

Gender Performance, Symbolic Capital, and Power: A Critical Analysis of Parenting Content on Chinese Social Media

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Abstract. This study explores how gendered divisions of labor and power relations are shaping parent–child dynamics within contemporary Chinese nuclear families. Drawing on classic sociological theories of family and gender, we examine the traditional roles of mothers as caregivers and fathers as providers, while also considering the profound changes brought about by China’s rapid modernization and the rise of the digital era. Through a two-part research approach, a qualitative content analysis of family parenting videos on social media and in-depth interviews with female adolescents, we sought to understand how these dynamics are performed and perceived from both a public and a private perspective. The findings show that deeply uneven gendered roles persist, with mothers carrying the vast majority of invisible emotional and educational labor, while fathers’ smaller contributions often gain outsized public recognition and "symbolic capital" on social media. Furthermore, the research reveals that children are not passive observers but active participants in the family triangle, often taking on the role of "referee" to manage parental tensions. By linking classic theories with the realities of modern Chinese families, this study offers unique insights into the changing nature of parenting, power, and intimacy in the digital age.

Keywords: Gender Roles, Family Power, Social Media, Symbolic Capital, Parenting Performance

1. Introduction

In the long discussion in sociology and family researches, households are viewed as primary settings of socialization, as well as the directest reflection of gendered divisions of labor and power relations. The interaction between parents and children not only relates to daily caring and education but also implies the expectation and standard towards the gender role by the society. From classical researches, we are able to see a long-standing mode: mothers are constructed as unconditional caregivers and emotion providers; fathers, in contrast, are more bonded with family raising and authority [1, 2]. This type of role division is most prominent in research on Western nuclear families, and it appears in multiple forms within multicultural contexts as well.

In China, the family structure has undergone profound changes in recent decades. From huge families to nuclear families, together with the change from the "one-child era" under the family planning policy to the educational anxiety and "refined parenting" brought about by the rise of the middle class in recent years, the inner family relationship has continuously been being reshaped. The

participation and division of labor taken by mothers and fathers in parental upbringing have been largely affected by traditional Confucian theories [3, 4]; at the same time, they have evolved with a new tension in today's rapid modernization and globalization. For one, gender equality has been promoted in various areas gradually, and the role of fathers tends to "enter" more in family education compared to the past. On the other hand, mothers still assume abundant invisible emotional labor and educational responsibilities.

Within today's digital era, how family relationships are present has already been changed. Not only providing platforms for family-life sharing, social media has become a space in which the public expresses themselves and recreates new gender expectations of families [5-7]. Therefore, this study revisits classic research on family and gender while grounding the discussion in the realities of China's contemporary nuclear families. It explores how gendered divisions of labor shape parent-child relationships and family education, using Western theories as tools but remaining attentive to China's unique social and policy contexts. In the digital age, the study further asks how these dynamics are being reshaped, offering insights into the changing gender order in society.

2. Classical researches of family education and gendered division of labor

Building on these foundational discussions, a closer look at classic research reveals how the gendered division of labor in the nuclear family is not merely a practical arrangement, but a deeply ingrained cultural paradigm. In this long-standing view, a mother's role is far more than just childcare; it is constructed as an innate, moral identity. As scholars like Thompson and Walker [8] describe, the enduring image of motherhood is one of an unconditional, intuitive caregiver who provides constant and selfless attention to her children. This idealized role often demands that women's identities be wholly defined by their children's needs, placing them in direct tension with other aspects of their lives, such as their careers. In stark contrast, the classic image of fatherhood is that of a distant breadwinner. Fathers are seen as lacking the natural ability or desire to provide day-to-day care and instead fulfills his duty by ensuring the family's economic well-being. This traditional arrangement means that while a mother's involvement is considered a necessity, a father's participation is often seen as a welcomed form of "helping" or a more playful and optional contribution to family life.

Yet, beyond these distinct roles, a more nuanced analysis of family dynamics reveals a complex interplay between "power" and "connection". While some earlier research viewed power as the central force shaping family relations, later scholarship argued that "hierarchy" and "solidarity" are inextricably linked. The two forces are both opposing and mutually reinforcing, suggesting that conflict can arise not just from overt power struggles but also within the very fabric of family intimacy. This insight provides a richer framework for understanding the invisible labor and emotional dynamics at play within parenting relationships.

While these Western conceptual tools offer a solid starting point, their application must be critically re-evaluated in the Chinese context. In China, the transformation of family structures over the past few decades—from extended to nuclear, from collective to privatized parenting—invites a re-examination of these dynamics. Although the cultural expectations surrounding motherhood and fatherhood differ from the American context, similar patterns of "intensive mothering" and "invisible paternal labor" are increasingly visible in urban, middle-class families. This study therefore adapts these theories not as universal truths, but as analytical frameworks that must be critically evaluated in light of China's unique socio-cultural and policy environment. In the Chinese context, this dynamic is shaped by traditions such as Fei Xiaotong's "dual-system nurturing," where a mother is responsible for a child's physiological development while a father provides social

development. This “male-breadwinner, female-caregiver” model continues to thrive, reinforced by the increasingly high-stakes and elaborate nature of modern parenting [9]. What is more, despite rapid modernization and the rise of dual-income families, recent empirical research reveals a surprising persistence of these traditional gender roles. Survey data from Wu et al. [9, 10] shows a notable increase in public agreement with statements like “men should focus on society, and women on the family,” and studies by Tong and Liu [11] confirm that even in urban dual-income households, wives still disproportionately bear the burden of childcare and homework assistance.

3. Theoretical frameworks of gendered division

Based on the historical patterns of gendered family roles, a more robust theoretical toolkit is necessary to deconstruct the nuances of contemporary family dynamics. To begin, we utilize “gender performance theory”, which suggests that gender is not a fixed essence but a social script enacted through daily actions, speech, and habits. In her seminal work, Judith Butler [12] introduced the concept of performativity, arguing that gender is a stylized repetition of acts that, over time, solidify the illusion of an innate identity. In the context of family education, this lens allows us to move beyond viewing parental roles as innate and instead analyze them as deliberate “performances” of motherhood and fatherhood. For example, a mother’s patience and emotional support during homework, or a father’s firm tone when setting rules, are not simply personality traits; as Emily W. Kane [13] argues, they are specific performances that reinforce societal expectations and, in turn, perpetuate the very gender roles they appear to reflect. This analytical framework helps illuminate how gendered divisions are not just about who does what, but how those actions are portrayed and perceived within the family unit.

This performance is deeply intertwined with the second theoretical lens: the dynamic interplay of “power and intimacy”. While some scholars have described power as the central force defining familial relations, a more sophisticated view argues that hierarchy and solidarity are inseparable. In their work on family power dynamics, Foucault [14] and others show that power is not merely a top-down force but a relational process embedded in all interactions. This framework allows us to explore how the unequal distribution of power in family education—such as which parent has the final say on academic decisions—is not just an issue of control but also has a profound impact on the parent-child relationship and the quality of connection. By examining how power is expressed and negotiated, we can better understand the emotional labor and relational costs embedded in the gendered division of educational responsibilities.

Finally, this study introduces the concept of “symbolic capital” to understand the social valuation of different parenting labors. As defined by Pierre Bourdieu [15] symbolic capital is the value or prestige that society and individuals attach to certain actions, a form of recognition that can be accumulated and converted into social advantage. In family education, this framework helps people analyze how the extensive, often invisible work of a mother—from emotional support to meticulous academic planning—may not be measured in economic terms but accumulates a powerful symbolic capital of selfless devotion. In contrast, a father's involvement, even if minimal, may be viewed as a valuable and highly visible form of “new-age parenting,” granting him a distinct type of symbolic capital and social recognition [16]. This perspective is particularly useful for our analysis of how the digital sphere reinforces and reimagines these forms of capital.

Taken above altogether, these three theoretical frameworks will serve as the core analytical tools for this study. They will allow us to move beyond a simple description of gender roles and delve into the performative, relational, and symbolic dimensions of family education, offering a comprehensive understanding of how these dynamics are being reshaped in China's digital age.

4. Analysis: gendered performance and symbolic capital in digital parenting

Despite the various functions people use the Internet for nowadays, such as entertainment, online transactions, and shopping, for example, the most obvious reason for Internet use is serving as a medium for the dissemination of opinions, ideas, and participation in a common conversation with each other [17]. According to Pitaksantayothin, there are several unique features contributing to the effectiveness and extensity of social networks, especially for social media. First, the one-to-many way of communication. It allows an individual to construct and share his/her own idea with a larger crowd of audience, and that audience will pass down the information to more people, making the communication happen concurrently. Second, social networking obeys the form of peer-to-peer communication, which fills the gap between content creators and message receivers to a large extent. In view of this, everyone in the virtual community is to be considered as a "user", instead of highlighting the hierarchy of status on the platform, thus creating a more equal atmosphere where individuals are able to share their opinions more freely and frankly in each discussion. Finally and most importantly, because of the scalability that social networking can accommodate any content to any condition, information is allowed to reach far larger crowds and greatly influences a number of people worldwide. In conclusion, the Internet provides new spaces where users are allowed to exercise their rights and make opinions freely by being both speakers who influence more audience and viewers who urge more views to the content, making public communication and discussion easy. As a result, social media platforms expand the channel from which people learn about gender equality, making the promotion of gender equality worldwide more powerful [18]. For instance, in a vicious attack on a group of women at a restaurant in northern China in 2022, the discussion of gender-based violence was largely prompted due to the dissemination of footage through the Internet. On the Chinese social media site Weibo, the pertinent hashtag had generated more than half a billion views and tens of thousands of comments on the following day the incident happened. Concurrently, the discussion of gender-based violation and gender inequality has been triggered at multiple platforms like Rednote, WeChat, and TikTok, and it has tremendously raised public awareness toward women's rights and safety issues.

As argued above, social networking registers and impacts various opinions, and it is within this new communicative space that the roles, expectations, and gendered divisions of labor within the modern family are being both performed and renegotiated. This study employs a qualitative content analysis to delve into family parenting content on Chinese social media platforms. Data was primarily gathered by searching keywords such as “baba dai wa” (dads with kids) and “quanzhi mama” (full-time mothers) on woman-targeted platform Rednote. To ensure the selected sample held significant social relevance, this research only included videos with over 10,000 likes and 1,000 comments. Ultimately, a total of 30 videos were chosen as the research sample for content coding and analysis. Additionally, the top 50 most-liked comments under each of these 30 videos were systematically collected, resulting in a total of over 1,500 comments, to explore the public’s gendered expectations for family education.

The analysis of the collected videos and comments reveals that social media isn't just a place where we see what families are like; it's a place where they're actively creating and performing their roles. A key finding is the different ways mothers and fathers are presented. Fatherhood is often shown as a journey or a set of special moments, like a father learning to care for his child or humorously struggling with homework. This performance gets a lot of praise, earning fathers a kind of social status or "symbolic capital" for doing things that are usually seen as a mother's job. This also conforms to what Thompson L. and Walker A.J. [8] found that the description "helping" of fathers' contribution never refers to that of mothers'.

In contrast, a mother's work is rarely put on display in the same way. The mothers in these videos are either in the background, documenting the father's efforts, or openly sharing their frustrations with the heavy burden of motherhood. They don't seem to gain the same "symbolic capital" for their everyday labor. The comments on these videos really highlight the difference: a father's effort is seen as exceptional, while a mother's is just expected.

The comments section shows that people aren't just passive viewers. They actively participate in judging these performances. The public's praise for fathers and criticism of mothers reveals a shared set of expectations. It's a clear example of how social media acts as a space where traditional gender roles are not only seen but also reinforced, even as people express a desire for more balanced family life.

5. Perceptions of the family triangle: a child's perspective

In order to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of family education and power dynamics from a child's perspective, the study below uses in-depth qualitative interviews. A total of fifteen female teenagers, ranging in age from 15 to 17, were interviewed to explore their perceptions of family roles, communication styles, and parental influence. It is important to acknowledge that the sample for this qualitative study is composed solely of female participants. While this does limit the generalization of the findings to a broader adolescent population, it also provides a deeper and more focused view on how female teenagers perceive and interpret the gendered dynamics of their family, offering deeper insights into the complex role of a daughter within a triangular family structure.

In this qualitative study, all fourteen interviewees described the conspicuous labor division in their family: they talk to their mothers for emotional support and daily affairs, while their fathers are more of the go-to for more rational, suggestive ideas like future planning, money, and career. During adolescence, children perceive their fathers as more powerful and more autocratic than their mothers; children perceive mothers as more sympathetic and responsive.

On power and intimacy, five of fourteen interviewees expressed their feelings of the existing clear hierarchy and authority of their fathers (even though some are quiet and some are relatively more aggressive); they described their mothers as submissive and passive in those dynamic power relationships. Other interviewees explain the concept of an equal family where parents show the same importance to family decisions (even children's opinions are the most important ones). This shows the traditional pattern of "male as head of the household" still remains, but an evolving pattern of Chinese family becomes more and more popular at the same time, which implies a more equal relationship and power starts to intervene between family members.

In terms of the role of kids, three interviewees explicitly call themselves "referees" who try to mediate their parents' conflicts. Seven interviewees talk about balancing their parents' emotions, providing "emotional value" to their fathers and acting as a crutch for their mothers. The other five interviewees declare being "calm and rational" to avoid siding with anyone. It shows how the unequal power dynamic (the "hierarchy") and the gendered emotional roles (the "performance") force the child into a third, active role. The child is not just a passive receiver of parenting but an active participant who manages the parents' relationship.

In addition, when asked about the perception of family-related content and the impact of social media, the answers from fifteen participants also vary, showing different levels of media literacy. Half of the interviewees see social media parenting videos as "fake" and "staged"; in contrast, the other half of the interviewees find the videos to be "real" and relatable, sometimes even mirroring

their own family lives. This reveals the performance of parents on social media is visible, and the content does rebuild family relations from real life.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored how gendered divisions of labor within Chinese nuclear families remain both persistent and evolving. While fathers' increasing involvement in parenting reflects broader ideals of gender equality, mothers continue to bear the overwhelming burden of daily care, educational planning, and emotional labor. Social media plays a crucial role in amplifying these dynamics: fathers are often celebrated for limited yet visible contributions, while mothers' continuous efforts are naturalized and overlooked. At the same time, children emerge not as passive recipients but as active participants in family relationships, negotiating between parental roles and even mediating conflicts. These findings underline how family education is a site where gendered power, intimacy, and symbolic capital intersect.

Nevertheless, this research has limitations. The interview sample focuses on female adolescents, narrowing the diversity of perspectives. Likewise, social-media content is drawn mainly from urban, middle-class settings, potentially overlooking the full spectrum of Chinese family experiences. Expanding future research to include more varied social backgrounds, as well as longitudinal studies, would deepen our understanding of these dynamics. By combining classical theories with contemporary Chinese realities, this study highlights how digital platforms reshape family roles and make visible the unequal value placed on parenting. Looking forward, policy reforms, cultural narratives, and changing expectations may create opportunities for more balanced and diverse forms of family education, offering broader insight into the transformation of gender order in Chinese society.

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