically) strong, and makes compromises or subdues his personal desires when necessary. But narratives of men's sexual desire or displays of passionate love were generally absent.²⁰ Ultimately, lifelong harmonious marriage is the supreme goal in the men's practices of *you dandang*. Given that *you dandang* represents a normative expectation of masculinity in the intimate sphere, those who cannot adhere to this masculine ideal need to justify their 'differences'. Thus, some participants choose to develop a positive mentality or highlight the egalitarian features of their intimate relationships, while others articulate or indicate that they would 'do a man's best' in order to be seen as *you dandang*. In this sense, the reinterpretation of *you dandang* or men's strategic changes are part of men's practices to establish elastic masculinity.

While contemporary Western societies are argued to be witnessing expanding and diverse intimate configurations (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004), these transformations have happened to a very limited degree in China. In general, friendship is usually

²⁰ Potentially, this is also because I did not ask participants to talk about 'love' but rather about their female partners and intimate relationships.

downplayed by the Chinese young men, and the boundary between friends and family remains intact. However, the value of friends may take on exceptional intensity at particular moments, especially when men need an alternative stage to present and construct their masculinity. This could be the mundane scene when a man quarrels with his girlfriend or wife, or the unique comfort and support offered by male homosocial ties. But these types of narrative are very rare in my interview data, which I suggest is closely linked to the social status and present life phase of my participants. Ordinary Chinese young men regard it as either unnecessary or unaffordable to frequently socialise with friends, or feel inclined to prioritise career and family over friendships.

Chinese young men's intimate experiences often reinstate traditional gender scripts and reproduce male authority, but there are also moments when patriarchal masculinity is questioned and challenged. Under competing or even contradictory sets of gender values, Chinese men are required to become more reflexive and flexible. Those who can reconcile and negotiate the traditional masculine role of *you dandang* alongside emerging non-patriarchal masculine traits, such as emotional expressiveness, sharing housework, and being sensitive and caring, represent the contemporary male model in practices of intimacy. In addition, although the intimate web centres on the couple, it is rarely only about them. Masculinity constructed through couple relations is characterised by its embeddedness in a whole set of family relationships. As a result, a man needs to carefully forge a networked self across different intimate relationships, which is usually not easy to navigate. Being a coupled young man in urban China continues to mean that he is not only the mainstay of his own family, but also ideally capable of taking good care of his parents and parents-in-law, and even of wider kin. Kinship ties are intertwined with young men's couple relations, and constitute another indispensable site for constructing masculinity.

Chapter 6

Handing Down: Making and Narrating Masculinity through Kinship Ties

Introduction

I have always been closer to my maternal relatives than the paternal side of my family. I believe it all started in my childhood, during which I spent most of my time with my maternal grandparents while my mother was busy with work. From day to day, my grandfather accompanied me to play all different kinds of games; my older cousin and two aunts also visited frequently. Such experiences made me emotionally attached to them from when I was little, and I still am now. For me, kin closeness is animated through sufficient quality time together and affective communication. As a result, I feel it is simply 'natural' that I do not have equally intimate feelings for my paternal relatives and that there is no need to make any effort to change this. These personal and family memories, I believe, have played an indispensable role in my processes of growth and self-identification.

My mother, however, always disagreed with me on this point, although she herself has long been distant from her mother-in-law as well as my father's brother and sister. This was certainly related to my mother's own personality, as she admitted, but she also told me stories of how my paternal grandmother was a dominant and self-centred woman, refusing to support us on various issues. Probably it was due to this enduring 'disharmony' in my family that my mother hoped I could play my part to improve the quality of the kinship bond. For example, she constantly told me I *should have* felt close to my paternal relatives because of the patrilineal blood tie, or the indisputable importance of relatives and kin relationships to everyone. After I left Shenyang for university, every time I went back home, my mother reminded me before any paternal family gathering to 'perform intimately to them'. But I have long been resistant to such performances of intimacy, or as Finch (2007: 73) terms it, 'family display'—an intention to prove that 'these are my family relationships, and they work'. Fortunately, my father has little to say on this slightly awkward issue, which gives me a sense of relief.

In writing my own stories, it has become clear to me how I remake my perceptions of kinship and family in complex ways, based on memories from my present point of view. As Jackson (1998: 54) puts it, memories are not already there in story form, rather it is in story form that we construct and reconstruct our memories—and these stories are historically located and mediated. Thus, I am reinterpreting my mother's narratives about her delicate relationship with my paternal relatives, and am simultaneously caught by my own happy memories of time spent with my maternal grandparents, cousins and aunts. I also use these reconstructed memories as an interpretative tool to verify my understandings of myself and family in the past and in the present. It occurs to me that all of these memories—the ones created and recreated by myself as well as those 'implanted' by my mother—are part of my sense of self (cf. Smart, 2007). In all likelihood, I will continue to use these 'tailored' experiences to reassure myself in the future that I am entitled to feel emotionally distant from my paternal relatives.

These autobiographical accounts exemplify the multi-layered and temporal features of personal identity and, more broadly, the gradual changes in family and kinship cultures in contemporary China. They also elucidate how handed-down personal memories and cultural traditions are imperative for an individual's identity formation. During my fieldwork, my participants also told a range of similar stories. Subsequently, careful reading and examination of the transcripts revealed that the young men's kinship experiences often entail a process of reinterpretation and reconstruction of their pasts. Therefore, in this chapter, I attempt to explore how Chinese young men configure masculinities in the context of kin, and the ways in which they narrated masculinities within such a framework during our interviews. What particularly interests me is the role of family memory and the transmission of familial identities in men's perceptions of their identities as sons, grandsons, nephews, cousins, fathers, etc. A close examination of masculinity as a temporal construct will also shed light on men's process of forming plural gendered identities, which is flexible and open-ended but also contains elements that are not easily altered or reworked. I will consider how participants intentionally or unconsciously carry forward historical cultural values and generational gender

resources while engaging with kin practices as Chinese men. My major focus will be on cultural and symbolic properties rather than material ones. Compared with romantic relationships, some participants seemed to have more to tell about blood ties, as these included people who had accompanied them from their very earliest memories and, for the most part, would continue to participate in their future lives. In this sense, kinship does not merely connect different members of the family, but also brings together men's memories of the past, life in the present, and imagination of the future.

Learning to be a Man through Kinship Memories

As Halbwachs (1992: 61) incisively points out, our kin communicate to us our first notions about people and things. Accordingly, family life is argued to be the most meaningful and substantial resource through which individuals construct identities (Erll, 2011). Many of the Chinese men I interviewed recounted vivid memory fragments of being surrounded by parents and close relatives to illustrate how they came to be the men they were now. It is widely agreed that the family past weighs heavily on the present self (cf. Khun, 2002). For example, Jack (29), who grew up in a small city near Shenyang, talked about his childhood days when we discussed friendship:

I think...maybe, from my own perspective, I prefer being alone [...] I'm used to staying in my own world, and this is related to my childhood experience. My grandma had quite serious heart disease and she couldn't live in the city. That's too noisy for her. So she lived in the suburbs. When I was in primary school, I was brought up by my grandma. I stayed at her home every summer vacation. Only those two old people, surrounded by a number of houses, and there was a small lake. You know what was my favourite thing at that time? In summer, when it was not too hot, I liked to sit by the lake and read books. I could do that for a whole morning [...] This kind of life lasted at least six years, at least six, when I was very little. So it sort of became inertia. Most of the time I actually don't want to hang out with crowds of people, loud, noisy, exciting. Sometimes I eat out with friends and after dinner when everybody discusses going home, they may realize that, hey Jack, you're here as well! Well, this happens. Sometimes it's easy to ignore my presence.

By outlining his childhood years with his grandparents, Jack explicitly pointed out

how past experience had forged the man he was now. In this episode, identity-forming resources were handed down from the past self to the present self. Meanwhile, it was also about reconstructing the past to make sense of the present, since memories are, to some extent, an 'imagined past' that serves the present and future (Lenz, 2011). In particular, stories of learning to be a man were narrated in relation to other people and within the family history. While the suburban house, the small lake and the books read in the morning might usually be something laid down in the memory, they all became vivid and meaningful when Jack reflected on the trajectory of his identity development. These nostalgic accounts were infused with emotion, which motivated Jack to cling closely to his grandma's home as a symbol of the memorised self. As D. Miller (2000) notes, the successive homes in which people have lived constitute crucial social relations to them, from which identity emerges and evolves. Hence, Jack's lived memories of physical households created a sense of connectedness and belonging to the past, and to the elder generation in the family. Moreover, it offered Jack his 'roots'—a sense of safety and protection that proved he was not 'disconnected from people and places, both past and present' (Edwards, 2000: 229). Far from inventing a 'do-it-yourself biography' as the individualisation thesis advocates, Jack's story reveals that masculinity-making is a temporal process involving interactions with significant family members and also the past self.

Jack was certainly not the only man who described such a picture of childhood. Having spent much time with his grandparents in a rural area as a little boy, Sean (31) also recalled:

I had few friends, very few. Because I went to school in the city, and in the village, those kids...well, and also my grandma sort of...protected me. She didn't want me to hang around with those rural kids (laugh). So I was quite lonely, which made me interested in daydreaming. I mean, cos you had nothing else to do and no one to play with, you preferred to think and imagine things by yourself. Now I think perhaps these all made me good at writing stories. They were useful. That's why I started to write drama scripts.

Being separated from the 'rural kids', who represented children of low *suzhi*

(quality), Sean was directed to pursue more appropriate forms of cultural capital by his grandmother (cf. Kong, P., 2016). Although he considered these to be a lonely experience, references to the past contributed to a positive identification with his present-time identity. Through narrating the masculine self that was situated in the personal past, Sean selected preferred episodes from his memories and assembled meanings to explain his current stance in a bricolage manner (cf. Leyshon & Bull, 2011). According to Sean, the fact that he could enjoy script-writing separately from what he called his 'boring and unsuitable' social identity as a bank clerk brought him enormous delight and confidence. It is therefore a narrative process of self-invention, during which men are able to develop deeper understandings of themselves whilst presenting rewarding aspects of masculinities. Seen as a form of collective accounts, Jack and Sean both articulate the profound impact of the one-child policy on their lonely childhood experiences (Sabet, 2011). Private memories are thus located in broad historical contexts and shaped by institutional forces. Moreover, personal stories located in kinship relations are not always pleasant and enjoyable. Later in the interview, Sean reflected:

My parents are both teachers but don't really teach. My father is...sort of a headmaster, and my mother works in the education commission, a public institution. Because she didn't actually teach students, my mother shifted her educational focus to me (laugh). You know, I grew up at my grandma's place. [...] My parents felt I was spoiled when I went back to their side. And also, because of their teachers' nature, they started to discipline me very strictly. This made me...unwilling to communicate with them. Well, it gets better, as time goes on. But too much discipline repressed me a lot.

Compared to the previous story, Sean talked about his past interactions with his parents with tangled feelings. These accounts tended to be expressions of events that he believed had exerted a negative impact on the ongoing process of self-construction. Meanwhile, linking masculinity-defining to the previous generation also gave rise to a sense of continuity that could easily be adopted to elucidate the present self. Remembering is therefore not only a recounting of the past, but also a reinterpretation (Widerberg, 2011: 330). I would further suggest that re-telling one's memories produces the key mechanism to fix important relationships in the

past based on reworked emotions at the present moment. In Sean's case, difficult kinship relations were under reflexive negotiation in the narrative process, and ultimately phrased as 'it gets better' from the present point of view. Ideally, kinship relations in Chinese family ethics should be harmonious and intimate, in that family members are conceptualised as one integrated body in the Confucian Rites (Huang, J., 2006). Given the pivotal importance to a Chinese man of performing filial piety, such strategies to modify the past are inherently practices of masculinity. After all, telling a 'good story' of one's family past weighs heavily on displaying familial loyalty and creating one's own identity (Welzer, 2010).

For some men I interviewed, being aware of old stories about the family, even if they were not part of them, could be equally meaningful and necessary when they unfolded these memories. Hence, personal memories are usually configured as situated within family memories, which encompass other family members and their collective past. At the same time, in the process of narrating family pasts, men gained 'historical depth' as an individual (Carsten, 2000). Time, self and sociality thus interconnect: 'the self is a social phenomenon and also a temporal one, reflecting back on itself, in time, and forward from the present in anticipating others' responses and orienting future action in the world' (Jackson, 2010: 125). In this sense, recreating self-identity along the trajectory of memories and relationships provided an uninterrupted history for Chinese young men. These meaningful pasts constitute the site in which the current version of the self is located and from which the future self can be envisioned. Furthermore, it is through representing family history that the men manage to identify their family membership and claim the starting point where they learnt to be a man. For example, when asked if there was anyone he could think of as a 'real man', Leslie (31) answered:

Leslie: Like my uncle, that's my mother's elder brother. When...when (both of them were) little [...] it was right during the three years of natural disasters. That's um, that's in the 1960s, around 1961 and 1962. At that time, it was called...it was the commune system. Every family had to send a person to work, and then the whole family could go to the collective canteen...

Interviewer: The big pot (*da guo fan*).

Leslie: Yeah, eating from the big pot. At that time, my uncle worked in the canteen, so he had a little power. [...] From a very early age my mom started to work for the family, and it was very hard. Since my uncle knew her situation, every time my mother went to the canteen to eat, he would try to help. Well, he also helped in many other respects. He gave my mother food and other stuff. It's that kind of...the feeling that an elder brother is taking care of his little sister. But actually he himself was young at the time, just a teenage boy.

Leslie's story mirrors the collective memories of ordinary Chinese during the three years of natural disasters, when numerous people starved to death due to adverse natural conditions and the mismanagement of economic production. In this situation of struggle, blood ties carried greater practical importance through reciprocal help between family members. Leslie's admiration for his uncle is also a manifestation of how crucial historical events from one's parents' generation may imprint on the personal identities of the current generation. As can be seen, Leslie described his uncle as the idealised Chinese man who could shoulder family responsibilities and selflessly sacrifice for his kin and clan. This is clearly in line with Confucian traditions that place paramount emphasis on individuals' obligation to the whole kinship group. Although Leslie himself was not part of this episode of family history, he portrayed his uncle as a masculine role model. Such an identification of a 'model', according to Kellerhals et al. (2002), is one form of normative reference through which the mechanism of familial identity transmission can be realised. Presumably, Leslie heard this experience from his mother, uncle or other relatives. By telling and retelling these stories, family heritage is able to increase its symbolic intensity and turn into emotionally inflected resources of identity creation for the younger generation. As Smart (2007: 87) notes, the past lives of parents and other kin (linked lives) become sedimented into family stories and traditions and even ways of knowing and seeing. In this sense, learning to be a man is profoundly informed by the generational handing down of identity (Brannen et al., 2011).

Even more than reconfiguring the past, telling family stories also shapes men's imagination of their future selves. Later in our conversation, Leslie said: 'I believe

real manliness is about the understanding that you must be responsible for your family and for your kids.’ Although Leslie did not explicitly identify himself with his uncle, the coherent meanings in his narratives weave the past, present and future together. San pangzi (32), who was one of very few participants stating that he remained very close to relatives, also expressed a similar perspective:

Sometimes I notice that some relatives could be my role models. For example, one of my maternal brothers-in-law works from 8 to 5 like me. But...he has always spent all his spare time with his kid. My father often tells me, learn from your brother-in-law! [...] so I think, the most important task for a mature man is to take good care of his family. And the measure of a man’s maturity is whether he puts his family first.

While Leslie aspired to be a real man like his uncle, San pangzi declared that male maturity is essentially about ‘putting his family first’, with his brother-in-law being the role model. On this point, it is not possible to discern whether the present has reinterpreted the past, or whether a masculine ideal serves to justify the rewritten memories. In Mead’s (1964: 353) insightful words, the past ‘serves us until the rising novelty of tomorrow necessitates a new history which interprets the new future’. Antze and Lambek (1996: xxi) also suggest that who people are is closely linked to what they think about memory, what they remember and what they can claim to remember. Drawing on Leslie and San pangzi’s accounts, this could be pushed even further: the construction of self-identity can be energised by sharing memories and experiences with close family members. While the process of identification is relational and interactive, it is also a networked practice that breaks temporal boundaries. Furthermore, the past we remember carries emotional meanings (Misztal, 2003). The happiest and saddest moments are the most difficult to forget, as every person, place and object associated with them became saturated with our feelings at the time. We cannot easily forget the occasions when emotional stickiness has been handed down from close relationships. In Leslie’s case, this was received from his mother and uncle. And for San pangzi, respect and aspiration triggered by the familial role model turned into a compelling force in his calibration of masculinity.

A Fluctuating Memory Journey

Overall, the storied self embedded in kinship relations validates the great extent to which masculinity is a temporal and contingent construct. Some participants struggled to disclose their uneasy feelings about personal and family pasts, whilst others recalled their younger selves with contentment and pride. In any case, the self is always in the process of becoming (Ames, 1993b; Mead, 1932, 1934; Tu, 1985), and this may be facilitated or impeded by the practices of remembering and story-telling. At the same time, the young men's accounts uphold a life-course perspective as an imperative dimension of identity formation (Hockey et al., 2014). As Holstein and Gubrium (2000: 182) explain, the life-course needs to be understood as 'a process whereby social selves construct the meaning of their lives over time'. Participants indicated how their impression of their parents had changed over different life phases. Hence, the memory journey is neither a self-contained nor a smooth route. To some extent, the interview arrangements generated a distinct environment for the men to monitor and remodel kinship ties in the past. These narrative activities also allowed them to forge deeper self-understandings given the pivotal significance of kinship to them. In this sense, narrating one's kinship ties is not only personal and familial, but also a social and historical practice.

The underlying notion that kin relations can be recreated and sometimes repaired through narratives was demonstrated in a number of the men's accounts. CC (25) and Xiaozhu (31) both struggled with portraying their parents, especially their fathers:

CC: My father is, well, he's a very communicative person. But he doesn't talk much to us younger generation. But it's not a big issue. He has his own difficulties. To us younger generation, he's sometimes too strict. He's too strict to the level that...we're afraid of talking to him, me and my sister [...] I'm afraid of him, I think. I've rarely talked to him. But I think it's not a big issue. After all, how to put it, they are my own parents, right?

Xiaozhu: My...my father is an electrician [...] He's very strict. When I was little, if I did badly in my studies he would beat me, very strict. Well, I'm afraid of him. I like my mother more (laugh). I hated my father when I was little. But as I grew

up I started to understand him. Especially after I had my own kid, I started to understand why he did those things before.

Both men's accounts portray the typical father image in traditional Chinese culture—authoritative, stern and taciturn (Li & Lamb, 2013). However, by repeatedly stating 'but it's not a big issue', CC was eager to present himself as a moral son who respects and understands his parents. It is also likely that this way of story-telling served to convince himself that he has sustained a harmonious father-son relationship. Similarly, Xiaozhu emphasised that he was able to feel sympathetic towards his father after he himself became a parent, albeit using rather strong expressions to criticise his father *in the past*. Xiaozhu's narrative, in particular, is a manifestation of how self-identity and perceptions of others are informed by one's life history. Therefore, making masculinity through kinship ties needs to be conceived as processual and dynamic, which may be subject to negotiation at critical life stages.

People's reluctance to criticise close kin has been sufficiently recorded by researchers looking at families and kinship in Western societies (e.g. Finch & Mason, 1993; Smart et al., 2001). It is not hard to understand why interviewees feel cautious or unwilling to tell an outsider about their unhappiness in the family. From a Chinese cultural perspective, this also reveals the enduring regulation of morality and behaviour in the domestic context, namely the 'naturally' established respect and appreciation among people with blood connections. The widely taught Confucian textbook for Chinese children, *The standard of being a good student*, states:

When your parents are loving and kind, of course it is not difficult to be filial. But if you are still filial to parents when they are hateful and cruel, only then will you meet the standard set by the Sage. If you recognise fault in your parents, exhort them to change for the better. Speak to them kindly and gently,

with a pleasant smile on your face (Li, Y. n.d.)²¹.

According to these guidelines for being filial at home, reverence for parents is unconditional; a person should remain the same in spite of parents' bad attitudes. Furthermore, the Confucian ontology that regards children as a physical continuation of their parents engenders a pervasive sense of indebtedness to parents in individuals (Kim & Park, 2006). Venturing to make negative comments about parents is largely regarded as immoral and unfilial. In this sense, the extent to which Chinese masculinity can be narratively expressed is restrained by cultural frameworks. To varying degrees, the participants whom I discussed earlier, Sean, CC and Xiaozhu, all demonstrate this unwillingness to blame their parents. They either carefully crafted their words when voicing dislike of their family members, or immediately found a way to gloss over negative comments. These men's narrative approach evidences the deeply ingrained sense of filial piety and the temporal features of masculinity in the paradigm of kinship. Even when past relationships are filled with fluctuating feelings, filial sons ought to hide their discontent. There appeared to be an internalised acknowledgement that, as a good son, a man should always be grateful for his parents' kindness and care.

In Mead's theorisation of the temporality of self, 'the past must be found in the present world' (1934: 116). That is, when narratives of self involve reflections on the past, they are constructed 'from particular temporal locations and are shaped by the situated occasion of their telling' (Jackson, 2010: 125). A recurrent theme that underpins the reshaping power of the present is the young men's suggestion that modern lifestyles have unavoidably permeated into their own masculinity-defining process, as well as causing re-evaluations of kinship. Irrespective of their depictions of parents, many participants drew upon contemporary values to assess their parents' identities and influences. For instance, 28-year-old Rocky said:

²¹ *The standard of being a good student* (弟子规) is usually acknowledged written by Li Yuxiu in the Qing Dynasty during the reign of Kangxi (roughly 1661-1722). But no specific date of publication is available. This quote is translated by me based on the original Chinese book since no published English translation can be found. The original Chinese texts read as: 亲爱我，孝何难，亲憎我，孝方贤。亲有过，谏使更，怡吾色，柔吾声。

Honestly speaking, I think my parents...they're great. I admire them. Because they...well, my mom could barely read, neither could my father. I think they're very traditional, simple and kind farmers. They only did hard physical work, but when I was little they could make very little money. I remember very clearly when we were in the village. We were very, very...like when we ate fish, they only bought tiny little fishes and put far more pickles together to eat [...] I think the most positive thing my parents gave me was frugality. But now it's sort of...gradually, I feel like they're not totally right. Like, my mother now always says that I'm too wasteful. It's just...after all, we are two generations [...] Um, now I want to give myself a happy life, and I want them to be happy, even if this requires money. You know, money is just something I can earn more of.

While frugality used to be a core element of Chinese moral principles, it no longer remains as an overarching lifestyle in contemporary society. The spirit of consumerism and abundant forms of leisure practices are instead widely embraced among the younger generation. For example, young adults from the post-1990s generation in Yu's (2014) study made numerous references to fulfilling personal desires and choosing a lifestyle of indulgence through all forms of consumption. As Rocky implied, even though he admired and respected his parents' life ethics, he refused to adhere to that ascetic life in his current circumstances. Seen in this light, the consistency of family identity is not frayed, but nonetheless appears fragile once exposed to transforming lifestyle aesthetics. Rocky depicted a vivid picture of the arduous life when he was little and how his parents strived to bring up four children. However, he treated this mostly as past events and a temporal border that he desired to transgress. Thus, modern social values are patch-worked into traditional ones, and together they act as a pool of masculinity resources from which men can select.

Fluctuating feelings towards parents were also revealed by Jim (25):

The positive influences my parents give me is that they are truly kind. I could say that they are the kindest people [...] My father is smart, but he's that kind of person who is just willing to be an idiot. I mean, he doesn't fight or scramble for anything. Sometimes, for example, he knew someone had played tricks on him, but he would just avoid any contention or disputation [...] My parents are both truly *shizai*.

In this extract, Jim complimented his parents as *shizai*. *Shizai* refers to someone

who is unsophisticated, unassuming and simple, implying that the person is trustworthy and reliable. The term can be used neutrally, positively or negatively depending on the situation. Here it was used in a positive tone, although Jim himself intended not to be as *shizai* as his parents. Being a project chief manager, Jim admits the significance of *shizai* as it was taught and influenced by his parents. Yet, in the competitive and risky contemporary society, he is also aware of the need to equip himself with additional personal attributes beyond always being humble or sacrificing his own interests. When we discussed his career plans, Jim expressed his ambition: 'Well, I'm quite happy with my current position, but not this company. I've decided to quit, sooner or later. It's okay, but I can see its limitation in the future. So it's not enough for me.' Here, his past self under the shadow of his *shizai* parents is somewhat at stake, leading to reflexive modifications in order to fit into the contemporary world.

Jim's ambivalent attitude towards his *shizai* parents is also indicative of the collision between classical and contemporary values in today's Chinese society. In Chinese culture, both interpersonal harmony and honesty are highly valued, particularly with regard to the Confucian ethics of self-cultivation. These are key moral codes designed to maintain an individual's self-interest as well as social status: respecting those for whom respect is required by the relationship is called righteousness (*yi*); and acting according to previously established rites or social norms is called propriety (*li*) (Hwang, 1999: 166). However, according to Barbalet (2013), the Confucian system nonetheless prioritises the interests of the past while repressing those of present and future selves. That is to say, cultivating oneself according to Confucius' teaching is predominantly about preserving one's reputation and respectability as achieved in the past. By contrast, modern values informed by the booming market economy in China safeguard the interests of the future self. This is because economic ambition and striving for commercial or occupational success are necessarily future orientated (Barbalet, 2013: 658). In light of Barbalet's arguments, both Jim and Rocky seem to prioritise the interests of their future selves. Although parents are still able to hand masculine traits down to their sons, young men do not uncritically embrace all the historical and

generational transmissions.

Nevertheless, parents who have actively practised modern values also face challenges, represented by frequent sociality as a core element of privileged entrepreneurial masculinity. After-work socials and routine banquets used to be common among businessmen, for whom family life is much more likely to take second place (Osburg, 2013; Uretsky, 2016; Zhang, E., 2001). But 2881 (28) intentionally hoped to deviate from this image:

My mother is completely family-centred, very, very traditional Chinese woman. Cleaning, cooking, a typical housewife. My father never...almost never asked about families. But now he has a grandson and cares more about families. Before this, he basically just drank and hung out with his bros [...] I don't want my marriage to be like theirs.

Although both Jim and 2881 exhibited ambivalent attitudes towards their fathers, their personal narratives of masculinity did not generate a neat coherence. In contrast to Jim, 2881 made rather negative remarks about his father, who had pursued career development with great ambition and became a long-term absent figure in the family. Having taken over the family business, however, 2881 claimed that he would not be the same type of businessman as his father. Labelling the identity of his father as undesirable significantly contributed to his own masculinity-making. This possibility of accepting, resisting, or reconfiguring varying sets of cultural values underpins men's broader project of cultivating elastic masculine selves. The temporal dimension of masculinity is thus highly reflexive, evolving along time and responding to the changing socioeconomic landscape. As Finn and Henwood (2009) contend, defensively countering the previous generation is animated by both personal biographies and cultural representations of appealing masculinity. In contrast to the media glorification of enterprising businessmen enjoying homosocial activities outside the home, many of the ordinary men I interviewed proudly declared that they were family-centred husbands and fathers.

At times, the young men also drew on generalising narratives to elucidate how

other people feel about and do kinship. Such a narrative technique was often employed to highlight one's own kinship relations as positive and beneficial, whereas those of others were located in opposition. For instance, FN (22) said: 'My parents have done so much for me. They care about me much more than other parents. Many parents don't pay enough attention to their children, but my parents are not like that.' Elsewhere, participants consciously articulated what they had gained from kinship relationships, rather than what they might have lost, to validate their present selfhood and strengthen their image as filial sons. Frank (25) provided a convincing example of this. Since he was little, Frank had moved all around the country and spent very limited time with his parents because of the family's business. Only after his parents realised that their youngest child might become the first top-university student in the whole clan, was Frank able to spend a year and a half with them. However, when I asked Frank if he had anything to say about the small amount of company from his parents, he replied:

But because they were like that, I learnt to do things by myself. [...] Everything has two sides, right? How my family is different from others is that there are three children. I'm the youngest, with an elder brother and sister. But many people are the only child in the family, and their parents actually...actually spoiled them a lot [...] Like, one of my university mates, she went to the USA to study last year. She cried a lot and said she wanted to quit and come back after only half a year. Another male friend, he couldn't stand it either [...] But I think, if I went there...well, like I once went off alone to travel during university by bicycle. I didn't mind being alone, and I think it's just natural [...] So...I can't say that I feel something different only because of the disadvantage. What they brought me and what they didn't bring me, everybody knows about it. And there's...nothing to complain about.

Clearly, there were senses of both self-reliance and embeddedness within kin connections, along with complicated emotional responses in Frank's story. In particular, two types of generalised others were articulated to make his own point: the fact that his family is different from those with only one child, and the belief that he had made himself to be a much better man compared to his only-child peers. According to Holdsworth and Morgan (2007: 402), 'identifying the generalized other in the analysis of narrative transcripts, and being alert to the various ways that it is used' is particularly relevant to understanding the process of

identification. In other words, similarity to and difference from others are both salient to the formation of self-identity, which essentially involves 'our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us)' (Jenkins, R., 1996: 18). This conceptualisation of the self as emerging from social interactions and taking the attitudes of generalised others also runs parallel with the relational and situated self in Confucianism (Hall & Ames, 1987). Therefore, Frank manipulated other families and other young men as narrative benchmarks to highlight his positive identification with his own parents and also himself.

Beyond the personal level, Frank's depictions of his fragile friends are coterminous with contemporary discourses that view the only-child generation as 'less trusting, less trustworthy, more risk-averse, less competitive, more pessimistic, and less conscientious individuals' (Cameron et al., 2013: 953). These accounts offer a graphic sense of how overarching the influence of the only-child policy is, in that Frank deployed it as a counter-resource to create meanings for his own masculinity. Whereas past experiences in the family might have engendered anxieties and difficulties, reflecting upon these memories from his present standpoint allows Frank to develop a more approving portrait of his kinship connections. The narrative fluctuations, which moves between cautiously expressed disappointment and the sense of forgiveness and understanding, highlight how individual autonomy is intertwined with complicated family relations. If story-telling is a way to produce identities, in this scenario Frank foregrounds a self-reliant modern man with a positive mentality who actively repaired inharmonious parent-child relationships. In this sense, the past and the present become interdependent and mutually influential in the process of Chinese young men's self-identification.

Inventing the Present: The *Dao* of Filial Piety

Illustration 1 records a scene from an open lecture organised by the Jiading community school in Shanghai in 2016, in which experts on traditional culture were invited to deliver a public talk to local residents. The key point was to instruct

the audiences to comply with filial piety as a crucial bond for familial harmony. As can be seen, most of the attendees were middle-age or elderly. I found this phenomenon rather intriguing, in the sense that they were likely to be either parents themselves or bearing a double identity as both parents and adult children. In such a situation, what might be reaffirmed is not restricted to the obligatory contribution side of filial piety, but also the ‘benefiting’ side characterised by the elders requiring and receiving and requiring their children’s care. The PowerPoint slide in the photo shows the title of this talk: ‘Passing on cultures of kindness and filial piety: Constructing a harmonious community’. Notably, both kindness and filial piety are addressed in one of the Confucian classics—*Book of Rites*. These two attributes are located first among the ‘ten right things’:

Kindness on the part of the father, and filial duty on that of the son; gentleness on the part of the elder brother, and obedience on that of the younger; righteousness on the part of the husband, and submission on that of the wife; kindness on the part of elders, and deference on that of juniors; with benevolence on the part of the ruler, and loyalty on that of the minister—these ten are the things which men consider to be right. (*Book of Rites*, VII. 19)



Illustration 1 An open lecture about filial piety and harmony in a community college (Photo by author, 2016)

This is certainly not an isolated case of the institutional promotion of traditional culture, especially Confucian values. Since the end of 2014, a series of educational activities aimed at promoting traditional culture have been organised by Shanghai Service & Supervision for Learning Society Construction. As an official response to the 18th Congress and a series of Xi Jinping's significant speeches, various lessons and activities labelled as 'traditional culture'—for example, Chinese medicine, calligraphy, traditional handcrafts, and allegorical stories advocating Confucian values—were offered to local communities. Additionally, the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission launched a series of activities to educate students from primary school to higher education to 'pass on and spread excellent Chinese traditional culture', including demonstrations of students' family spirit (*jiafeng*), family instructions (*jiaxun*), and performing one's family stories. Moreover, in January 2017, the central government issued official guidelines on preserving and developing excellent traditional culture. These guidelines outline specific tasks, such as carrying forward traditional Chinese virtues and preserving cultural relics. Although the Sage himself is not explicitly named, core Confucian values such as righteousness, filial piety, loyalty, harmony, and ritualisation are widespread throughout the text.

The significance of passing on traditional Chinese culture is therefore proactively disseminated through governmental discourses. In President Xi's speech at the Opening Ceremony of the International Conference in Commemoration of the 2,565th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth, he pointed out: 'We can do our present job well only through proceeding to the future from the past, and blazing new trails by sustaining the nation's cultural lifeline.' Such an institutionalisation of Confucian ethics speaks to a central principle that governs the *Analects*—*dao*, or the Way. Ames (2014: 183) elaborates the concept as 'forging our way together in the world' or, more specifically, 'travelling through a shared physical, social and cultural landscape'. Importantly, time and temporality, as both 'mental construct' and 'experienced reality' (Tu, 1974: 119), are of paramount importance in the concept of *dao*. From the Confucian perspective, *dao* contains the meaning of inheriting

and following the normal course of past events, and is thus characterised by its moral, social and political connotations, in contrast with Daoism (Liu, S., 1974; Zhang, M., 2003).

To an extent, the contemporary wave of rejuvenating conventional culture symbolises an official promotion of the Confucian *dao* to cultivate consummate human beings. Associated with specific means of self-cultivation, *dao* also stresses a persistent and stable continuity of the value system that transcends time. What is particularly relevant to masculinity constructed through kinship ties is the fundamental importance of filial piety in Confucian *dao* in order to become a gentleman or exemplary person (*junzi*). Specifically, this can be acquired by learning from the previous generation, handing down to the succeeding generation, and practising self-cultivation for the fulfilment of filial piety throughout one's life. As *Analects* (1.2) stresses, 'Exemplary persons concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having set, one's vision of the moral life (*dao*) will emerge therefrom.' Although Confucianism is seen to have been rehabilitated and manipulated for political use (Billioud, 2007; Louie, 2015), individual Chinese men's experiences actually present more nuanced and personalised stories. It is true that being or becoming a filial son retains its almost incontestable significance for men's identity-making, yet the *dao* by which they actually comprehend and practise it has undergone considerable negotiation and transformation.

An evident remoulding *dao* of being a filial son, according to the majority of my participants, is a departure from the 'role-informed' Confucian masculine identity (Ames, 2011; Nuyen, 2007). For centuries, men's role in Chinese families has been crucial and strictly regulated. Because the Chinese family was characterised as patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal (Stacey, 1983), sons were supposed to take up more filial obligations than daughters in supporting the whole family, according to Confucian doctrines. However, the most frequently raised filial *dao* among the men I interviewed tended to be 'not to concern my parents'. Leery (32) provided typical accounts: 'Being a good son means bringing less troubles to parents. I mean it. If you can avoid concerning your parents, that's the biggest happiness you can

bring to them.’ Aaron (25) similarly commented: ‘Um...not to concern them, that’s the best I can do. Because they are now still worrying about all sorts of things about me, whether I eat well, sleep well, or work well.’ In all likelihood, the reinterpreted *dao* of filial piety mirrors the young men’s present-time response to transforming social circumstances. Along with the process of individualisation, the traditional legitimation of filial piety has been undermined (Qi, 2015; Yan, 2003). Consequently, many participants desired to showcase their independence from parents.

But a closer examination of my participants’ narratives reveals that, in reality, this perspective is not as much of a celebration of self-making and self-reliance as it sounds. Instead, it operates based on the logic of relationality. What is hiding behind these announcements is the fact that many young men still *need to* rely on their parents at different levels. Therefore, ‘not to concern my parents’ delivers the connotation that a filial man should release his parents from the pressure of continuing to support their adult sons. For instance, 29-years-old Neyo, who was a local Shanghainese, frankly admitted:

Now it’s true that living in Shanghai is very stressful. I think not to worry them is already the best thing I can do. After all, they’ve already helped in buying *fangzi*. Don’t...don’t put much more pressure on them and live my own life well. This is the most important thing.

In Neyo’s case, the assertion of wanting ‘not to concern my parents’ should be understood as ‘not to concern my parents beyond *fangzi*’. Truly, a large proportion of my Shanghai participants are, like Neyo, beset by the dramatically rising cost of establishing oneself in this competitive cosmopolitan city. It is fair to say that these men confront enormous pressures in order to build up appropriate masculinity, particularly with reference to material criteria. In fact, receiving certain levels of financial support from parents is certainly not a secret but rather a universal phenomenon among the interviewees. As Qi (2015) acknowledges, Chinese children are more widely encouraged to accept financial assistance from their parents than their Western counterparts. Offering a certain amount of material

support to adult sons is considered to be parents' responsibility in China; in turn, failure to do so might signify a violation of the moral obligation as decent parents (Shi, 2017a; Yan, 2009). While the individualisation agenda has more or less redefined young men's identity-making process, it cannot easily break the sticky bond between Chinese parents and their adult children. To continue receiving parental support against the influential discourse of self-reliance, reworking the notion of filial piety backs up young men's assertion of their masculinity. Hence, the renewed filial *dao* of not wanting to concern one's parents is shaped by both long-lasting social norms and contemporary structural tensions.

Meanwhile, the not-wanting-to-concern-my-parents discourse mirrors Chinese young men's reflexive engagement with the phenomenon of *kenlao*. This term literally means 'biting the old', and is used to refer to adult children's intense reliance on their parents for both financial support and personal care. The rhetoric of *kenlao* represents a particular form of family life in contemporary China: whereas the whole society has certainly become more individualised, increasing risks and uncertainties prompt people to stay close, if not even closer, to their families (cf. Chang & Song, 2010). As a result, rather than working against their elderly parents, adult children find that their best interests are to work together with their parents as a family 'corporate', but in a new way (Qi, 2016: 40). Hence, the intergenerational solidarity in contemporary Chinese families delivers the necessary resources for the current young generation to survive modern urban life (Liu, W., 2017). By the same token, parents cannot change their values and daily lives completely to an individualistic style. In order to enjoy their adult children's respect and care in older age, Chinese parents are expected to provide continuous support for their adult children according to the reciprocal and interdependent feature of family obligation (Liu, F., 2008). Recent television dramas, in particular, have depicted a series of Chinese parents who are willing to accept *kenlao*. As Shi Li (2014: 362) observes, good parents are commonly depicted as 'industrious and austere, bearing hardship without complaint and as unselfish' in media discourses. They need to act according to varying ethical requirements to aid their children in order to be good parents, ranging from grandparenting, providing appropriate

education, and domestic help to monetary transfers (Goh, 2011; Liu, F., 2006; Tao et al., 2000). These parental responsibilities have gradually become normalised and serve to set a powerful moral backdrop for both parents and adult children to undertake mutual care.

My participants displayed tangled feelings and diverse reactions towards *kenlao*. For example, Danran (31) replied: 'I think the worst thing a man does is *kenlao*. It's fine to accept parental support for a short time. Otherwise, I don't like those people. They're not independent.' Therefore, being overly dependent on parents is certainly not filial and can even be regarded as not masculine. Elsewhere, a few participants adopted the word to describe themselves with a sense of embarrassment and uneasiness. San pangzi (32) said: 'Both my wife and I are the only child. So, you know, it's like the so-called *kenlao*. The elders help a lot with childcare.' Both San pangzi and his wife work full time and they have two young children. As San Pangzi indicates, there is no other better choice than to seek parents' continuing investment on them. Therefore, *kenlao* in terms of grandparenting is an inevitable outcome of traditional expectations of parental roles on the one hand, and the continuing deficiency of institutional provision for childcare on the other.

In contrast, DX (26) confessed that he had always relied heavily on his parents, ranging from purchasing *fangzi* and a car, to securing employment and preparing for his wedding. As he joked: 'I *kenlao* in all sorts of stuff.' Nevertheless, DX interpreted it as a taken-for-granted decision, commenting that: 'It's not realistic to avoid *kenlao*. [...] You should learn to utilise available resources, and what your parents can offer you is exactly your invaluable and distinct resources.' Clearly, DX drew on resources inherited from his parents to work towards material constraints. The practice of *kenlao* thus compensates for his lack of sufficient economic and social resources in society. Seen from these cases, *kenlao* is inherently a form of sociocultural practice. In line with the reworked *dao* of filial piety, the cycle of family caring in contemporary China has also been significantly altered. By investing in their children with their existing resources, parents are expecting to

earn old-age care from their adult children in both urban and rural areas (Obendiek, 2017; Qi, 2016). For the young generation, fulfilling filial piety is seen less in terms of a natural obligation with rigorous demands, and more as something that can be subject to personal capability or adjusted according to parental demands. But it should not be overlooked that such a norm of reciprocity may also contain intimate feelings. Since most of my participants are the only son in their families, it is not difficult to understand their parents' willingness to offer various forms of assistance to them. As a response, many men disclosed a sense of indebtedness to their parents because of *kenlao*. In this vein, the young men's emphasis on not making parents be concerned about them reflects the tension between the growing consciousness of individualism and a range of institutional and structural limitations.

In addition to avoiding adding an extra financial burden to the older generation, not to concern one's parents also implies developing and maintaining appropriate masculinity. In the current era, this is ideally linked with the masculine entrepreneurial spirit (Zheng, T., 2015a). Although most of the ordinary young men I interviewed did not show a strong desire for outstanding success or achieving 'exemplary masculinity' (Liu, F., 2017), it is important for them to achieve 'ordinary' successes in terms of education or the stability of their employment. These are key criteria for measuring masculinity for both men themselves and in the marriage market (see also Chapter 5), which seem to be closely bound up with parental expectations and men's awareness of being a filial son. JJ (29) is from a standard middle-class family in Shenyang. While he had failed to complete his postgraduate course in the USA, at the time of the interview, he was preparing to enrol in another postgraduate course at a local university. JJ said that he must achieve a Master's degree for his mother, who is a university lecturer:

I didn't get the Master's degree in the USA, but my family needs that...that sort of certificate. My mom is a university teacher. Among her friends, if your child only finishes undergraduate studies, that...that doesn't make sense [...] What you actually study is not important. The important thing is to bring back the certificate. But I failed, so I...I took the postgraduate entrance exam back in

China and...anyway, I have to get a certificate for my mom.

JJ's experience, to a large extent, epitomises the privileged and aspirational childrearing provided by middle-class mothers (Burke, 2011). Meanwhile, it is also a generational transfer of aspirations in accordance with Confucianism. In conventional Confucian ontology, individuals' lives are assumed to be the continuation of their parents' physical lives (Hwang, 1999: 169). As a result, it is children's obligation to meet parents' needs and realise their aspirations. During the interview, JJ talked at length about how he had been pushed by his mother to pursue further educational achievement. As he indicates, children's academic qualifications are key reference points to judge one's moral decency as a parent in his mother's social network. Accordingly, obtaining a Master's degree is about *saving the face* of his mother, and therefore displaying his filial practices. While display has become an integral aspect of contemporary Western family life (Heaphy, 2011), in the Chinese context, it is argued that displaying filial piety is essentially influenced by the cultural concept of face, or *mianzi* in Chinese. As Y. Zhang (2016) observes from young women's filial practices in north-eastern China, saving the face of the elder or giving them face is both an individual desire and a sociocultural obligation. For JJ, bringing back 'the certificate' for his mother is necessary to ease her concerns. Moreover, it also highlights his attempt to bring pride to the family as a way to express filial piety (Lin, 2013). For parents, the success and capabilities of adult children also enhance the possibility for them to pay back by providing old-age care (Obendiek, 2017; Shi, 2017b). In this way, JJ's complex and ambiguous sentiments further validate the relational characteristics and social embeddedness of filial practices in contemporary Chinese families.

Furthermore, several participants highlighted the importance of following a standard life path in order not to concern their parents. According to Lee (27), being a filial son is as simple as following a normalised life path: 'I think being a good son means doing my own job well [...] If I go to work every day normally and do not cause any extra trouble, this is the best way to repay my parents.' Again, Lee underscored the notion of normality as a primary element in creating appropriate

masculinity²². Similarly, final-year student FN (22) from Shenyang linked the notion of filial piety with a successful transition into the labour market:

How to be a good son...that's all about managing your own life well. I mean, for me, first of all, I need to find a job. You shouldn't make your parents worry about you, cos employment is very, very important. Because now...what I need is just a job, just how to find a job.

Being an undergraduate, FN was temporarily free from the burden of acquiring *fangzi* or other material goods. But throughout the interview he consistently expressed anxiety about job-hunting, and repeatedly stressed that he must be pragmatic and realistic. For example, FN implied that a romantic relationship was something luxurious and irrational for him at this stage. In order not to place an additional burden on his parents, he saw himself as not eligible to use his parents' money for dating²³. FN also openly said that the option of studying abroad was not affordable for his family, and therefore it was not an option for him at all. To cope with these deep anxieties, he had actively made plans to participate in the Master's entrance exam at his current university. For younger participants like Lee and FN, the present time-slot that they are living in means that self-cultivation is their primary task. At least in their current life stage, successful management of their own self-biography was believed to be sufficient to prove their filial piety to parents. It is also likely that many Chinese young men have to find a balance between their personal pursuits and family expectations (cf. Sabet, 2011). In this sense, the specific conditions of men's personal lives profoundly shape their imagination about the future and their present practices of filial masculinity.

Thus, men's interpretations of being a good son cannot be separated from their *current stance* and *present point of view*, which is closely linked with their parents' needs. Time, as experienced by both young men and their parents, serves to shape participants' filial practices. Jim (25) commented: 'To be a good son, from the present perspective, I think being a good son is to...work hard to stabilise my career

²² I have also discussed how young men treat normality as a primary element to measure embodied masculinity and appropriate male *shenti* in Chapter 4.

²³ FN's pragmatic framing of intimate relationships has also been discussed in Chapter 5.

and make as much money as possible. The next step is to marry and have a child. These are all their expectations.' In this response, constructing filial masculinity is coded as a series of successful transitioning events that follow a normative life-course. Rocky (28) was an expectant father when I interviewed him, and he expressed a similar view: 'I think filial obligation means forming my family, establishing my career and having a kid. This is the only thing I can do to comfort my parents.' Passing on the family name used to be one of the most crucial filial responsibilities for Chinese men, and this has also been recorded in recent research on the enduring importance attached to having sons (Santos, 2017). But, as Shi (2017a) observes, the significance of continuing the family line has largely declined in rural north-eastern China, where the belief in ancestral rituals used to be strong. Truly, none of my participants explicitly mentioned the importance of ancestor worship or carrying on the family name. Nonetheless, producing offspring is still generally seen as a crucial task to bring comfort to parents or adhere to social norms. Entering marriage and achieving fatherhood are common-sense episodes in one's adulthood transition as well as constitutive elements of filial masculinity. Informed by traditional cultural values, these are also manifestations of following the patrilineal ritual, which is gradually fading but nonetheless retains some lingering influence.

Given the widespread attitude that they have plenty of time before they will need to provide personal care for parents, the young men's reinvention of filial piety is distinctively differentiated from conventional ethical codes. Traditionally, having the right sense of time and comprehending one's own situation used to be considered a prerequisite *dao* for becoming a Confucian gentleman. Neo-Confucianist Wang Yangming explains clear time-consciousness in relation to filial practice:

If it is the mind that is sincere in its filial piety to parents, then in the winter it will naturally think of the cold of parents and seek a way to provide warmth for them, and in the summer it will naturally think of the heat of parents and seek a way to provide coolness for them. (cited in Chan, W., 1963: 8)

Clearly, the disciplinary power of such Confucian orthodoxy of providing timely and personal care for parents has faded, as many of the young men I interviewed seemed to regard it as a matter of fact to postpone the project of performing filial masculinity. In all likelihood, such attitudes are inseparable from the relatively young age (22 to 32) of my participants and, equally importantly, the good health and financial comfort of their parents. This is explicitly addressed by Jia fei mao (32): 'For my parents, considering their age and income, they don't need our financial help. In the future, the most we can do is to look after them when they get really old.' Since traditional values like filial piety are usually internalised as common sense, rewriting the filial *dao* cannot be completely arbitrary or random. Nonetheless, rather than fulfilling a son's obligation throughout their lives, contemporary young men are allowed to adopt more flexible strategies to provide for their parents. In other words, the temporality of filial piety has become more open to negotiation.

The marked difference between the contemporary and traditional *dao* of filial piety exhibits the recreation of this concept from a life-course perspective. As participants recognised, their own life-course changes had a great impact upon the way in which they were reinventing the parent-child relationship and their identity as filial sons. Filial obligation is no longer a fixed regime but consists rather of negotiated commitments, evolving all the time between parents and adult children. This sentiment was made clear by Danran (31):

Well, I don't think I'm a qualified good son. But since I married and became a father myself, this different life stage has allowed me to gradually understand them. Very slowly, but I think I've changed. I've learnt to understand them and meet their needs. I used to quarrel with them a lot. Some of their values sounded unbelievable to me. When I was younger, I always wanted them to change [...] But now I think what matters is...well, there's the emotional bond, but we should respect each other. We should leave each other a comfortable space and live our own lives separately. I prefer this kind of relationship.

It should be noted that Danran is a unique case among all the participants. He described his parents as 'having almost no impact on me' and revealed an evident

emotional detachment from his parents. Unlike many young men, who pursue their individualised lifestyle on the basis of family support, Danran drew a clear line between himself and his parents. However, he also highlighted that his perception of the parent-child relationship had evolved over time. Despite potential unwillingness, Danran indicated that he was trying to undertake the obligations of a filial son. His narratives and practices appear to bounce back and forth between individualism and relationality. Therefore, it is important to pay greater attention to the increasingly contingent and dynamic features of filial piety in contemporary China. However, an individual's ability to practise alternative filial obligation is essentially gendered and classed. For example, providing material support for parents has been demonstrated to be continually prevalent and crucial among some groups, such as male migrant workers (Lin, 2014) and married daughters (Xie & Zhu, 2009). Moreover, changing social conditions, including geographical mobility and the rising cost of living, have also reshaped filial practices and parent-child relations. Physical remoteness from parents and stressful daily lives are found to give rise to kinship rearrangements (Kipnis, 2017). In this sense, filial relationships should not be viewed only in the domestic setting. Rather, they constitute threads of social relations within a wider material reality and reflect structural factors. In turn, the persistence of institutional sanctions and an incomplete welfare system serve to sustain family values and the interdependence between parents and their adult children.

The notion of time, apart from being a consistent process of fluidity that transmits family identity and historical cultural values, is also regarded as a stock of assets for accumulating filial masculinity. While filial practices that were normalised in the past, such as material support and physical care, are not completely devalued, fostering emotional closeness between the parent and child seems to have gained more attention (Wang & Hsieh, 2000). This trend is also evidenced in the intensification of intimate ties between daughters and their parents in rural China (Liu, J., 2016). Therefore, constructing valuable family time with parents is recurrently named as another reworked filial practice. Since most of the young men I interviewed belong to the only-child generation, they were concerned about

their parents' feelings and sensitivities as a result of the child-centred approach in their families (Deutsch, 2006). XiXi (30) was co-residing with his mother, and he said:

Um...I think, actually it's about keeping your parents company. As long as you spend more time with them, they are already happy. It's not necessary to buy them something expensive or give them money. In fact, if you can stay with them, keep them company, and respect them, that brings them great happiness.

Although there is an assumption that kin relationships 'can be neither evaded nor changed' (Yao, Y., 2009: 139), XiXi voiced an opposing attitude, implying that blood ties also needed to be carefully nurtured through time-investment. Lacking siblings, many participants had an underlying awareness that their parents might be lonely and unhappy if they could not spend time with them. This is conterminous with the idea that filial piety is also 'an expression of the natural affection between parent and child' apart from rigid rituals in classical texts (Harrison, 2005: 54). As an only child, L (23) reflected:

I think to be a good son is to keep parents company as much as possible. In fact, no matter how many things you can buy for your parents, it can't compare with the feeling when you stay with them.

In this sense, keeping parents company was regarded as the fundamental, if not the most important, way of demonstrating one's filial affection²⁴. With family obligations becoming less compulsory in the contemporary Chinese family, strengthening the mutual emotional bond has been foregrounded as an alternative strategy to demonstrate filial piety. This is in line with Zhang Yi's (2016) argument that, in the Chinese context, filial obligation needs to be *displayed* in addition to being practised. For adult daughters, providing sufficient personal care for elders carries enormous moral and emotional significance for parent-child relationships. Meanwhile, adult children's emphasis on intimate care and physical support is also a filial response to parents' demands (Shi, 2009). This recognition of the intentional

²⁴ I also discussed this sense of 'embodied filial piety' in Chapter 4, which is related to young men's project of constructing the Chinese male *shenti* with *li*.

nurturance of kinship mirrors contemporary researchers' emphasis on *doing* family and intimacy (Jamieson, 2011; Morgan, 1996). Although relationships with parents have not become decentred in China as much as in the West, now they need to be coped with more reflexively.

Yet, as many interviewees confessed, their willingness to allocate time to parents is constrained by manifold interrelated factors. A few young men appeared rather indifferent about nurturing their relationship with parents. Misery's (25) parents divorced when he was very little, and he had lived with his mother ever since. He stated: 'I've never thought about being a good son. Maybe...things like talking with them? But I just don't want to do it.' TMB (30) also admitted that he was simply unwilling to spend more time with his parents: 'I have no patience for communicating with them. You know, the sort of generational gap. There are so many things they don't understand and I just don't bother explaining to them.' Although Misery's and TMB's accounts do not fit into the common picture, their attitudes suggest that the impact of filial piety on the construction of masculinity may have decreased. Both of them were single at the time of the interview, and they stressed that pursuing personal goals in the wider social world was more important for making meanings of the masculine self. Furthermore, Misery and TMB's responses pose a challenge to the glorification of mutual disclosure to enhance reflexive intimacy in late modernity (Giddens, 1992). If we view filial piety as a form of intimacy, it is more about practices than disclosure for most Chinese men. Misery, in particular, continued to explain: 'I buy my mom small gifts to make her happy from time to time. That's what I do as a son.' Since Confucian doctrine traditionally prioritises actions over verbal expressions to display one's good intentions, the contemporary valorisation of mutual disclosure does not necessarily carry the same importance in Chinese parent-child relationships (Clayton, 2014).

However, usually the young men try to find various reasons to justify their distance from the cultural ideal of a good son. Sean (31) had lived away from his parents for a long time during childhood and described them in an ambivalent tone. He was

struggling to fulfil normative filial obligations:

Um...(sigh), well, I know that you may need to care more about them, both materially and emotionally. And then...if they want to do something, you should support them. But, the first thing is I live quite far away from them, so I can't take care of them myself. The second thing is, um...my personality, is not that type. After all, men and women are different. Maybe daughters are closer to parents, like taking care of them. But men might be bad at this. I know this problem, but sometimes you just can't do it (laugh).

Clearly, Sean did not feel guiltless about failing to keep his parents company, either through his physical presence or verbal communication. In this extract, he paused several times while sighing and laughing to conceal his uneasiness about disappointing his parents. Nonetheless, he showed little commitment to change. The ideal *dao* of filial piety is seen as an important part of his familial responsibility, but not as amounting to the sense of mandatory obligation. Between subjective preference and fulfilling parental demands, Sean was determined to prioritise his own values and lifestyle. By reinterpreting common beliefs about filial obligation, enduring family values are slowly eroded by the principle of individualism. According to Sean, this was initially elaborated in relation to the existing dilemma that he lived in a different city and, furthermore, it was legitimated as an essentialist male trait. Hence, his narratives uphold the contemporary phenomenon that daughters are now expected to shoulder greater obligations for parental care in China (Liu, J., 2016; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). Whereas the traditional preference for sons denoted men's indispensable responsibility to support their parents, Sean displays a conscious departure from this family role.

Elsewhere, men's immaturity has been articulated as being particularly salient to their reasoning on kinship relations and filial behaviours. Hence, the inherent temporality of masculinity might be manoeuvred to legitimatise men's underachievement of filiality. Carey (26) was a typical example:

You might understand some [principles of being a filial son], through things like television or other people's experience. But, well, it's very likely that you forget them afterwards. You might be touched in the moment, but...Because the

environment you're living in will make you forget those worries.

Carey's narrative demonstrates that men's belief in filial piety is not always powerful enough to motivate them to put these moral codes into practice. Despite having formed his own family and become a father, Carey did not read such life transitions as signs of independence from parents or the time to pay back as a mature man. For him, filial practices as a present-time duty were eligible for an extension into the future. By resorting to an alternative *dao* of filial piety, participants like Carey maintained their moral decency whilst shirking some Confucian masculine roles. Filial piety, being a historically handed-down ethical precept for men, seems unable to maintain its rigid surveillance of the public as promoted by governmental discourse. Truly, the extent to which filial piety is seen as a burden depends on the interplay among a myriad of factors, including men's own life phase, income, parents' age and health, and the family's financial situation as a whole. While men's reinterpretations of the filial *dao* evince a historical depth and continuity of masculinity in a broader sense, it also reflects an insidious fluctuation within the temporal dimension of masculinity. As R. Jenkins (1996: 27) highlights, individual identity is 'always constructed from a point of *view*' and therefore open to ongoing alteration. Even when many participants treat it as their obligation to support parents in the future, at least at the present life stage, they are allowed to pave an alternative *dao* of being a good son.

Weaving it all into the Future

The temporal dimension of masculinity made and narrated through kinship ties looks nostalgically towards one's past and, in the other direction, extends forward into the future. While memory is not viewed as a 'store' but 'a plurality of interrelated functions' in contemporary thought (Jedlowski, 2001: 30), one of its functions is to underpin a coherent sense of selfhood in spite of changing life phases. Despite having experienced profound transformations in Chinese society, kin connections remain unique sources of identity that young men rely upon and carry forward with them. This notion of extracting fragments of identity from both past and present and instilling them into the future self frequently came to the fore

in interviewees' sketches of (imagined) fatherhood. Several participants candidly admitted that they would perform differently from their own parents, or would follow in their footsteps, whilst others indicated such perspectives implicitly, or perhaps even unconsciously. In either case, a careful examination of the young men's depictions of their fathers and their own understandings of being good fathers exposes a strong sense of family continuity and the transmission of intergenerational identity. For example, Alex (32, with a daughter) described his father as follows:

From primary school, my parents have spent enormous time cultivating me. I mean, they tried their best to create a good environment to support my studies [...] They've corrected my mistakes, those immature ones, since I was little. It's like...let's talk and we'll tell you what to do and what not to do, distinguishing right from wrong. They also paid attention to the friends I made. Like, there were classmates with bad habits, they would tell me to avoid hanging out with them too much [...] Especially my father, he taught me a lot about society and nature.

Much later in the interview, when we discussed his own fathering strategies, Alex seemed to reiterate what he had said about his own father:

Um...I think I want to become a friend-like father. I'll teach my daughter...all ranges of knowledge and cultivate her with good habits, such as you need to fulfil certain tasks at the right time, what you should and shouldn't do. And good habits, like good habits of study, a regular timetable every day. Also...correcting her bad behaviour when she does wrong.

Although I did not discern the interconnections between these two sets of accounts during the interview, reading the transcript allowed me to recognise the striking similarities. Here, we can see a transparent consistency between a father in the past (Alex's own father) and a father in the future (Alex as a father himself). A range of narrative elements overlapped; predominantly, the emphasis on study, good habits, parental authority and the inculcation of self-discipline and moral values. The popular image of an involved and caring father, who actively participates in day-to-day childcare activities, is not evident in Alex's consideration. In line with his Western counterparts, Alex is more dedicated to being involved in

the interactive and fun part of childrearing (Craig, 2006; Raley et al., 2012). Moreover, Alex's inherited parenting style matches well with other studies that affirm middle-class parents' ability to pass on privileges (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Lareau, 2003). His accounts also mirror the normative assumption that regards the middle-class child as a project—'soft, malleable and able to be developed and improved, with the "good" parent presenting a myriad of opportunities and support for the child to encounter a range of learning experiences' (Vincent & Ball, 2007: 1065). By replicating remembered childrearing practices, Alex was able to imagine himself as a good father, for whom fatherhood positively added to his possession of masculinity.

As Brannen and Nilsen (2006) suggest, fatherhood may provide meaningful references to examine the continuity and disruption of masculinity across generations in a family. The storied masculine self was therefore placed as an intermediary for the intergenerational transmission of identities. In all likelihood, such resemblance was built upon a mediated personal past and positive self-evaluation from the present perspective. This attitude was more straightforward in Aaron's (25) reply:

My father has had a huge influence on me. Like I just said, the reason why I believed I should become a stern father in the future was because my father was very strict with me. I think that brought many positive results during my growth. Looking back, although there were loads of frustrating memories when I was little, from my current perspective I think they were all valuable. He helped me set up right world views and values.

What can be observed from Aaron's narrative is that a positive evaluation of the present self serves to justify the value of the past and creates the desire to pass on a certain family heritage. In traditional Chinese society, the continuation of personal identity and, more broadly, the whole family structure, was generally encouraged or even taken as common-sense knowledge. Given that lineages and families in the past were responsible for 'political, economic, religious, and other functions' (Fei, 1992: 84), Chinese kinship connections must maintain their stability and continuity. Apart from distributing material possessions, kin relations were

also featured as handing down cultural values, moral codes and living experiences from generation to generation that went beyond a micro level. As Confucius teaches, individuals are responsible for ensuring that 'this culture of ours' (*siwen*), inherited from our ancestors, is carried forward into the future (*Analects*, 9.5). In this sense, Confucianism as a living culture not only has 'legs' but indeed is more roundly genealogical as it is embodied, revitalised, and then passed on by each succeeding generation (Ames, 2014: 183).

Like Alex and Aaron, the majority of my participants displayed loyalty to gender-specific parenting that was shaped by the way in which they had been raised. Thus, the belief in a clear demarcation between motherly and fatherly roles driven by traditional gendered culture proved its lingering vitality in contemporary China. On most occasions, the men mainly re-inscribed a patriarchal and heteronormative division of labour, with the mother as loving care-giver and the father as omnipotent guide. As 23-year-old L affirmed:

Seen from my parents, I feel a father is responsible for...maybe not absolute, but he should be the mainstay. First, a father has to provide for the family. He needs to earn money for his wife and child, right? I mean, at least daily expenses. The second point is, judging from my own family, a father needs to point out the right direction for the kid. Like how to cope with this sort of thing, and how to behave in that sort of situation. The mother should...well, offer sort of meticulous care.

Since parenting practices are extremely habitual (Brannen et al., 2011), for younger participants like L, who treats parenthood as a distant stage, personal memories play a key role in the narrative imagination. But such a downplaying of fathering care and the gendered features of parenting are also social phenomena. In the rural Chinese context, Santos (2017) has raised the notion of 'multiple mothering'. Specifically, the work of childrearing remains in the hands of a female-centred, intergenerational parenting body supervised by the child's mother under the authoritative guidance of her mother-in-law (2017: 94). Moreover, although the intensive parenting ideal imposes surveillance on both men and women, it is intensive mothering that dominates the discourse in the USA (Hays, 1996). And, as

Caputo (2007: 188) argues, intensive mothering 'serves as a means of social control, stigmatizing and punishing women who violate norms of motherhood'. However, since many participants observed this gender-specific parenting style in their own families, generational transfer is usually highlighted. Simon (27) also remembered in detail how his mother and father had been responsible for different parenting tasks during his growth:

My father had more influence on me in aspects like my personality, worldview, and my way of thinking. He taught me how to be a good man and how to get along with others. My mother's role was more about everyday life and...maybe the emotional part. Yeah. They had different influences on me.

Not surprisingly, later in the interview, Simon confirmed the division between mothering and fathering without any hesitation: 'They must be different, because my own mother and father had a different focus when bringing me up. I think I'll be influenced by them and follow their route to raise my own child.' As Finn and Henwood (2009: 556) highlight, men's identification of themselves as fathers results from 'a set of complex and mobile interconnections between personal biography, social reality and a series of relations that reinforce, energise and often run counter to each other.' Many Chinese young men's narratives about (imagined) fatherhood underscore the pivotal impact of personal biographies and cultural traditions. The existing literature has also noted this generational conveying of identity taking place across cultures and societies. For example, contextualised in Papua New Guinea, Weiner (1992) argues that it is through the transmission of 'inalienable possessions'—including both material goods and abstract knowledge or values—that the reproduction of kinship becomes legitimised. Looking broadly at Western societies, Lenz (2011) points out that memories transmitted across generations are crucial family and historical resources for an individual's self-identification. Therefore, L and Simon are certainly not alone in describing the generational handing down of parenting strategies.

What appears to be distinct in the Chinese context is the core of Confucian ethics that underpins the young men's accounts. It is this symbolic discourse that marks

the transmission of Chinese fatherhood as different from similar practices in other cultures. Describing their understandings of fatherhood and fathering as 'traditional belief' is prevalent among the young men. In this sense, it is not only a familial but also a historical continuity. The Confucian framework has produced corresponding expectations of parents and children; namely, authoritarian and superior parents, in contrast to obedient and conforming children (Lin & Fu, 1990; Steinberg et al., 1992; Li et al., 2016). As *Three Character Classics* quintessentially reads, 'To feed without teaching is the father's fault.' Motivated by their personal pasts and also cultural history, many interviewees appeared to reiterate the conventional type of stern and disciplinary father figure. In this regard, their accounts could also be seen as conforming to the normative social construction of parenthood and an emphasis on being morally adequate parents (Crabb, 2010; McCarthy et al., 2000; Smyth & Craig, 2017). Furthermore, ideal fatherhood is also linked to becoming a good Chinese man. After all, these men's perceptions of a breadwinning father and an attentive mother rightly echo their common expression of ideal masculinity and femininity (Chapter 5).

Conversely, fatherhood may be manipulated in order to modify masculine identities that interrupt generational transmission. Both family memories and collective cultural codes combine to forge men's paternal ideals, yet some men simultaneously experiment with creative masculine strategies. In this regard, learning from one's own father and embodying parenting values are reflexive projects for the young men. This is illustrated by their careful sorting of transgenerational identity components instead of an unreasoned acceptance and inheritance. In some participants' portraits of imagined selves, they would engage with contrasting fathering practices due to their disapproval of their own fathers. For example, Albert (24) said:

My father rarely took care of any domestic stuff. Once he'd handed over his salary, he'd just leave it and go out for fun. I mean, he likes that...it's not that kind of fun. And then, the family chores have generally been managed by my mom. She's in charge of things like shopping and cooking. So I spent more time with my mom, yeah. She looked after me. And my dad, using the current

vocabulary, he's not a family-centred man. I mean, it's not...that in a pejorative sense.

Again, Albert was very cautious about criticising his father. The frequent pauses and following reparative comments in the above extract were manifestations of his effort to display harmonious kin relationships, as well as performing morally appreciated masculinity. Albert subsequently concluded that his father was rather a 'background figure' in the family, who had only recently started to communicate with him more. However, instead of a complete rejection of the way he was fathered, later in the interview Albert said:

I think I'll be relatively more family-centred. Other aspects, I think I can just do the same [as my father]. The main thing is to be more family-centred. I'll communicate with the kid and help with his or her study, or intellectually. And things like taste, these are all important. Worldviews, life philosophy, and suchlike.

Brannen and Nilsen (2006) have pointed out that generational transmission is not always straightforward and explicit, but sometimes emerges in subtle ways through the individual reinvention of family identity resources. Albert's imagination of what it means to be fatherly seems to support their argument. Associated with a conscious refusal of the traditional aspects of fatherhood that he dislikes in his own father, Albert also shows a strong consistency. He portrays an authoritative and intelligent father who can pass on symbolic, moral and cultural values to his child. By countering the figure of the 'missing' father, Albert's narratives are animated by both family heritage and the contemporary masculine discourse of the hands-on father. As the engaged father gains more social support in today's China, adhering to the new image will apparently create more masculine currency for young men. Therefore, it should not be overlooked that the temporal dimension of masculinity is always situated in the real world and informed by the changing cultural climate.

Another point of view that was stressed by the men tended to be to 'let children be themselves'. Many participants mentioned that the paternal role was to offer

material support for their children as far as possible whilst permitting them to 'choose freely'. Traditionally, Confucianism places little value on childhood as a separate stage of playful activities, but emphasises instilling adult ethics into children from a young age (Bai, 2005; Hsiung, 2005). With the intensive commodification of education and childrearing in contemporary China, the young men's belief in a free childhood epitomises the new norm of raising creative and high-quality children (Woronov, 2008). Moreover, these participants' statements can be seen as part of the wider official discourse, which suggests that offering proper and happy times to children is 'crucial both to the well-being of individual children as well as to the successful construction of a "stable, harmonious" society and a "strong, vital" Chinese nation' (Naftali, 2010: 590). It is thus morally crucial to perform egalitarian, progressive and friend-like fatherhood. However, such changes in fatherly characteristics are happening to a rather limited degree, especially in terms of maintaining gender divisions and fitting into normative discourse. For example:

TMB (30): If it's a boy, I'll play ball games with him. If it's girl...maybe I'll let her learn piano or dancing. But you should let them volunteer to do these.

S (31): I won't say 'you need to learn what I like' or 'what your mother likes'. I'll just provide guidance, *zhengchang* (normal) guidance that avoids that bad stuff. Of course, all other normal hobbies, interests, I'll let the kid choose.

Thus, the announcement of allegedly 'letting children choose for themselves' needs to operate within the safe zone signified by normality (*zhengchang*). TMB and S's comments exemplify how social norms and cultural legacies are perpetuated at a personal level. In this regard, the fabrication of masculinity displayed a certain flexibility in a besieged area but lost such malleable potential as soon as it hit the taboo of overriding the gender dichotomy—for both the men themselves and their children. Indeed, gender is central to the performance of parenting. Just as most young men appear to support gender essentialism and regulate themselves accordingly, raising gender-appropriate children is an equally imperative task in their larger project of constructing masculinities.

In addition to handing down parenting strategies, past kinship memories, especially those joyful moments, contribute to shaping men's understanding of affinity and the extended family. In most cases, my participants stated that they retained very little contact with other relatives except at family gatherings on particular festival days, which seemed to be in sharp contrast with the old picture of a harmonious crowd of kin and clan (Logan et al., 1998). It is true that decreasing family size has been identified as a marked feature of the Chinese family at least since the 1990s (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). As a result, participants are allowed to make more individualised choices with relatively fewer structural and cultural constraints. In particular, the widespread practice of living away from the natal home has profoundly reconfigured the young men's perceptions of kinship ties. Both Carey (26) and XiXi (31) mentioned this point when asked if they kept routine contact with relatives:

Carey: Um...it's mainly my parents maintaining the contact, like during festivals or holidays [...] For me, probably I only contact them if I have to. I think modern individuals have their own circles and you live in your circle. There are huge differences in age, life, work, environment, and school. So...your circles don't overlap.

XiXi: Vey little, very little. Except my cousin living in Shanghai, we visit each other sometimes. Others...sometimes I call back, like my grandmother. Yeah, generally no contact. After all, we don't live in the same place and...there's little chance to meet, except during Chinese New Year.

Clearly, lacking opportunities for communication and the subsequent emotional detachment were key factors that had broken the conventional Chinese family structure for both Carey and XiXi. Potentially because of this, both men described their understandings of the term 'family' without any relatives. Carey said: 'My family...that's my wife, child and my parents.' XiXi similarly concluded: 'For me, family constitutes my parents, wife and in the future my kid.' The 'familial society' described by Fei (1992), in which people rarely left the area where they were born, has largely become history. Accordingly, men's family roles have become simplified to a certain extent. While maintaining wider kinship connections had its practical function in the past to provide life intelligence and other assistance for individuals

to survive, increasing mobility in present-day China often means that men need to find their own path.

Among the few men who did maintain intimate relationships with relatives, past experience played a vital role in moulding familial masculinity. Jia fei mao (32) grew up in Inner Mongolia province. He left home in 1997 for high school and finally settled down in Shenyang. Talking enthusiastically about his childhood experience in rural China, Jia fei mao displayed a strong sense of place attachment:

Well, you probably won't know what I'm talking about, because of your age. What type of person am I? We grew up in rural China in the early 1980s. At that time, the population of rural China constituted 70% to 80% of the whole population. The experiences of these children in the rural areas were different from urban dwellers (*chengshi ren*) [...] We played around all day, up to the mountain, down to the river, fighting in the field. Parents were busy making money. There was much less parental supervision than today.

During the interview, I was quite surprised at the evident pride that Jia fei mao felt about his experience in the countryside, which I did not commonly observe among interviewees of similar family background. Rather, most of the young men born in rural China mentioned their desire to leave their poor and boring hometown and become urbanites. Despite the cohort difference, Jia fei mao's narrative is evocative of Mao's (2012) observation that many Chinese women born in the 1960s had a 'free-range' childhood, when social control and parental discipline were much looser compared with contemporary children. This is likely to have been caused by the uneven regional development in China, which is accompanied with slower social and cultural transformation in inland rural provinces (Fan, 1995). However, similar to Mao's interviewees, Jia fei mao depicted an idyllic scene of his hometown in the past. The retrospective description elicits a sense of emotional attachment to kinship connections, which can be clearly seen from Jia fei mao's interpretation of family:

For me, family is the feeling of belonging [...] That's my hometown in Inner Mongolia, because the older generation all live there. My family is where my grandparents live. That's my roots. Family is also a sense of connection and

emotional bond. Every time I feel lonely, contacting my family makes me feel much better.

Looking back to the old days from his present point of view, Jia fei mao's descriptions evoked a strong nostalgia for the land he had left. The feeling of loss generated by fond memories serves to deepen the emotional connectedness with his close kin. Thus, he displays a high degree of loyalty to his memories of domestic life that corresponds to conventional familial forms. According to Bonnett and Alexander (2013), nostalgia can become a productive and creative resource that leads to both individual and social changes. Indeed, it is nostalgia for the past that invigorates Jia fei mao's interpretation of 'family' and provides a consistent sense of belonging. If, as L. Miller (2003: 217) argues, belonging is 'fundamental to who and what we are', the continuous attachment to his hometown and other family members acts as a stable source of identity that Jia fei mao can always call upon.

Therefore, sweet memories of the familial past contribute to strengthening the present family bond. More than this, they are also the energetic force that hands down strong family identifications to young men. For instance, when discussing his perception of the term 'family', DX (26) answered that he was more inclined towards a big family with grandparents and had been yearning for four generations under the same roof. He went on to explain:

Perhaps because my grandparents, both paternal and maternal, passed away very early, my parents have a very strong sense of responsibility in their generation. Although they are the younger ones, my family is relatively better off than others'. My uncles and aunts, whenever they needed anything, my parents often felt responsible for helping. And also, many of our relatives are still living in the countryside in their native village. I lived in the countryside until I was six, but they're still there. Their roots are there. My father was offered a place at the university, and then he came to Shenyang. The thing is, every New Year we go back to the countryside and visit every family. We'll have lunch at one place and dinner at another. It's...busy and lively (*rere naonao*).

For DX, the term 'family' immediately evoked his childhood in the countryside and the annual family gathering during Chinese New Year. Here, the New Year celebration functions as a family ritual, which not only facilitates interactions and

contact, but also creates solidarity among members and across generations (Smit, 2011). The happy memories brought back nostalgia for a time when DX was surrounded by other relatives as well as the sense of belonging within a collective family history. As a consequence, kinship experiences in the past and present constituted a symbolic site from which DX imagined the domestic environment he would like to live in. Seen in this light, family rituals contribute significantly to protecting both family and personal identity through the mechanism of remembering and story-telling. As Shore (2003: 17) emphasises, to the extent that family life is always becoming memory, and thus family history, it rests inevitably on the routines and stories which are the foundation of its enduring character. Moreover, reflecting on family history, especially his parents' long-term conscientious acts, served to inform DX's own masculinity-defining process. Since he grew up in such an environment, it is not too surprising to find DX embracing similar values to manage family relationships. This passing on of strategies to construct familial masculinity appeared to be a habitual practice resulting from frequent interactions with the familiar (Fei, 1992). While distant kinship ties might lose their emotional significance once they are no longer a lived relationship, DX's accounts mirror an active reinvention of traditions and the resilience of Confucianism-informed masculinity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have investigated the temporal dimension of masculinity construction located in kinship relationships. This entails both practices in the men's everyday lives and a narrative process during which participants drew on personal memories and cultural traditions in order to negotiate masculinity in the interviews. By employing the concept of 'handing down', I have tried to unravel the (dis)continuity of masculinity across time. Importantly, the masculinity of Chinese young men as a temporal construct needs to be considered multi-dimensionally. It entails an individual man's personal biography from the past to the future, life-course changes, and generational transmissions within a man's kinship network, as well as the historical persistence of key masculine values and ethics. While narrating the past tends to be remarkably reflexive and malleable, masculinity

formation in the present and the future often loses its elasticity to varying degrees.

On a personal level, the older generation may hand down specific gender values to young men, which allows critical acceptance and modification. Chinese men reflexively work with and assemble a range of personal stories as resources to make sense of their masculine position within the kinship network. More broadly, discussions of family values and filial piety validate the enduring influence of Confucian heritage across historical time. Nonetheless, my participants commonly deploy an alternative *dao* of filial piety as meaning 'not to concern my parents'. This discourse is created by ordinary young men in order to achieve a balance between growing individualisation and familial obligation. But this reworked notion of filial piety is essentially a temporal construct. As most of the young men emphasise, they will provide whatever support their parents need in the future depending on the actual situation. In this sense, while actual filial practices may be adjusted and recreated, the core cultural and moral meanings remain intact.

Seen from a temporal point of view, both memory and imagination are carriers of kinship. In the process of creating and remaking multiple pasts, Chinese men choose preferred elements to configure masculinities while discarding others, although this process is not without constraints. Meanwhile, personal pasts are often inclusive of significant others from a man's family. When the young men hold uneasy feelings about their parents, relatives or themselves, they strive to reinterpret and recreate imperfect kinship ties. In contrast, among participants who identify positively with their own pasts, emotions usually serve as the adhesive that fosters a sense of connectedness and togetherness. Grounded in the present, the men envisage their future masculine selves as situated within their kin circles and family histories. Many participants compared their own practice and imagination of fatherhood with the parental generation. They either revealed a striking continuity with how they were fathered, or intentionally distanced themselves from their own fathers. More than this, the ideal family they dreamed of creating usually mirrored the past of their native families. Therefore, the temporal dimension of masculinity appears to be rather fluctuating and volatile.

Masculinity formation through kinship offers a gendered insight by which to investigate the relatively stable and enduring parts of individual identity in contemporary China. In recent years, a range of official texts and institutional activities have been endeavouring to recuperate a traditional *dao* of the Chinese self that is congruent with Confucian kinship ethics. However, I suggest that classical Confucian values are rather something that has been *redefined* instead of being *rehabilitated*. After all, according to the Chinese men I interviewed, the importance of being a filial son and gratitude to one's parents has rarely been denied. Even though actual filial practices have become more contingent and negotiable, the fundamental concept remains as a powerful regulation. Despite competing discourses that bring forward, or even encourage young men to forge a more fluid and malleable sense of self, what is actually happening within the site of kinship exposes a relatively less elastic aspect of Chinese masculinity.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

I came to this research through my curiosity about young men of my generation and the supposed decline in manliness in contemporary China, and the exploratory process has generated both surprising and anticipated findings. If the crisis-of-masculinity discourse presumes that 'men are responding in negative and destructive ways to insecurity about their "role" in society' (Robinson et al., 2011: 32; see also Scourfield & Drakeford, 2002), the Chinese young men indicate clear understandings of their male roles. Although there are tensions and confusions, most participants are able to articulate socially appropriate forms of masculinity. Typically, they need to present a controlled, ritualised and relational body, perform *you dandang* in intimate relations and maintain harmonious kinship ties. Therefore, the masculinity of ordinary Chinese young men is becoming negotiable and heterogeneous rather than experiencing crisis.

On a broad level, the majority of ordinary young men show limited evidence of either the detraditionalisation or individualisation of personal life (Yan, 2010a). Although their lives are certainly becoming more individualised and self-mobilised, these shifts have not amounted to individualism or disembeddedness from existing institutions (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1992). The process of masculinity formation for young men remains deeply relational and connected to their personal relationships, which are carried out in a modern but not entirely Western individualistic way. Young men's perceptions and practices of masculinity demonstrate their active role in constructing masculinity. Compared with the rapid economic growth in contemporary China, the notion of a (good) Chinese man has been much slower to change. Nevertheless, there are also ample instances of flexibility and renegotiation, manifested in the nuances, complexity and ambiguity of individual men's everyday gendered experiences. At the same time, these men have to confront the entangled intersection of structural inequalities, institutional constraints and dominant cultural discourse, many of which are increasingly difficult to tackle.

Throughout this thesis, I have considered how ordinary young men in urban China construct and negotiate masculinities in their everyday lives. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 Chinese men, I specifically examined their creation and experience of male *shenti*, practices of intimacy, and the temporal dimension of masculinity narrated and constructed through kinship ties. These three aspects were chosen because I considered this study to be an empirically driven project, and there was rich data available from the interviews upholding the salience of these dimensions of masculinity for the Chinese young men. Rather than more dramatic or risky events, my focus is on the mundane episodes in young men's daily lives. As Lefebvre (1991: 97) maintains, everyday life is 'profoundly related to all activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond and their common ground'. Accordingly, my analysis mostly emerged from the men's daily experiences, such as how to dress properly at work, expectations of partners, how often they visit their parents' home, etc. Moreover, the three themes addressed in this thesis are in dynamic interplay with each other, all serving as key elements in the configuration of masculinity. After all, everyday life is not divided into isolated spheres, but is multidimensional because 'it involves different social fields that are separated by irreducible gaps, yet which are permeable and, in their interaction, create a series of effects' (Burkitt, 2004: 213). In this sense, these men may construct consistent masculinity in different spheres, but they also make transitions between different masculinities in order to suit the environment (cf. Robinson & Hockey, 2011). Therefore, Chinese young men are embodied subjects, co-producers of intimacies, narrators of family pasts and creators of kinship, and all of these aspects need to be understood as interrelated layers of their masculinity.

During the early stages of data analysis, I presented some preliminary findings on men's practices of intimacy in a workshop. After the presentation, I was asked by a member of the audience: 'So Chinese men are still quite traditional and patriarchal, aren't they?' In that situation, I found it extremely difficult to answer the question. Either yes or no sounded unfair to my participants. For the most part, the Chinese young men in this study are hoping to maintain male privileges and

gendered boundaries. Nonetheless, they make concessions on certain aspects of their personal lives which they consider to exert less impact on the preservation of their masculinity. There are also some men who have actively challenged conventional gender beliefs and redefined Chinese masculinity. However, it is difficult to draw a uniform and consistent picture. In varying instances, it can be observed that participants have made great efforts to reinvent themselves in order to be good Chinese men. But those adjustments are uneven and sometimes contradictory, with vast individual differences in terms of age, class, occupation, family configuration and other factors. Thus, ordinary young men's gender practices appear rather 'messy', and cannot be easily conceptualised by terms such as patriarchal or egalitarian, traditional or modern, individualised or collective.

Based on these ongoing reflections, I have developed the concept of *elastic masculinity* to elucidate the complexity and heterogeneity of ordinary Chinese young men's gender identities. Overall, the masculinity of ordinary young men is flexible, adaptable and accommodating; their masculinities can be stretched, expanded and forged differently depending on the context. At the same time, elastic masculinity is constrained by the availability of resources, structural constraints, cultural traditions and diverse personal relationships. In this sense, the term 'elastic' is an appropriate metaphor to delineate these features; masculinity that is elastic can stretch in different directions but within limits. As a response to the changing social, economic and cultural landscape in contemporary China, elastic masculinity captures the gendered strategies with which ordinary young men navigate through ongoing and newly emerging tensions. Thus, elastic masculinity is a practical strategy for young men who have been thrust into profound social transformations; it is a product of shifting relationships between the individual and society in urban China. As traditional and indigenous beliefs face modern (Western) values, and relationality and connectedness compete with the process of individualisation, these men are expected to manage these new situations in a masculine way. Young men's reactions should not be perceived as consisting wholly of resistance or conformity. Instead, they are compelled to become more elastic and, as most participants indicate, such increasing elasticity

may be also a subjective preference.

To varying degrees, ordinary Chinese young men select elements from both modern ideas of being a man and traditional Chinese manhood, crafting these gendered values and resources together to make sense of their masculine selves. Specifically, the historically endorsed *wen* masculinity still has purchase in today's China (Louie, 2002), but the concept has also been expanded and remoulded to suit new contexts. For example, the young men commonly agree that cultural attainments and disposition weigh heavily on their masculinity. But, on most occasions, accumulating *wen* masculinity alone is not enough to guarantee a man's social respectability in present-day urban China. It usually needs to collaborate with other gendered resources, such as *fangzi* or male entrepreneurial spirit, in order to create ideal masculinity. The three analysis chapters have underlined this point from different angles. In order to produce the legitimate male *shenti*, a man should take care of his appearance, but certainly not too much, prove his ability to perform a ritualised body, and form a harmonious relationship with his surroundings through embodied interactions. The global trend towards healthism and gym culture has prompted the men to pay closer attention to keeping fit and watching their state of health. However, they describe these embodied activities in relation to the Confucian concepts of *du*, *li* and *he*. Moreover, the ordinary young men in urban China might have altered their practices of gender division and symbolic male domination, but these are not always associated with a more equal gender ideology. They embrace the new masculine standard of emotional expressiveness and conjugal intimacy, while highlighting that what bonds a couple together should be morality, responsibility and obligation. The young men's narratives of filial piety reaffirm a sense of intergenerational cohesiveness as in classical Confucian doctrine. Nonetheless, they articulate the reinvented filial strategy as 'not to concern my parents' in order to be a good son, which draws heavily on a global discourse of self-reliance and responsabilisation.

As can be observed, elastic masculinity is almost never an individual construct, but is embedded in webs of relationships and co-produced with manifold others. In

order to be stretched or forged into a different shape, Chinese young men often demand external assistance or need to deploy different resources. This does not mean that elastic masculinity replicates the collectivist discourse which emphasises that 'the needs and goals of the individual must be subordinate to those of the group' (Guo, 2010: 154–5). It also differs from classical views of the Confucian self, who can only exist through social relationships and social roles (Tu, 1985). By contrast, contemporary young men do not hide their prioritisation of the self. Belonging to particular networks still matters to them, but the definitions and configurations of these networks are usually open to negotiation. More importantly, the way that young men associate with these collective relationships has been profoundly transformed. As Barbalet (2016: 11) suggests, what needs to be theorised in contemporary China is the 'changes in the ways in which individuals relate with others in the arrangements of the institutions and organisation which provide their social existence, including family, kinship, gender and class'. For example, the young men stress the importance of presenting a healthy and tidy *shenti* to demonstrate respect for others, but also imply that such a performance is conducted in order to enhance their self-confidence and satisfaction. In the intimate sphere, the extent to which masculinity can be elastic largely depends on women's requirements and needs. Similarly, the men's alternative strategies of constructing parent-child relationships are not developed in a vacuum, but are subject to the actual situation of their parents. Furthermore, elastic masculinity is located in the present, but never isolated from the past or the future. The young men stretch their current self to chime with their past experience, while portraying the man they want to become with reference to existing resources. The project of crafting elastic masculinity requires both self-cultivation and relational forces.

Meanwhile, elastic masculinity captures ordinary young men's partial, but generally insufficient, possession of the resources necessary to achieve desirable masculinity. Most of my participants are indicative of the urban middle-class male population in a variety of ways. Although a few of them came from rural areas, they had managed to settle down in Shenyang or Shanghai without many left-behind concerns—usually ageing parents and young children—compared with

migrant workers (e.g. Choi & Peng, 2016; Lin, 2013). For example, both Zhi (27, Shenyang) and Rocky (28, Shanghai) had migrated to the city at a young age with limited education. But when I interviewed them, Zhi had bought a *fangzi* and married in Shenyang, while Rocky had opened his own hair salon and had a much higher income than a number of urban young men. The general financial comfort of most ordinary young men buttresses their masculine privilege to certain extent. However, despite most ordinary young men's comfortable lives, I want to emphasise that the men in this research are far from the elite-class men in many other studies (e.g. Osburg, 2013; Uretsky, 2008; Zurndorfer, 2016). As I have addressed in Chapter 5, many participants could not live up to the desirable masculinity of *you dandang* in practices of intimacy. However, elastic masculinity has enabled ordinary young men to deal with various tensions by employing alternative strategies. In other words, they may feel vulnerable and inferior, but not necessarily in a negative way. Their accumulation of gender resources, either inherited from their parents or produced by themselves, enable these men to redefine the notion of a good Chinese man.

The meaning of elasticity also metaphorically reveals that ordinary young men's masculinities cannot be endlessly stretched but are subject to material constraints, cultural discourse and personal relationships. In many aspects of everyday life, ordinary men want to make autonomous and free choices. Yet, their embeddedness in the broader social context determines that they cannot always be flexible. As Gilding (2010) warns us, positioning reflexivity unanimously over convention may run the risk of overlooking continuing institutional forces and newly emerging social norms. In this regard, elastic masculinity addresses individual reflexivity and autonomy without ignoring the range of constraints and regulations. The young men's accounts reveal their disappointment, helplessness, reluctance and anxiety when their masculinity cannot be elastic. Typically, although some of them intend to reject fatherhood, they are concerned about being labelled as 'abnormal' or disappointing their parents and parents-in-law. Most participants' pragmatic framing of intimacy is also closely associated with the public glorification of the male breadwinner and historical Confucian family ethics.

This is not to assume that Chinese men are victims of the modern age, as has been articulated in relation to some of their Western counterparts (Green & Van Oort, 2013; Kimmel, 2013) or as represented in films (Pang, 2002). My emphasis is that the changing power dynamics that shape the masculinity of ordinary Chinese young men deserve critical and multidimensional exploration.

Despite many continuities, elements of change can also be discovered in the young men's narratives compared with previous generations. They invest enormously in undertaking gendered roles as sons, spouses, fathers, and employees, but inscribe these with different meanings compared with their fathers or grandfathers. As indicated by the metaphor 'elastic', the masculinity of the young generation of Chinese men is more ready to be negotiated and reconfigured. While patriarchal gender ideology is still widely accepted in practices of intimacy, some participants have started to question its validity or negotiate its meanings and values. Even those adhering to conventionally established gender beliefs need to make greater efforts to achieve and maintain culturally appreciated masculinity in contemporary society. Fatherhood has also transformed remarkably, with more engaging, caring and intimate fathering practices carried out by the Chinese young men. A few participants also explicitly declared that producing offspring is no longer a man's obligation. Furthermore, the young men's attitudes towards work and personal networks have also shifted enormously. Many participants showed little interest in expanding or utilising *guanxi* in career development and aspired to become more family-centred.

Many ordinary Chinese people in the previous generation have suffered from socioeconomic predicaments and turbulent life courses as a result of the shifting political climate (Huang & Chiu, 2003; Liang, J., 2011). Without those life-changing state policies, such as the Cultural Revolution or the closing-down of the *danwei* system, contemporary Chinese young men live in a relatively stable historical period compared to their parents' generation. However, as they face continuing socioeconomic development, these men frequently ponder their decisions and behaviours, and demonstrate greater reflexivity in making sense of their everyday

lives and masculinity. Thus, a general tendency is that the young generation of Chinese men are more reflexively engaging with their personal lives and wider social landscape, which is a core characteristic of elastic masculinity. Although many young men may not be powerful enough to challenge existing rules and orders, they have started to interrogate and re-evaluate many taken-for-granted facets of society. For me, these pockets of change are likely to effect further personal and social transformations.

While I have teased out the concept of elastic masculinity as an appropriate metaphor for ordinary Chinese young men's masculinity, it is not without limitations. First of all, the scope of this thesis and my initial research plans have prevented me from undertaking a comprehensive elaboration of this concept. For instance, the social sphere of work has not been taken into detailed consideration in this thesis, and this may be explored in future research. Moreover, my sampling method also means that I have approached a very specific group of men in Shenyang and Shanghai. Since 'no place in China (or anywhere else) is "typical"' (Hsu, 2007: 26), my analysis cannot encompass the whole picture of Chinese masculinity. Given the vast regional differences in urban China, my participants from Shenyang and Shanghai should not be seen as representing all 'ordinary Chinese young men'. At the same time, because participants were mostly recruited by purposive sampling through personal networks, young men in this research may have some similar personal characteristics, family backgrounds and views. But, in turn, these factors validate the young men's relatively conservative views in many everyday aspects.

Another point I want to stress is that this thesis is nonetheless a historical product. When I interviewed these young men, they were aged between 22 and 32 and their attitudes had emerged from that specific time. I have particularly shown in Chapter 6 that a man's own life phase is essential in shaping his narratives and practices of kinship ties. During the process of data analysis and writing up, I also constantly felt that my own analytical angle and interests have shifted along with my personal progress and the surrounding environment. As V. May (2011b: 145)

comments, all accounts are presented from a point of view and there is no ‘God’s eye view’ account to be offered. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the particularities of this work, since the age and life experience of both the researched and the researcher have a significant influence on the study (England, 1994; Morgan, 2011b).

In spite of these limitations, I believe that this thesis has made a number of contributions to the existing literature and relevant knowledge. Focusing on ordinary Chinese young men and their everyday experience, I have expanded current debates around Chinese masculinity. Although scholarly work on this topic has mushroomed in recent years, Chinese masculinity as a field of research still lacks sufficient attention (Evans & Strauss, 2010; Louie, 2015, 2016). By critically reviewing the existing literature, I have also identified a gap in empirical investigations of ordinary Chinese young men in contemporary China. More often than not, these men are not ‘eye-catching’ enough to attract researchers’ attention. Compared with the new rich, senior governmental officials and successful male entrepreneurs, their lives are probably far less colourful. According to my participants, their daily journey is usually between the workplace and family. They seldom participate in luxurious banquets and they cannot afford to keep a mistress or frequent high-end karaoke bars. As a result, ordinary men’s stories provide little evidence on popular topics in the field of Chinese masculinity, such as *guanxi*, corruption or sex consumption. On the other hand, ordinary young men live a much more comfortable and stable life than migrant workers, sexual minority men or money boys. They are largely free from social stigma, silencing, stereotypical disdain or turbulent experience. To some degree, being an ordinary man is a privilege. In this regard, this thesis complements the long-term neglect of these ‘mainstream’ men with a timely examination of their gendered identity.

In addition, this study serves to deepen understandings of middle-class identity in contemporary China. Although the term ‘ordinary’ that I have used cannot be wholly equated with the middle class, my participants generally fall into the broad category of the emerging middle class in China. I avoided using the term ‘middle

class' to describe my participants because many of them did not identify themselves as such. Moreover, middle class is still a highly controversial and ambiguous concept, as discussed by both Chinese and Western scholars (Cheng & Goodman, 2013; Li, C., 2010; Tomba, 2004). In comparison, many participants appreciate their 'ordinariness' (*putong, yiban, or zhengchang*) within both the wider society and the masculine hierarchy, and hope to preserve this situation. Thus, my introduction of 'ordinary Chinese young men' may offer a fresh perspective to examine middle-class masculinities. Additionally, adopting the lens of masculinity has enabled me to bring men, as gendered subjects, into the centre of analysis. Rather than theorising the 'middle class' into numbers and diagrams, I have foregrounded the experiences of men themselves and pointed out immense individual diversities. Various axes of identity are constantly in interaction, including age, gender, class, embodiment, memory and so on. Apart from recognising ordinary men's privileges and superiority on a collective level, it is imperative to uncover the inequality, exclusion and ambiguity experienced by each individual.

Importantly, my study has made theoretical contributions to critical studies of men and masculinity by exploring the under-researched area of embodied and temporal constructions of male identities. It also complicates recent sociological interest in intimacy by adopting this term beyond the Euro-North American context. As to body and embodiment, I have closely examined the way in which Chinese men live with their bodies and work on the body in their everyday lives in Chapter 4, which addresses the lack of knowledge around the empirical examination of the embodied experiences of individuals (Morgan & Scott, 1993; Nettleton & Watson, 1998). Furthermore, I have adopted a feminist perspective in order to unravel the differences and inequalities that the male body has to bear, a topic which has been largely absent from feminist scholarship on the body. While feminists have criticised how forms of domination are enacted through and act upon the female body (Bordo, 1993), my work suggests that treating men's embodied experience as homogeneously superior is highly problematic. In particular, 'men embodying marginalised and subordinated masculinities disproportionately suffer the costs of

existing gender (and class) arrangements' (Monaghan & Robertson, 2012b: 152). For example, the Chinese men's common repudiation of the *zhongxing* body with its homosexual connotations and their judgement of embodied geographical differences clearly illustrate various forms of inequalities within the hierarchy of embodied masculinity. Additionally, as K. Davis (1997: 15) argues, feminist investigations of bodies and embodied experience need to 'explicitly tackle the relationship between the symbolic and the material, between representations of the body and embodiment as experience or social practice in concrete social, cultural and historical contexts'. By developing a Chinese historical, cultural and philosophical framing of male *shenti*, this thesis extends existing debates around the cultural variation of body and embodiment.

In terms of practices of intimacy and the generational transmission of identity, my study contributes to exploring these issues in a society where Confucian family ethics have a lingering influence. My analysis of the men's articulation of *you dandang* in Chapter 5 demonstrates that practices of intimacy are often implicated in practices of gender, class and culture. Chinese young men's narratives and experiences of intimate ties underpin the analytical value of the concept of 'intimacy' and 'practices of intimacy' beyond the Euro-North American contexts. I have also generated culturally and historically specific insights through researching actual relationships. Chinese society is worthy of particular attention because of the ongoing individualisation process and growing exposure to global values and discourses. Meanwhile, the Confucian values of familial harmony and role fulfilment remain imprinted in Chinese men's way of thinking about family life, with regard to both couple intimacy and parent-child relationships. Indeed, practices of intimacy, kinship and family among Chinese young men may sustain 'the conventional arrangements for partnering and parenting that receive legal, economic and cultural support' (Jamieson, 2011: 2.5; see also Morgan, 2011a). But these continuities are accompanied by shifting cultural scripts and individual negotiations in the contemporary era. Furthermore, in line with growing sociological investigation into the generational handing-down of beliefs and practices (Amadini, 2015; Bengtson et al., 2002; Brannen et al., 2011), the Chinese

men's narratives about kinship serve to enrich existing discussions by adding a historical dimension. Because Confucianism originally emphasised the passing on of core values by each succeeding generation (Ames, 2014), historical and familial identity transmission are inevitably intermeshed with each other in Chinese men's perceptions of kinship and the self.

In particular, my contribution to existing knowledge about the body, embodiment and intimacy is achieved through merging Chinese concepts with leading sociological theories of individualisation and reflexivity developed in the West. These are based on my growing awareness that local contexts are imperative in shaping Chinese men's gender values and daily practices. Thus, masculinity must be examined in relation to the historical, sociocultural and economic backgrounds in which Chinese young men are firmly embedded. I argue that indigenous concepts informed by philosophical and cultural conventions, or frequently used in daily language, can be useful analytical tools to explore the experiences and attitudes of individuals. Specifically, I have suggested that the Chinese term *shenti* has rich meanings and conceptual depth that can be brought to an investigation of the bodily aesthetics and embodied practices of Chinese men. Moreover, since *shenti* is inherently relational, reflexive and a lived experience informed by conventional Chinese thought, it disrupts the mind-body dualism that has previously haunted the sociology of the body. Therefore, *shenti* has further potential to be widely employed as an analytical tool for theories of the body and embodiment. Moreover, I have conceptualised *you dandang* as a key element of masculinity in the intimate sphere based on participants' accounts. *You dandang* designates morality, responsibility and obligation, all of which are of paramount importance when evaluating Chinese men as boyfriends and husbands. However, *you dandang* is not a wholly obligatory contract, but is instilled with intimate feelings. Being part of ordinary men's larger project of constructing elastic masculine selves, *you dandang* is also open to negotiation and alteration, albeit constrained by normalised discourses and historical traditions. This term brings together different aspects within practices of intimacy, including emotion, material reality, morality, responsibility, obligation and newly emerging gender discourses.

In this sense, *you dandang* offers a new lens to rethink men's intimate practices in a rapidly transforming society like China, which is witnessing a complicated interplay between tradition and modernity.

By analysing how historical legacy and indigenous intellectual heritage are pivotal to the construction of masculinity, and by foregrounding Chinese interpretive resources, this study has contributed to developing an alternative epistemology and methodology in global social science research (Connell, 2007; Omobowale & Akanle, 2017; Shilliam, 2011). As Qi (2014: 1) acknowledges, in the global system, 'local' knowledge can be made irrelevant, displaced or otherwise compromised by the knowledge of those associated with the dominant power. For Chinese sociology, which has historically followed the pace of Western sociology, researchers are faced with similar challenges. In this regard, only by bringing traditional Chinese thought into critical conversation with global knowledge can we develop sounder understandings of Chinese social realities (Bian, 2017; Wang, N., 2017; Zhao, X., 2011). These reflections have inspired me enormously in producing this thesis. During the early stages of this project, I used to struggle with how to represent Chinese young men's voices. While making a great effort to enable them to 'fit into' mainstream sociological perspectives, to a large extent I neglected what Fei Xiaotong terms 'cultural self-awareness'. According to Fei (2015: 50), cultural self-awareness means that 'those who live within a specific culture have a true understanding of it, know where it comes from, how it developed, which its unique features are, and how it is evolving'. Thus, neither overstating cultural specificities nor uncritically adopting foreign concepts is an appropriate method for studying Chinese men. It is necessary to consider both the social reality in which Chinese men are situated, and how global theories and discourses can inform my analysis. This is not easy to achieve and I have experienced many anxieties, frustrations and confusions. However, at this point, I believe that this study offers a Chinese perspective that can "provincialize" the epistemic and cultural premises of Eurocentred knowledge' (Bhambra & Santos, 2017: 4; see also Chakrabarty, 2000).

I believe this research is important in terms of portraying Chinese young men's

experiences and identities during an ongoing transformative period. Moreover, through continuous reflections on the Chinese culture and society of which I am a member, this research has been transformative for me as well. On many occasions now, when I read Chinese philosophical texts or visit museums and other historical sites, I feel something different from before. Those unspoken, intangible, underlying or sometimes even unconscious notions behind our everyday interactions do not only belong to the present phase, but also resonate with historical periods. While many aspects of social life in China are becoming highly individualised and globalised, people still maintain connections with significant others and value meaningful traditions and pasts. I have become more aware of how deeply both I and the young men I interviewed are embedded in the long history of Chinese culture. In this way, I hope this thesis can provide some insight into what it means to live in contemporary Chinese society where rapid changes will continue to occur, helping ordinary young men and women to make better sense of their gender identities and everyday lives.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Project Information Sheet

I am conducting this research as part of my PhD project at Centre for Women's Studies, University of York in the UK. My research looks at the masculinities of young men in contemporary urban China with a focus on identity constructions at home, work and in everyday life. Being one of the young generations in rapidly changing China, I am interested to explore different ideas of what it is like to be a man. The interview will contribute to my research, which may promote more open discussions on the lives of young men in China today. This study has been approved by the relevant Ethics Committee (ELMPS) at the University.

I will first ask you to read this information sheet and fill in a consent form to show you willingness to participate in this research. You can ask questions at any time before, during or after the research. You will be asked to take part in an interview with me, which will last around one to two hours. I will ask for your permission to record the conversation between us. During the interview, you will be asked about your personal experience of and attitudes towards being a man at work, home and in everyday life.

The data collected from the interview will be analysed and used in my PhD thesis and relevant future publications. Anonymity and confidentiality of your participation will be always maintained. If you want to read the final thesis and other related publications, you can indicate this in the consent form.

Your participation in the research is voluntary. You can withdraw from the research at any time up to six months upon the completion of the interview. If this is the case, interview data related to you will be completely deleted. If you have any further questions regarding the research, you can ask me at any time or contact

me later through phone call or email. Thanks very much for your participation and cooperation.

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项目信息表

我是英国约克大学的博士学生，将要进行的采访属于我博士课题的一部分。我的研究方向是中国当代城市年轻男性的男性气质，侧重于个人性格，价值观，生活方式等（自我身份认同）是如何在家庭，工作以及日常生活中逐渐形成的。作为快速发展的中国社会的年轻一代，我深刻感受到伴随周围环境在自己身上不断发生的变化，以及与父母一代的许多差异。因此，我希望更深入的了解和研究年轻一代的男性是如何看待自己，以及广义上的“中国男人”。这项研究不仅对于我的博士课题非常重要，同时也会拓宽相关的学术研究，并且为大众性的探讨贡献更多的资源和活力。这项研究已经通过约克大学相关研究伦理委员会的批准。

在这项研究中，首先我会请你阅读这份项目信息表，并且在知情同意书上签字表示你愿意参与这项采访。如果你有任何不清楚或有疑问的地方随时都可以提出问题。经过你的同意之后，我将会对这次采访进行录音。采访之中，我会对你在工作，家庭，以及日常生活中的个人经历和感受进行提问。这项采访可能会持续一到两个小时。

采访数据将会用于我的博士论文以及未来其他相关的学术研究发表。我会保证你参加这次研究的隐私性和匿名性。如果你希望阅读最终的博士论文或其他相关的研究论文，你可以在知情同意书上写明。

参与这项研究完全出于自愿。在采访结束后六个月之内你可以随时退出这项研究。如果你决定退出这项研究，所有与你相关的访谈数据都会被彻底删除。如果在研究结束后你有任何相关问题，可以通过电话或邮件联系我。非常感谢你对这项研究的参与和配合。

曹思暘

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Appendix 2

Consent Form

Title of the study: Negotiating self-identity in a changing society: masculinities of young men in contemporary urban China

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

Have you read and understood the project information sheet about the study? Yes No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study? Yes No

Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the researcher? Yes No

Do you understand that you may withdraw from the study up to six months upon the completion of the interview for any reason? Yes No

Do you understand that the information you provide may be used in future publications but without being personally identified? Yes No

Do you agree to take part in the study? Yes No

If yes, do you agree to your interviews being recorded?
(*You may take part in the study without agreeing to this*.) Yes No

Your name (in BLOCK letters):

Your signature:

Interviewer's name:

Date:

*If you have requested a copy of the final thesis/relevant future publications, please indicate how you would like it to be sent to you:

By Post:

By Email:

知情同意书

研究题目：变化社会中的自我身份认同：现代中国城市年轻男性的男性气质
这份知情同意书将用于陈述你是否同意参加这项研究。请阅读并回答每一个问题。如果你有任何问题或需要更多信息，请向研究者咨询。

你是否阅读并理解了项目信息表？ 是 否

你是否有机会对这项研究提出问题？ 是 否

你是否了解研究者会对你提供的所有信息完全保密？ 是 否

你是否了解无论出于何种原因，你都可以在完成采访后
六个月以内退出这项研究？ 是 否

你是否了解你提供的信息可能会被用于研究者以后的相
关学术发表但你的相关信息将会完全保密？ 是 否

你是否同意参加这项研究？ 是 否

如果同意，你是否同意你的采访将被录音？ 是 否
(你可以选择不被录音但参加这项研究)

姓名 _____

签名 _____

研究者姓名 _____

日期 _____

*如果你要求阅读最终博士论文及相关研究发表，请表明你希望以哪种方式收到：

邮寄地址 _____

电子邮箱 _____

Appendix 3

Sketches of Participants

1. Aaron, 25, Shanghai

I met Aaron in a cafe during the evening after he finished work. Aaron was born and raised in a rural town in Shandong Province. Before coming to Shanghai, he worked in Beijing for a few years. Aaron co-owns a business specialising in mobile application development and he said that he enjoyed the accompanying challenges and excitement. He is in a long-term relationship, but does not plan to marry for various reasons.

2. Albert, 24, Shanghai

Albert is a postgraduate student in translation. He is from Xuzhou in Jiangsu Province, a city which is stereotyped as having relatively slow economic development and a low-*suzhi* population. As Albert stated, this biased understanding had caused problems for his relationship because his girlfriend's father showed disapproval of his hometown. Albert was confident and aspirational about his studies and career, but appeared reserved about relationships and marriage. In particular, he frequently referred to concerns about buying a *fangzi* in Shanghai throughout the interview.

3. Alex, 32, Shenyang

Alex works in a high-ranking hospital as an administrator and researcher. I interviewed him during the day at his office. He is passionate about his work. He was the 13th man I interviewed and I was impressed by his compliments about his wife, which I had rarely heard during previous interviews. Alex was polite, humble, but also reserved. Our interview lasted about 40 minutes, but he chatted with me for another half an hour after I turned off the recorder.

4. Carey, 26, Shanghai

Carey is married with a 19-month-old daughter. He works in a community college, and I interviewed him after work at his workplace. He is a local Shanghainese and

owns an apartment. Carey lives with his wife and daughter, but his parents live nearby and he maintains a very intimate relationship with them, especially his mother.

5. CC, 25, Shanghai

CC is a white-collar worker in Shanghai, and I interviewed him in a cafe on a Saturday. He is from a small city in Jiangsu Province, went to university in Shanghai and continued to work there. CC is very much concerned about health and *yangsheng*. He is also interested in Chinese medicine and traditional culture. CC is single, but actively participates in match-making and hopes to marry soon. CC seems to have uneasy feelings about his parents, as he struggled to describe their relationship during the interview.

6. Danran, 31, Shenyang

Danran is from Heilongjiang, the most remote north-eastern province. He is a civil servant in Shenyang, and I met him during the day at his office. He was very reserved and careful when talking about his work. Danran owns an apartment without a mortgage, and lives with his wife and daughter. He is confident, assertive and very proud of himself as a good father. He plans to have another child. Danran's parents still live in Heilongjiang. He is not very close to them, and he prefers that they each live their lives independently.

7. DX, 26, Shenyang

DX was born and grew up in Shenyang. He works in a public institution as a construction equipment inspector for almost a year and I interviewed him during the day at his workplace. DX is outgoing and talkative. He and his girlfriend have planned to marry, and DX's family background is much better than his girlfriend's. He also admitted frankly that they relied heavily on his parents, including for employment, housing, car, and perhaps also childcare in the future.

8. FN, 22, Shenyang

FN is a final-year student, and he plans to participate in the competitive national postgraduate entrance exam in order to gain greater competence in the job market. FN indicated that he is not from a well-off family. He is enthusiastic about his major in history, but appears very anxious about his future. He constantly repeated to me that he and, actually, every young adult, must be realistic and clear-minded in today's China. FN had no plans for a relationship as he thought them to be a waste of money, time and energy.

9. Frank, 25, Shanghai

Frank is a white-collar worker in a fairly big fast-moving consumer goods company in Shanghai. I interviewed him in a cafe during his lunch break. Frank had moved around the country due to his parents' business since he was little. As a result, he did not see much of his parents throughout his childhood, and he appears self-reliant and self-determined. He lives with his girlfriend in a rented apartment, and has no plans to marry yet.

10. Jack, 29, Shenyang

Jack is a white-collar worker in Shenyang, and I interviewed him at a Starbucks during the evening after he finished work. Jack is from Fuxin, a smaller city near Shenyang, and his parents still live there. He is single and lives in Shenyang by himself. Jack is very concerned about his parents and said that he would certainly look after them in person in the future. He is highly reflexive, and sensitive to some extent. He has many philosophies about being a good son, a good partner, a good friend, and a good man in general.

11. Jia fei mao, 32, Shenyang

Jia fei mao is a high-school teacher of politics in Shenyang. I interviewed him during the afternoon in a vacant classroom at his school. He is from Inner Mongolia Province, but has settled in Shenyang for many years. He lives with his wife and daughter. Jia fei mao is very proud of his rural origins and attaches great significance to the sense of having 'roots' and maintaining a harmonious family.

12. Jiang feng, 23, Shanghai

Jiang feng is a final-year undergraduate student in Shanghai. He was doing an internship with a tourism company and I interviewed him in a cafe one Saturday. He is from Anhui Province, but hopes to continue working and living in Shanghai. He just entered a relationship.

13. Jim, 25, Shanghai

Jim is a local Shanghainese. He is a sales manager, and I interviewed him in a cafe one Saturday. Jim is talkative and outspoken, and he is very confident about his working competence. He has a long-term girlfriend and they plans to marry soon. But Jim is very concerned about *fangzi*, because he and his family are not able to purchase a new apartment. His girlfriend is from a better-off family and his future mother-in-law might be able to provide them with a separate *fangzi*. These issues brought him complicated feelings.

14. JJ, 29, Shenyang

JJ just returned from the USA when I interviewed him. It took place in a cafe during the weekend. He failed to obtain a Master's degree abroad, and was preparing for the start of a postgraduate course at a local university in Shenyang. JJ's mother is a university lecturer and his father is a senior officer in the army. He also ran his own business when he studied abroad. JJ is satisfied with his life and positive about the future. He is single and does not want to have children even if he marries in the future.

15. L, 23, Shenyang

L is a final-year undergraduate student in Shenyang, and was preparing to study abroad for a Master's degree. I interviewed him during the day. L talked a lot about his parents, to whom he is very close. He is in a stable relationship.

16. Lee, 27, Shenyang

Lee is an assistant Party branch secretary at a rail depot station. I interviewed him during the day at his office. Lee is from Jinzhou, a small city near Shenyang. He has

an older brother and a younger sister. Lee is very proud of his mother, who was the major provider when he was a child and worked very hard to raise the three children. Lee is single, but he has already bought a *fangzi* in suburban Shenyang.

17. Leery, 32, Shanghai

Leery is an administrator in the army, and I interviewed him in a weekend at a cafe. He was from Xi'an province. Leery's mother passed away when he was 18, and he lived with his father after that. Leery is married with a young daughter. His father has moved to Shanghai, but lives separately from them. His wife is a local Shanghainese but, he said, her family background is not as good as his. Leery complained about his wife's vanity, personality, and mothering, saying that his marriage was full of problems since the birth of his daughter. So he does not want to have another child.

18. Leslie, 31, Shanghai

Leslie is a senior banking manager, and I interviewed him in a cafe after he finished work in the evening. Leslie's daughter was born a few days before the interview. He is from Jiangsu Province, but his mother has moved to Shanghai to live with them. Leslie has a very strong sense of responsibility to work hard in order to support his family and provide a comfortable life for his daughter. Leslie has his own *fangzi*, but he and his wife have already discussed moving it to a bigger one in a good school district. He plans to have another child.

19. Misery, 25, Shanghai

Misery is a white-collar worker in a national-owned company, and I interviewed him during the weekend in a cafe. Misery is a local Shanghainese. He is single and lives with his mother. His parents divorced when he was little, and he said that he did not have much to say about his father.

20. Neyo, 29, Shanghai

Neyo works at the airport on airplane maintenance. I interviewed him in a public cafe during a weekday when he was off shift. Neyo will marry his girlfriend soon,

and he will then move out of his parental home into their own apartment. Neyo is not satisfied with his salary, but he does not want to give up his current stable job. He has been thinking about doing some part-time jobs to increase his income.

21. Rocky, 28, Shanghai

Rocky owns his own hair salon, and I interviewed him during the day at his salon. Rocky is from a rural village in Jiangsu Province and his family lived a rather poor life during his childhood. He had just bought his own *fangzi* when I interviewed him, and his wife was pregnant. His work is generally very busy and he often cannot keep his wife company. Rocky's parents still live in his hometown.

22. S, 31, Shanghai

S is a senior bank clerk in Shanghai, and I interviewed him during the weekend at a cafe. He is a local Shanghainese. S recently married, and has his own *fangzi* but with a mortgage to pay back. Throughout the interview, he stressed the importance of living a stable, harmonious and balanced life.

23. San pangzi, 32, Shenyang

San pangzi works in a research institute attached to national-owned enterprise. I met him during the day in a vacant office at his workplace. San pangzi was the only participant with two children. San pangzi's wife is a teacher in high school and earns more than him. He was very reflexive about his life, ranging from health, career, everyday family life and, indeed, almost every topic during the interview.

24. Sean, 31, Shenyang

Sean is a bank clerk in Shenyang, and I interviewed him during the weekend in a cafe. Sean is from Jilin Province, but has bought a *fangzi* in Shenyang with the help of his parents. He is in a stable relationship and is thinking about marrying his girlfriend. Besides his formal job, Sean is also a scriptwriter at a theatre. He is not close to his parents, as he said, because they lived apart for a long time during his childhood and they treated him very strictly.

25. Simon, 27, Shenyang

Simon is a white-collar worker in Shenyang, and I interviewed him during the weekend in a cafe. He cohabits with his girlfriend in a *fangzi* bought by his parents. Simon stresses the importance of maintaining family harmony, and he believes that his girlfriend is someone who shares his familial values.

26. TMB, 30, Shenyang

TMB is a civil servant in Shenyang. I interviewed him during the weekend in a cafe. He is single and lives with his parents. Apart from his formal job, TMB is a part-time director in a theatre. He hopes to quit his job one day and study film-making, or make his own documentary at the South Pole.

27. Xiaozhu, 31, Shanghai

Xiaozhu is a white-collar worker in Shanghai, and I met him during his lunch break. He is a local Shanghainese. He, his wife and son live together with his parents in order to receive parental help with childcare. Xiaozhu wants to move out, but sees it as difficult to achieve at the moment.

28. XiXi, 30, Shanghai

XiXi is a university lecturer in Shanghai, and I interviewed him during the day at his office. He is from Jiangsu Province. XiXi is married and has his own *fangzi*, but with a mortgage to pay back. His wife is pregnant, and they live together with XiXi's parents.

29. Zhi, 27, Shenyang

Zhi is an elevator maintenance worker, and I interviewed him during the day at his company. Zhi was born and raised in Dengta—a semi-rural town in Liaoning Province. He left home around the age of 15 and since then has taken various jobs in Shenyang, during which he also served in the army for a while. Zhi has his own *fangzi* in Shenyang, which was bought with the help of his parents. He lives with his wife, who is pregnant.

30. 2881, 28, Shenyang

2881 runs his own small business in Shenyang, which he inherited from his father. I interviewed him during the day in a restaurant. He is married with a two-year-old son. He has his own *fangzi*, the down payment for which was offered by his parents and the couple is paying off the mortgage. 2881 stresses that he is family-centred, and shows great delight and pride in being a father.

Appendix 4

Glossary of Key Terms and Phrases

Danwei	单位	working unit in national-owned enterprise
Dao	道	inheriting and following the normal course of past events, and travelling through shared cultural heritage
Diaosi	屌丝	a sloppy, cynical and poor man
Du	度	degree, position, quantity or proportion
Fangzi	房子	an apartment
Guanxi	关系	relationship, connection, network
He/Hexie	和/和谐	harmony
Junzi	君子	a Confucian gentleman
Kenlao	啃老	intense reliance on parents
Li	礼	ritual, propriety, etiquette
Niang	娘	a man who is effeminate or lacks macho masculinity
Putong	普通	ordinary, in contrast to outstanding or falling behind
Shenti	身体	body, body-person
Shizai	实在	unsophisticated, unassuming, simple and trustworthy
Suzhi	素质	quality
Wen	文	cultural attainments
Wu	武	martial valour
Yangsheng	养生	health preservation and life nurturance
You dandang	有担当	being willing to and capable of shouldering responsibilities
Zhengchang	正常	normal
Zhongxing	中性	neutral gender/sex

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