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Abstract

In 2013, Hunan Television, one of China's most successful provincial satellite television stations, debuted a reality TV series featuring celebrity fathers and their children. A localized version of a Korean-developed format, *Where Are We Going, Dad* (*baba quna'er*) brought dads and kids together to different locations in the countryside, usually very remote and exotic, to complete certain assignments. This inquiry takes *Where Are We Going, Dad* as its focus; it seeks to understand how and how far notions of fatherhood are being constructed and circulated in contemporary China. It does so by way of audiences. While the show was evidently configuring and promoting their versions of fatherhood, we wanted to find out what viewers thought of the show, and of fatherhood. Located in the juncture of fatherhood and reality show studies, this exploratory inquiry identifies three themes from the conversations of four families in urban China. First, they articulate the difficulty of being a good father in a rapidly changing China and the concomitant longing to a return of traditional Chinese fatherhood. A second recurring theme concerns the ways in which they accept this tension between tradition and modernity. Finally, they demonstrate savviness in their viewing of the show.

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We build on the three themes to argue that such reality shows do impact on Chinese families' understanding of fatherhood, but their savvy viewership points to the limit of such media impact.

Keywords

China, reality television, daddy where are you going?, fatherhood, audience study

Introduction

In 2013, Hunan Television, one of China's most successful provincial satellite television stations, debuted a reality TV series featuring celebrity fathers and their children. A localized version of a Korean-developed format, *Where Are We Going, Dad* (*baba quna'er*, hereafter WAWGD) brought dads and kids together to different locations in the countryside, usually very remote and exotic, to complete certain assignments. Underlying the program is the assumed alienation between fathers and sons in contemporary Chinese life. These fathers are far too busy, spending far too little time for and with their children. To rectify this absent fatherhood and to foster better paternal bond, the reality show invited five fathers and their children to participate in all kinds of challenging, team-building activities. The last, and the sixth season, was released in 2019. Two films, based on the first two seasons, were produced and screened nation-wide in 2014 and 2015.

This inquiry takes WAWGD as its focus; it seeks to understand how and how far notions of fatherhood are being constructed and circulated in contemporary China. It does so by way of audiences. Informed by casual encounters during fieldwork where this reality show often became a conversation topic, we were intrigued by its appeal to the viewers. While the show was evidently configuring and promoting their versions of fatherhood, we wanted to find out what viewers thought of the show, and of fatherhood. Given the family context where fatherhood is actualized, we decided to invite ourselves to four families. It was in such domestic setting that they were facilitated to talk about WAWGD, from which we will explore about contemporary notions of fatherhood, as well as the impact of reality shows—and its limits—in contemporary China. We use the word “explore” as the confines of this inquiry cannot and should not warrant more than its exploratory nature.

We locate our inquiry in the juncture of fatherhood and reality show studies. In the following, we will offer a review of these two lines of scholarship and map out our engagement. We will then explain our methodological choices, and the limitations they entail. The four families will be introduced. In the analytical section, we will identify three recurring themes from their conversations. First, they articulate the difficulty of being a good father in a rapidly changing China and the concomitant longing to a return of traditional Chinese fatherhood. A second recurring theme concerns the ways in which they accept this tension between tradition and modernity. Finally, they demonstrate savviness in their viewing of the show. We build on the three themes to argue that such reality shows do impact on Chinese families' understanding of fatherhood, but their savvy viewership points to the limit of such media impact. In the concluding section, we will discuss some implications of these findings and propose possible research directions.

Fatherhood and Reality TV

As testified by the popularity of WAWGD, the encounters between fathers and their children are endearing. Despite, or because of, such entertainment appeal, they also serve an educational goal: how to be a good father? Parents want to make sure that they are doing the right thing as parents, and

WAWGD provides techniques for successful parenting, or, more precisely, successful fatherhood. Watching the paternal scenes, viewers are invited to envision their own role as parents, and like the fathers in the shows, interpellated to engage themselves in a similar process of self-improvement to become better fathers.

Modern fatherhood is one important domain for self-governance. Academic studies suggest that the traditionally big gap between fathers and children has decreased and roles of the father have expanded from being an authority and example to being an emotionally involved friend and confidant (Song and Hird, 2014; Xia et al., 2004). Others show how the authoritarian father figure transforms into an advisory role when the child grows up, (Ash, 2016; Feng, Poston, Wang, 2014; Xia et al., 2004). Changing ideals, or demands, of fatherhood have taken place in tandem with development of gender equality, in particular women's participation in the job market. A dual-earner model of maintaining a household has necessitated a dual-carer model of parenting, and with it the notion of so-called "involved fatherhood" (Molander, Kleppe and Östberg, 2019). Critics, however, point out how such notion is class- and race-biased; without structural change, enhanced paternal expectations are in effect a "set-up," another neoliberal trick, summoning men already marginalized to do better, to work harder (Black and Keyes, 2021). Taken together, these studies foreground the main issue that *WAWGD* seems to address: a supposed "crisis" of fatherhood, and possible ways to resolve this crisis. Our exploration concerns the Chinese experience.¹

The governmental logic of *WAWGD* centers on how to remain a good father according to traditional societal role models in an era of enormous socio-economic growth, taking place in a context of rapid urbanization and globalization (Keane and Zhang, 2017). Interpretations, however, differ on how this balancing act between tradition and modernity is played out in the series, as we will demonstrate in our analyses to follow. According to a Chinese study, "in the past Chinese tradition men work outside and women do housework (*nanzhuwai, nvzhunei*), nowadays fathers lack communication skills with their children. Through the show *WAWGD* fathers know their problems about their relationship with their sons" (Zhao, 2018: 111). Drawing on interviews with young men in China, one study corresponds to the changing ideals of masculinity and fatherhood, singling out the tension between *yang* (to raise a child) and *jiao* (to teach a child), the kind of tension we see readily enshrined in *WAWGD* (Cao and Lin, 2019). Placed in a broader, historical context, paternal ideals have been under duress ever since China's intensifying attempt to modernize itself, from the Republican period, through the Socialist, to the reform-era (Li, 2018). Generally located in the scholarship of changing fatherhood, our inquiry converses in particular with a number of studies on the same reality show.

One study demonstrates the societal value of the show, arguing that *WAWGD* underlines fathers' acknowledgment of relationship issues with their children (Zhao, 2018). Two studies examine the construction of fatherhood and masculinity in the first season of the program. In her analysis, Li concludes that the show has demonstrated the emergence of "involved fatherhood, and a 'wish for increased paternal involvement in childcare, and the preference for a liberal, emotionally warm fathering style over the critical, authoritarian stance,'" which the author claims to be central components of contemporary urban Chinese fatherhood (Li, 2016: 32). Song, on the other hand, observes a double-layered construction in the show's representation: "While the show's portrayal of 'men as fathers' has mobilized the popularity of Korean soft masculinity to create a new, trans-cultural masculinity ideal, its focus on 'fathers as men' appears to perpetuate a conservative understanding of fatherhood that reinforces gendered dimensions of masculinity/femininity" (Song, 2018: 177). Contrary to Li, Song concludes that the show's construction of fatherhood is still rather traditional despite aspects that are considered "progressive." More fundamentally, Xinxin Jiang (2018) argues that the series is an excellent cultural site to witness the discourse of changing

fatherhood practices and gender roles in China, asking whether the show helps audiences understand the merits and weaknesses of traditional Chinese parenting practices. In the analytical sections to follow, we will connect our findings to these studies. In the process, we are making one distinct departure: we are investigating the reality show not only in textual terms of its propagation and governance of fatherhood ideals; we want to understand how the audience makes sense of the show.

In China, like elsewhere in the world, reality TV has become the stock in trade (Bai and Song, 2015; Jiang, 2018; Wang, 2017) and many successful formats (*The Voice*, *Idols*, *Big Brother*, *Take Me Out*) hail from overseas. Many shows are billed as entertainment, but simultaneously provide information, instruction, and practical advice on everyday situations, such as what to eat, how to stay healthy, but also how to conduct oneself in intimate relationships (Sun, 2014; 2015; Wang, 2017; Xu, 2007). In this prescriptive and normative sense, reality shows can be understood as enacting experiments in governance for testing, refining, and sharpening people's abilities to conduct themselves in accordance with certain demands and ideologies being placed on them (Ouellette and Hay, 2008).

Televised life-advice and guidance on who to become and how to live have become integral to the formation of what Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang (2008: 5) call the "new social" in China (2008). The authors are referring to the "gap between state action and self-interested endeavors," a space that is taken over by "neoliberal tools of privatization, (...) animating a new kind of self-consciousness and self-governing among Chinese subjects" (Ong and Zhang, 2008: 5). The very possibility of this "new social," the space to offer certainties to the populations can be attributed to the fading away of securities of socialist rule. During this transformation, according to Yan Yunxiang, the "politically and ideologically charged rules about what to wear, whom to date, when to get married, how to raise children, and so forth" disappeared, giving way to a sense of insecurity (Yan, 2010: 502). Elsewhere, Yan has argued that the Chinese model of "individualization without individualism" provides increased "mobility, choice, and freedom," but without state welfare support or political influence (Yan, 2009: 287–291). Relatedly, other works refer to a "privatized" society where the state recalibrates its position by withdrawing from the micromanagement of biographies, forcing people to rely on themselves and manage their own lives (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Ong, 2006). Studies also show how television as a medium is deeply entangled with family cultures. Xie (2022), for example, shows how the China Central Television's Spring Festival Gala Show is part of ritualized family traditions.

Building on this line of scholarship, studies on reality shows in China focus on its content and tease out their representational logic and power dynamic. Take our concern here, namely, gender politics, as an illustration, we see how the hugely popular and heavily researched dating show *If You Are the One* reiterate and reify the image of women as subordinates and dependents looking for material support from men. Even when the single women in the show are the ones posing questions to the male bachelor candidate and making choices, the show is criticized as constructing the Chinese version of post-feminist popular culture and sensibilities, eventually buttressing patriarchy and the capitalistic yearning (Li, 2015; Luo and Sun, 2015). As if to foreground the very fact of state withdrawal, in 2010 the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television decided to intervene, trying to contain the risk of leaving matters of norm and value construction to media companies; from then on the women's choice clearly goes to a caring and respectful man, rather than a rich guy (Chen, 2017). A study of a more recent makeover show *You Are So Beautiful* confirms the persistent textual essentialization of gender, and the dominant neoliberal and cultural norms and values in contemporary China (Peng, 2021). While there are studies who offer alternate ways of reading these shows—more diverse gender representations (Hu and Wang, 2020); enhancing public

discussion on gender issues (Wang, 2017)—the thrust of these studies in the intersection of reality show and gender politics is to critically examine the governance impact and its analytical lens is textual. The studies on WAWGD cited earlier are similarly premised. We are taking a different, and less trodden, path in this inquiry: audience research. Acknowledging (but not assuming the primary) importance of media texts, we go to ask audiences what these texts mean to them.

Positioning ourselves in the tradition of active audience research (Ang, 1991; Hermes, 2008), we ask: how do families reflect on conceptions, techniques, and role models of fatherhood as conveyed in WAWGD? How do they negate, adjust, or appropriate these techniques and conceptions? How do they talk about the show? ... Indeed, we mobilize the central thrust lodged by audience studies: we go beyond the textual in order to better grasp the governmental logic of reality TV in China (and elsewhere, for that matter).

Methods

We employed focus groups as method to explore how audiences reflect on, discuss, and appropriate WAWGD. This methodological choice was informed by our fieldwork in China (for this and other projects), when informants told us their families regularly discussed about this program. Some parents explicitly stated that they tried to learn from the reality show. We therefore chose to conduct focus groups with families, with members representing two or three generations present. We tried to keep the research environment as “natural” as possible, with the aim of recuperating their viewing experience as spontaneously as possible. We had our discussion in the family’s own home, watching the show on their own television. The gatherings took place in June 2017. Considering a camera’s physical prominence and possible interference, we decided not to make video recordings of the proceedings, but only audio recordings. The discussion was conducted in Putonghua, subsequently transcribed verbatim. The facilitator started all gatherings with an explanation of the research purpose, stressing the importance of speaking their minds freely. During the discussion, the facilitator asked descriptive questions and avoided normative ones—not steering the conversation but at the same time keeping it within the outlines of the research.

The families were recruited through the personal networks of two of the authors. All four families (14 individuals in total) have a middle-class background and live in apartment buildings in Changsha, in Hunan. Two couples received us with their only child, one couple with two children, and one with their child and the child’s grandfather. Among the five children, three children are male, two female. Three focus groups include members from two generations; one includes three generations. All parents have completed tertiary education, either teachers or working in professional or managerial/administrative positions. The focus group methodology was to tap into the subjective experiences and meaning making of participants, and explore themes emerged from the discussions. Following the tradition of qualitative research, any insights drawn are to be understood as illustrative and illuminating—in the sense of throwing light on everyday practices of the people involved—without claiming to be representative or conclusive (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017).

To stimulate discussion, we selected three scenes from WAWGD deemed to be typical, and evocative regarding the question of fatherhood. In the first scene, the fathers and children are looking for mud eels in a rice paddy in Nanjing county, in Fujian. Dajun, the son of actor Lin Yongjian, refuses to enter the muddy field. The father urges him in, but the son screams, cries, and resists. The father stops pushing him and tries to convince him verbally. The son still refuses. As the audience is told, the son is afraid of snails and insects. The screen then turns to “reflection mode,” where the father reflects on this conflict, and expresses his inability to really understand his son (HSTV, 2015a: 1:03:00–1:05:50).

The second scene, about filial piety, takes place in Xishuangbanna, in Yunnan. In a Buddhist temple, the participants are required to perform a kowtow exercise, described as the “most fundamental etiquette.” The monk leading the ceremony asks the children to kowtow to their fathers; some of the fathers get emotional. In short reflective intermezzos, we see Lin Yongjian attribute his tears to memory, the past, and tradition. His son is now kowtowing to him, says the father, something he did to his grandparents when he was a child. Another father, Liu Ye, also appreciates this ceremony as recognition of filial piety and states how his French wife was equally impressed when she first saw this. Referring to the children, the monk explains how to kowtow for forgiveness for bad things they have done (HSTV, 2015b: 34:20–37:55).

The third scene takes place in a veteran village in Zizhou county, in Shaanxi. The fathers and children need to organize a wedding for two Red Soldiers who are in their eighties, but never had a proper wedding ceremony. Host Li Rui pays tribute to the older generation, who “has sacrificed to enable us our good lives.” Then, against a backdrop of military music, the former soldier and other veterans step onto the podium, while his bride walks down the aisle with her bridesmaids (the children). They are then married with the ceremony prepared by the fathers and their children, who have also prepared gifts for the newly-weds. Finally, in “reflection mode,” actor Hu Jun articulates gratitude and honor to the older generation of soldiers (HSTV, 2015c: 1:14:25–1:20:35).

Parenting in a Rapidly Changing China

Concurring with the textual analyses from the abovementioned studies on WAWGD, one trope that emerges from the focus group discussions is: “China is changing rapidly.” A shared sentiment it may be, the parents and children concerned, however, do not unequivocally regard it as a positive development. While economic growth and better living standards are cherished, rapid development also means to these families a loss that the new generation has little idea where China came from. In response to scene 1, the mud eel challenge, a mother tells her child: “You should try to go into the mud, like farmers do! Now you have better living standards, but so many of you haven’t had this experience (...) Because we are in the city now, we may have amusement parks, but no chance to experience this life.” A father mutters his embarrassment when Dajun, the son in the scene, refuses to go into the mud: “how can urban kids be like this?” While the parents do most of the talking, one child takes this issue much further, stating that because of the economic development, “Chinese people’s character has become sheep-like.” Clearly influenced by Jiang Rong’s 2004 bestseller *Wolf Totem*, a novel depicting the journey of a Han Chinese who traverses to Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution and discovers there a culture of freedom, independence, and respect, the child continues:

“Hmm...let’s put it this way. The heart of a man is bloody. Let’s temporarily call this bloodiness wolf-like. Conversely, there’s the sheep-like personality. In the Qin dynasty, Chinese people were wild wolves; in the Han, civil wolves; in the Song, civil sheep, and it has been going that way until now. (...) Everyone nowadays lacks the wolf-like adventure spirit of the Mongolians.”

His articulation encapsulates Jiang’s reversal of the civilization/barbarian distinction by criticizing the Han Chinese and Confucian culture, while praising the feral quality and independence of the nomadic populations in Inner Mongolia—and simultaneously conflating it with the urban/rural dichotomy. The past is imagined as freer, more adventurous, the show, intertextually linked with a book, thus propels in the child a pastoral nostalgia.

After watching the third fragment with the wedding, a mother states “[these older generations] have been fighting the enemy all these years in order to create better conditions for our younger generations.” Her husband then complements: “through the stories of the revolutionaries of the older generations, we truly believe that the peaceful and stable state of our country today is hard-won. Therefore, we must be grateful.” Their child gets their message, and reacts: “We have our life now because of the efforts of the red soldiers.” Thankfulness towards the past struggles is considered important while living in a rapidly changing China. Some families do point to the “cheesy and commercial” aspects of these scenes, which we will discuss later. Despite such critique, all families express their general fear of current generations losing touch with what they perceive as the traditional values of Chinese culture.

A fear of losing touch in a rapidly changing China is explicitly nationalist; cultural nostalgia and cultural nationalism, in these family discussions, seem to be two sides of the same coin. In this sense, the audience interpretation of the show reflects the historical socio-political role of television in China: to reinstate the principles of cultural collectivism while using traditional constructions of heroism as a strategy to boost patriotic sentiments (Huang, 1994; Li, 2013). The members of the focus groups unanimously worry about the loss of something packaged as “traditional Chinese culture” in an era of great socio-economic upheaval. This fear of losing the old script of how to live, and how to raise a child, underlines the families’, and the show’s, affirmation of “traditional Chinese culture.”

One mother’s articulation is exemplary of this affirmation. “The next generation may think they are the boss, while I’m not saying that they directly challenge authority. But I think it’s too free, too audacious. It’s gone too far. I think the way our generation respects our parents’ authority is better.” This trope continues in the discussion of the value of the ritual of kowtowing. According to one parent, kowtowing as a formal ritual is commendable: “As the younger generation, we expressed our thankfulness or repentance through a formality to our elders.” While other parents suggest that the ritual of kowtowing might be outdated—“different times have different formalities”—there is a consensus that a certain level of formalism is necessary to counter the individualizing, anti-authority tendencies associated with the West, indicating at the same time the realities and challenges posed by such tendencies to them, just like the fathers in the show. As one parent recalls:

“I remember when I was in school, I got sick and didn’t recover for a long time. My mother looked at me and said: ‘aiya, if only the illness could be born on my body, you wouldn’t be in so much pain.’ I really wanted to cry at that moment, and then after my mother said that, I knelt in front of her. My mother squatted down at once and hugged me. We cried for a long time. This deeply impressed me, really. The feeling of kneeling down to parents is a different experience. So, this ritual has its reasons; it is the inheritance from 5000 years of culture. We cannot just abandon it and create something new – that’s not necessary. Now that our economic foundation is getting better and better, the social education is deepening – we must demonstrate our spirit, we must be confident. Don’t think that all Western things are good.”

We cite this utterance in length as it demonstrates how the father is expressing his uncertainty obliquely with a memory of ready solutions to difficult parent-child situations. When older rituals no longer apply, what then? Blaming the West and longing for the old China is another way to say they are caught in between, and do not really know what to do. Another father refers explicitly to the loss of paternal authority: “You see, in the West, it’s now about challenging authority, overemphasizing the self, and asserting one’s personality.” Parents thus seem to have strong reservations about the values of individualism and free-spiritism that they associate with the West and value the

communitarianism and respect for authority that they regard as inherent to Chinese tradition. All the families exude this sense of going through high pace of transformation and modernization, and the fear that the parents are “losing touch,” not knowing what to do with their children.

In this conundrum, a father connects the show to his generation, and notes the usefulness of the show for his contemporaries in terms of child-raising behavior:

“The context is now that the post-80s and 90s generations suddenly have a child, and need to learn how to raise it well. When seeing how celebrities are raising their children, they reflect on their own child-rearing capabilities... The parents and children see it, they will get some inspiration.”

China has been undergoing dramatic changes. While WAWGD capitalizes the challenge these changes—modernization, urbanization, and individualization—pose on fatherhood, the three selected scenes provoke discussions fearing or blaming the influence from the West, cherishing and longing for the good old days and traditions. The fathers in these real homes feel like the fathers in the show, that they have to find ways to deal with a child growing up in very different time and space. The last quotation highlights a father’s acknowledgement of the usefulness of the show as vividly as his eagerness to find the show useful.

Accepting Ambivalent Parenting

If what we have just demonstrated underlines a tension between the rapidly modernizing and some would fear Westernizing way of life and the traditional Chinese way, we want to tease out the complexities in this tension. Instead of taking a clear stance between the new and the old script of fatherhood, these families articulate far more ambivalence. When the families talk about the three scenes, we hear the changes, the challenges, and the longing to return to better, easier times, but above all, we hear the tension, and a sense of relief to accept this tension. The acceptance of ambivalence runs through all our conversations.

Put simply, they blame and thank the rapid changes in China for the challenges to their fatherhood; whatever they do, modern or/and traditional, they attribute it to being Chinese. A rapidly changing China thus triggers a revisit of tradition. This then immediately feeds into a discourse on the importance to develop a parenting style with Chinese characteristics and on what it means to be a parent in China. As one father notes, “In the past, the demand was simple: just feed the children. Now the problem of the post-1980s and 90s is to educate the children, to raise them well.” Given the context of the reality show and their own family configuration, all the focus groups mention the generational predicament. Due to the implementation of the One Child Policy in 1979, the importance of ensuring good prospects for the single child has become pivotal for these families, and many others. Often branded *xiaohuangdi* (little emperor) or *xiaogongzhu* (little princess), the “only child”-generation has the reputation of being spoilt and selfish. While this stereotyping is highly problematic, it is pervasive in dominant discourse.

Again deploying the discourse of a rapidly changing China, parents in the focus groups, like the father cited just now, note how parenting has changed considerably for younger generations, adding considerable pressure to not just take care of the basic needs of children, but educate them to become responsible and successful citizens. That said, parents hasten to add that they need be thankful. Indeed, the discourse of thankfulness sustains the families’ imaginary of how to raise their single children. As one mother reminds her 8-year-old child: “You think that we should give you the best, you’re always asking from us, and we indulge you (...) Maybe it’s our fault, we didn’t teach you to be thankful for anything other people do for you.” Remarkably, the child of another family makes a

remark following a similar line of reasoning: “nowadays, many parents spoil their children, to a point where they forget to respect their parents. Of all virtues, filial piety comes first. So, this program reminds the children to respect their parents in a timely manner.” The frequently recurring trope of thankfulness thus dissipates and conflates through the discussions in many ways: thankfulness for China’s success, prosperity, the older generations, and of course one’s own parents, creating a metaphorical lineage of parenthood from the state to one’s own parents.

The families are also thankful to the reality show itself when they refer to how they learn techniques of parenting. A father states: “I like this show (...) because I can see how parents interact with their kids, to make their relationship better. (...) and this show provides us with some ways to improve our relationship.” Of particular interest here is the way in which the parents and children react to the first scene, where father Lin Yongjian urges his son Dajun into the mud. All families have lively discussions on the practice of good parenting: should the father coerce his child to venture something new or should the father respect the child’s opinion? The responses of the families vary considerably. One father is reluctant to force the child and supportive of the child’s autonomy, stating “if he is not willing to do it, then just let it be.” Another mother is similarly skeptical: “The father should first understand the child’s thoughts, talk to him, and don’t force him down in front of so many people. He should see why the child refuses.”

Another mother speaks for a more strict father: “The child is afraid and unwilling because he hasn’t tried it. How do you know you’re afraid without trying, right? So, as parents, we make him eat the bitter gourd—if you haven’t taken a bite, how do you know you don’t like it? Maybe it’s tasty...” One more mother agrees: “I think sometimes we should coerce children. If you don’t push, the child may not overcome his fear, and he may never experience that kind of fun.” While these two parents may indicate a preference for the so-called traditional paternal authority in Chinese fatherhood, we want to complicate this preference with the utterances’ accent on trying, experiences and fun—values more associated with the “Western” way of looking at fatherhood, and tactics more associated with teaching the children how to cope with future changes in China itself.

The eel catching scene is also analyzed in Chinese academic studies, in which they engage with the juxtaposition of the Western father. Just as we have shown above that in our focus groups the West is equated with a very open and quite rebellious mode of parenting, in contrast to a more authoritarian Chinese way, so does the editing of this scene produce a similar logic. Liu (2018: 194) concludes: “Compared with the traditional Chinese authoritative style, the equal Western style contributes more to the children’s development and results in a close relationship between father and child.”

Other studies are equally keen to articulate the difference between the Confucian Chinese way and the more individual and equal Western way (Xiao, 2018; Zhao, 2018). While Liu may praise the alleged Western way, our focus group participants are more hesitant, or ambivalent. They articulate similar tension as that experienced by the fathers in the reality show, but they are rather resolved to the very presence of the tension, given the rapid changes in China. After all, one should be grateful to and embrace the changes; both the parents and the children. After all, one should be prepared for more changes to come, and that is the destiny of fathers living in contemporary China.

The Savvy Viewer

Following these two themes as teased out from the focus group discussions, we want to revert to the savviness of these viewers to point to the limit of our own analyses and reality show analyses in general. Mark Andrejevic argues how reality television stimulates savvy viewing positions in which audiences assert not to be duped by the screen but instead see through the production logics:

“[reality TV] relies heavily on the fact that viewers are self-consciously aware of the ways in which media power operates. For these savvy viewers, such programming foregrounds the contrived nature of celebrity per se by showing how network executives can transform people off the street into celebrities in just a few weeks. The invitation to viewers is not to seize control but rather to participate in the rationalization of their own viewing experience.” (Andrejevic, 2004: 152)

Savvy viewers look down upon naïve audiences who take television shows at face value; they derive pleasure from a deconstructive, savvy viewing position. “Reality TV stimulates such readings because its contrivance, its artificiality and low production values, mobilize viewers’ critical capacities.” (Teurlings, 2013: 518) In China’s media culture of government control, a similar “savvy” viewing position emerges in our focus groups. The families are keen to deliberate upon the production choices, to debate on the authenticity of the program, and to foreground the stringent censorship under which such shows are produced.

An immediate topic of discussion is the presence of celebrity fathers and what that means for the “reality” aspect of reality TV. As one father states, “What I find attractive about this program? The format, this kind of everyday life format seems really innovative to me. It goes beyond the stage and sincerely reflects some real situations from daily life.” In another family, the father and mother initially assess the presence of celebrities as positive. However, later in the discussion their opinion has shifted, and they conflate the “reality” aspect of the show with its usefulness or uselessness, often by creating a conceptual distinction between the daily life of normal people (like them) and the “fake” lives of celebrities. The same father says, “when the program deliberately implements these [pedagogical] ideas through famous actors, it is not so real, and its educational significance disappears.”

This trope is shared by several other parents. One mother opines: “These celebrities may be very famous and glamorous, but as to their daily lives, and getting along with their children, I think they are rather dim. I think the celebrities are less concerned with their children than ordinary people.” Two other families are harsher in their criticism of the “reality” show. One mother thinks “the family life of celebrities in the show is fake, not real.” What they are implying is that without reality, there is less or no truthfulness or usefulness to the show. Reflecting on the kowtow scene, a mother reflects: “It is not very meaningful, it’s fake.” The father nods: “I think, the children only kowtowed because they were guided into doing it. It was not genuine or spontaneous.” After the wedding scene, one mother recalls the pioneering days of WAWGD: “The first season was closer to real life, more down-to-earth. They shot real scenes, set up some games and activities. It seemed less deliberate.” These parents thus employ what Jan Teurlings, echoing Ricoeur, calls a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” (2013: 518) constantly reflecting through the text on the machinery that produces it. For these savvy viewers, this reality show is first and foremost a production, staged.²

The wedding scene seems to have provoked the strongest reaction toward the production choices. Reflecting on the moment after the red soldiers have entered the podium, one father says:

“Later when the wedding has started, the other ‘old reds’ become irrelevant. When you introduce a person, you should tell his story, like his heroic deeds or something, to show the children. I’d think it’d have a more educational meaning. But the wedding, and then the program making them kiss, hug, and commercially brought out that refrigerator and television... What is this? I feel very disgusted.”

We see here a clash of conceptions reminiscent of Rebecca Feasey’s observation that “these programs [reality TV] can all be seen to draw on documentary traditions, employ soap opera narratives (...), focus on real lives and engage with first person accounts” to “package particular

aspects of daily life as entertainment” (2008: 107). Reality TV’s primary selling point, she holds, lies in its fixation with authenticity: personalities, narratives, and situations. However, by reflecting on the production values, and destabilizing the authenticity that is supposedly created by WAWGD in its depiction of scenes such as the red wedding and the kowtowing exercise, these savvy viewers renounce this aura of authenticity the show tries to construct—at least in some situations.

For one family, the perceived fakeness serves to discard any valuable meaning in the program. Commenting again on the wedding scene, the father proclaims: “The program doesn’t express the deeper meaning.” The mother chips in: “Its purpose is perhaps to instill patriotic education to the children.” As these parents consider the show’s constructed authenticity partly as fake, they concurrently reject any value the show might have for real life. While this family has articulated the most fierce critique, all families have cast doubts on the authenticity of the show.

In China, we argue, the production logic does not only involve the making of reality TV, but also the context of stringent censorship. Thus, the savviness of the audience takes on another layer of significance when it is also articulated through reflections on censorship. Reminiscent of similar intervention surrounding the dating show *If You Are the One* (Chen, 2017), in April 2016, the State Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT)³ issued a regulation prohibiting children from endorsing products in television shows, effectively banning WAWGD from television screens after three successful seasons. However, as the ban only concerned television broadcast, HSTV, the station responsible for the show, decided to move the program to its online platform, Mango TV. One discussion develops itself to the topic and the father is not aware of the ban: “oh my, the control is so tight? I think it’s characteristic of communism, killing the idea of entertainers.” He continues with a rant against the system, ending with his take on freedom of expression, and critique of “the traditional way” that they praised a while ago: “My point of view has always been that I think everyone should be able to express themselves openly and sincerely, rather than the traditional way.”

It is noteworthy how the focus group discussions become explicitly political only when an outright political issue such as the government ban emerged. It shows how censorship is not only a silencing act, but also a speech act, drawing attention to the governmental workings of Chinese media. The child of this father also complains about the ban but ends with a personal plea: “I think it is very inconvenient, because now I cannot watch it [on television], and my parents won’t give me their mobile phones.” Inspired by the wedding scene, one father comments on how Chinese media use Japan as the evil other to boost nationalism: “Whenever we talk about patriotism, we bring out the Japanese. (...) All those war films are about fighting the Japanese. They have planted the seed of hatred against Japanese [in the show] since they are children (...) so people can be brainwashed.” Both the ways the show is being censored as well as the ways the show is being used for propaganda stir up reflections from the savvy audience, giving WAWGD, on a meta-level, a political edge. We thus see that all parents try to make sense of the program on a meta-level, present themselves as “savvy viewers,” criticizing the production choices being made and reflecting upon the context of censorship and propaganda.

Conclusion

In tandem with all the studies on fatherhood in general and Chinese fatherhood in particular, our inquiry on viewers of the reality show WAWGD demonstrates a strong articulation of the difficulty of being a good father in a rapidly changing China. While contemporary Chinese families acknowledge the need to raise or educate, to use Cao and Lin’s words (2019), differently—underlying the Western, modernized ideals of involved fatherhood—they also show a concomitant longing to a

return of traditional Chinese fatherhood, to easier and simpler paternal roles and authority. But they embrace this tension, they accept they oscillate between what is perceived to be “Westernized” parenting and “Chinese style” parenting. The show helps them in this acceptance of what can be termed ambivalent parenthood. And finally, we want to highlight the savviness in their viewing of the show. Informed by these three themes, we argue that such reality shows as WAWGD do impact on Chinese families’ understanding of fatherhood. They help families to articulate the tension between modernity and tradition, and at the same time offer tools to come to terms with this tension. Tradition is considered important, just as Chinese history is, but not at all costs. The savvy viewership we have witnessed necessitates us to be aware of the limit of such media impact. The families we talked with see the show also as a mediated construction of reality, with specific production choices meant to attract audiences. Their savviness in viewing a show, that is produced in an authoritarian country with increasingly strict censorship regulations, must be taken into account. This finding also points at the limits of propaganda and censorship, audiences are not that easily being governed.

When it comes to studies on fatherhood, we like to flag the importance to insert the role of media shows, like WAWGD, as one important domain in which gender and parent roles are being negotiated. In other words, media display *and* construct identities. To paraphrase Stuart Hall, fatherhood practices are “never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.” (Hall, 1990: 222) By adding a non-western case to reality television studies, we demonstrate how struggles over modernity and tradition are being played out through such shows. Although the role that reality television plays in articulating modes of governmentality is by now well studied (Ouellette and Hay, 2008), it is important to acknowledge that different localities produce different modes of governmentality—as our study attests to. And, whatever modes of governmentality there are, savvy audiences still find ways to question and poke fun.

Our first point, by way of conclusion, is as banal as it is relevant: aside from analysis of both production and text, the study of how audiences negotiate reality shows remains urgent to probe into the workings and limitations of the governmental logic that drives such shows. This logic is promoted through a juxtaposition of the urban with the rural, with the latter evoking feelings of purity and nostalgia, of Chinese and Western fathers, provoking a comparison that requires a balancing act between alleged traditional and modern values, and of the communist past and the modern present, promoting respect for previous struggles and hardships.

Secondly, our analysis also shows how production, text, and reception are intermingled, urging us to complement audience analysis with reflections on both text and production. Clearly, our inquiry is limited in scope, at least in two senses, first, the number of viewers involved, and secondly, the socioeconomical backgrounds. More investigations, with more participants and larger diversity of backgrounds, are needed to tell us more about what is going on regarding fatherhood in contemporary China. While our analysis focused on shared discursive patterns along the families, more studies are needed to unpack, for instance, the gendered and generational differences in reception.

Our final note concerns the viewer savviness and its potentials for future research. We have seen how Chinese audiences, or at least some of them, are savvy audiences; they derive pleasure in talking about the ways in which the reality is staged and constructed. They also reflect upon the wider context of cultural production in China, in which censorship abounds and where propagandistic messages are incorporated. As far as our inquiry is concerned, we detect occasionally an explicitly critical stance towards the authorities; but we do not find evidence for a clearly oppositional reading of the show. We may need to examine more this particular dimension of

audienceship—the media savviness—in order to update our understanding or theorization of the critical potential of popular culture (cf. Fung, 2009).

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Notes

1. While not the focus of this study, this crisis in fatherhood resonates with a perceived crisis of masculinity in China, characterized by a critique of and distancing from effeminate masculinities (Zhang, 2019).
2. While the topic did not come back in our discussions, the frequent insertion of all kinds of animations in the program, like flowers, hearts, emoticons, word clouds, and so on, will not help to make it more real.
3. “SAPPRFT’s strict controls forces popular show *Where are we going dad* off the air,” [Sohu.com](http://news.sohu.com/20160417/n444572403.shtml), 17 April 2016, <http://news.sohu.com/20160417/n444572403.shtml> (accessed on 18 April 2016). “China issues ‘child limit,’ banning *Where are we going dad*,” BBC China, 17 April 2016, http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2016/04/160417_china_showbiz_children (accessed on 18 April 2016).

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