

Tradition, modernity, and Chinese masculinity

The multimodal construction of ideal manhood in a reality dating show

Dezheng (William) Feng¹ and Mandy Hoi Man Yu^{1,2}

¹The Hong Kong Polytechnic University | ²The University of Hong Kong

This article examines the multimodal construction of ideal manhood in male participants' self-introduction videos in a Chinese reality dating show. A framework is developed to model identity as evaluative attributes and to explicate how they are constructed through linguistic and visual resources. Analysis of 91 videos shows two versions of idealized Chinese masculinity, namely, modern masculinity (mainly embodied by participants who have won a date), and traditional masculinity (mainly embodied by participants who have not won a date). Modern masculinity highlights career-oriented qualities, socio-economic status, and luxurious lifestyles, while traditional masculinity highlights family values, skills in Chinese cultural heritage, and class mobility. The findings provide new understandings of the complexity of Chinese masculinity in the dating show context, which reflects the influence of capitalist globalization on the one hand, and the government's attempt to govern public conduct and morality on the other.

Keywords: identity, Chinese masculinity, reality dating show, multimodal construction

1. Introduction

Chinese society has been in a state of flux in recent decades, changing from an isolated country to the present relatively modernized (and in many aspects Westernized) one after forty years of reform and opening up. Such transformation has had significant impact on Chinese masculinity. As Louie (2015, 5) observes, "Chinese masculinity ideals have undergone more fundamental changes in the last 30 years than at any other time in the last 3,000". In his seminal research on Chinese mas-

culinity, Louie (2002) conceptualizes Chinese masculinity in terms of the *wen/wu* dyad, which refers to two forms of masculine ideals in Chinese history. *Wen*, which literally means scholarship in letters or literature, refers to qualities associated with the scholastic learning of men. *Wu*, which literally means martial arts, refers to “physical strength and military prowess”; as well as “the wisdom to know when and when not to deploy it” (ibid, 14). *Wen* was central in this dyad, as throughout most of Chinese history, government officials were selected based on scholarship in classic literature (especially writings of Confucius), and being an official was virtually the only form of career success for a man in an agricultural society. Louie (2015) argues that the paradigm also applies to contemporary Chinese masculinity, but its nature has changed with the increasing globalization of China. The emphasis on economic development in the 20th century under the influence of the Western world, particularly since the reform and opening up in 1978, “has changed the notion of *wen* itself to include business management skills and monetary power” (Louie 2015, 1). *Wen* has evolved to include not just talent in literature, but also the new offshoot of talent in business. The latter aspect has become dominant in today’s commercialized Chinese society as career success for men is increasingly being defined by monetary power, similar to the discourse of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ in the West (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 850; Song and Hird 2014, 12).

Therefore, Chinese masculinity, like other forms of identity, is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that is shaped by complex social, economic, and cultural forces. As Song and Hird (2014, 4) note, “the interaction between local and global forces in the construction of masculinity has become a major issue of concern”. The analysis of media discourse is particularly useful for understanding the construction of masculinities. As Hilton-Morrow and Battles (2015, 28) argue, from a critical cultural perspective, the media is a “central site for negotiating the very meanings of identities and for making particular identity categories available in the first place”. It follows that many recent studies have adopted a media-driven approach, looking at television drama, magazines, the internet, and so on (e.g. Song and Hird 2014).

To further understand the complexity of Chinese masculinity and how it is performed in the underexplored media form of reality television shows, this study examines the construction of male identity in *If You Are the One*, the most popular reality dating show in China. We approach the issue from a multimodal discourse analytical perspective, which emphasizes that identity is constructed through the deployment of linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic resources. The analysis includes three major components, namely, identifying attributes that male participants project in their self-introduction videos, explicating how these attributes are constructed through linguistic and visual resources, and explaining the

results in relation to socio-cultural realities in contemporary China. Our explanation focuses on the dialectic relation between the discursive performance of identity and social contexts, that is, how the show both reflects and shapes reality. We consider reality television as a form of governance and explicate how it is used to influence the conduct of the audience (cf. Ouellette and Hay 2008; Palmer 2003). In what follows, we will start by surveying literature on language and gender identities, with special reference to Chinese masculinity and dating discourse, and providing some background on the genre of reality shows and the specific program *If You Are the One*. We will then describe our dataset and method of analysis, followed by a presentation of our data analysis results. Lastly, we will discuss the findings relating to traditional Chinese culture, recent social change, and the media context in China.

2. Background

2.1 Gender identity and masculinity

Our study adopts a constructionist understanding of identity and sees gender as a dimension of identity. This understanding shifts away from the essentialist view on gender identity as dichotomous opposition, i.e. masculinity versus femininity, most notably influenced by Lakoff (1975) and Tannen (1990). A constructionist understanding of identity means that rather than having a given identity based on broad social categories, e.g. race and gender, we choose to construct different versions of our identities in different contexts. Therefore, identity is fluid and multiple, which is widely agreed upon in sociolinguistics (e.g. Jaworski and Coupland 2014; Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002). Butler (1990) similarly proposes the performativity of identity, arguing that gender identities do not concern whether we are men or women, but rather how we perform our masculinities and femininities. Identity is therefore largely a “discursive phenomenon” (Zotzmann and O’Regan 2016, 113), and a discourse approach is needed for the study of gender identities (Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002). It should also be noted that, as emphasized by Song and Hird (2014), Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity cannot be interpreted as the volitional choice of an agent at his/her free will; rather, gender performance is determined by the immediate situational and the broader socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, our analysis of how male identities are performed is set in the specific context of a popular reality dating show in China.

Our interpretation of ideal manhood is also informed by Connell’s concept of *hegemonic masculinity* (see Connell 1995, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). According to Connell (1995, 2005), there is a hierarchal relationship

between different forms of masculinity and hegemonic masculinity represents the normative and culturally dominant form of masculinity which “embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man”, “require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it”, and “ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). For example, Connell and Wood (2005) note that the ‘transnational business masculinity’ has become dominant in Western societies and globally, including China. However, this hegemonic masculinity cannot be understood in its singular form, but in plural forms that are fluid and context dependent (cf. Jefferson 2002). In the context of China, the Western hegemony coexists with older forms of masculinity shaped by traditional Chinese culture, resulting in ‘scattered hegemonies’ (Grewal and Kaplan 1994). Our discourse analysis of how different male participants construct identities in the reality dating show will shed light on the multiplicity and hybridity of hegemonies shaped by different contextual forces.

2.2 Discourse studies on gender identity

Masculinity did not attract much interest in the field of language and gender until Johnson and Meinhof’s (1997) seminal volume *Language and Masculinity*. Since then, it has received increasing scholarly attention and has been investigated from different perspectives such as how speakers ‘index’ their masculinities in interactions (e.g. Kiesling 2002) and media representations of masculinities (e.g. Baker and Levon 2016). Language and masculinity has also been studied within a wide range of communities, e.g. gay men in South Africa (Milani 2013) and young Japanese students (Itakura 2015), and a wide range of domains such as political discourse (e.g. Neff van Aertselaer 1997), workplace discourse (e.g. Saito 2012) and dating discourse (e.g. Jones 2000).

While considerable research has been done on language and masculinity, Chinese masculinity remains underexplored in linguistic and discourse studies. This is despite the tremendous interest in the topic in other fields of humanities, such as gender studies, cultural studies and media studies (e.g. Louie 2002; Song 2010). A survey of *Gender and Language*, the only international peer-reviewed journal dedicated to research on language and gender, reveals that only one single paper has addressed Chinese masculinity ever since it came into being in 2007, namely Hiramoto’s (2017) study on the representation of castrated male characters in Chinese martial arts films. Even taking into account other sources, only a small number of studies can be found, e.g. Hiramoto’s (2012) research on the representation of Chinese masculinities in martial arts films, and Gong’s (2016) research on how members of a Chinese football fan club constructed their masculinities online. Our research aims to contribute to this underexplored topic by exploring

Chinese masculinity in a popular dating show, that is, how Chinese men construct their identities for the purpose of dating or attracting a potential partner in the context of reality dating shows. This aspect of masculinity is important in that it is underpinned by normative dating patterns and reflects changing views on ideal manhood.

Following a literature review on Chinese masculinity, we now turn to another line of research that is key to the present study, namely gender identities in dating discourse. A prominent researcher in this regard is Justine Coupland, who has conducted a range of research on the genre of personal advertisements, e.g. those for heterosexuals, homosexuals and older people (e.g. Coupland 1996, 2000). Her works have attracted a number of studies on the genre. For example, Jones (2000) and Baker (2003) employed corpus tools to investigate the construction of gay masculinities in Hong Kong and UK magazines respectively. Research that is more recent tends to focus on online personal advertisements (e.g. Baudinette 2017). However, most studies only focused on the role of language in the construction of gender identities (e.g. Jones 2000; Baker 2003), despite the growing attention to the use multimodal resources in the broader fields of language and gender (e.g. Caldas-Coulthard 2008; Koller and Bullo 2019) and language and identity (e.g. Matley 2020; Oostendorp 2015). We argue that both verbal and visual resources need to be considered in analyzing dating shows, which are a highly multimodal genre. Addressing the need to understand Chinese masculinities and how they are constructed using multimodal resources in dating discourse, our research explores how male participants in *If You Are the One* project their ideal versions of masculinity that they consider attractive to women.

2.3 Reality dating shows

Reality television first came into being in the UK and US in the 1980s (Hill 2015). Deery (2015, 16) defines the genre as “pre-planned but mostly unscripted programming with non-professional actors in non-fictional scenarios”. Reality television does not simply record reality to entertain the audience, but also reflects and shapes social order (Palmer 2003). As Eriksson (2018, 59) maintains, “it involves ideas about how to value and understand participants and the activities they involve; reality TV can legitimate or de-legitimate social practices and their participants and thereby do ideological work”. Employing Foucault’s (1991) idea of ‘governance’, i.e. the conduct of conduct, Palmer (2003, 3) discusses the role of reality television in the UK as “new strategic efforts to change the operation of power and management by the authorities”. Instead of directly executing power, this neoliberal form of governance works in more insidious ways, for example, through the behaviors of participants in television shows. In this sense, reality

television constitutes “one of the dispersed institutional authorities that constitute a society focused on the conduct of conduct” (Lunt 2009, 1024). Also working with the Foucauldian notion of governance, Ouellette and Hay (2008) analyzed reality television in the American context, focusing on dating shows, makeovers, lifestyle demonstrations, and so on. They investigated “how reality TV simultaneously diffuses and amplifies the government of everyday life, utilizing the cultural power of television to assess and guide the ethics, behaviors, aspirations, and routines of ordinary people” (Ouellette and Hay 2008, 2). They found that the shows governed behaviors in more diverse ways, e.g. providing informal guidelines for personal conduct and daily life at a distance through testing, judging, advising, and so on. These discussions will inform our contextual explanations of the performance of masculinities in reality dating shows in China.

The focus of our study, *If You Are the One*, falls into the dating show subgenre of reality television, which has gained increasing popularity during the past two decades (Smith 2019). Dating shows first appeared in the Chinese televisual landscape in the 1990s (Guo 2017). Different from their Western counterparts, Chinese dating shows not only serve to entertain, but also to help single people find partners (Luo and Sun 2015; Shei 2013). Another distinctive feature of Chinese dating shows lies in the media environment in China. Unlike most Western media outlets, the Chinese media, despite its growing commercialization, is subject to the heavy hand of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). Reality programs are often intervened on moral grounds (Guo 2017). In June 2010, not long after *If You Are the One* was first aired, the SARFT issued two notifications and set out guidelines that Chinese dating shows should follow (see Chen 2017, 108 for details). Particularly relevant to the present study are the following two guidelines: “vulgar topics involving sex, materialism, and unhealthy, incorrect viewpoints on marriage should be avoided” and “moral guidance should be provided to the participants; the host/hostess should be carefully chosen” (ibid, 108). Drawing upon Palmer (2003) and Ouellette and Hay (2008), we will explicate how *If You Are the One* plays the role of governing personal conduct and maintaining public morality against the background of the SARFT regulations and the broader political and cultural context in China.

2.4 If You Are the One

If You Are the One, originated from the UK dating show *Take Me Out* (see Morrow 2014), is a pre-recorded dating show produced by Jiangsu Television. It was first televised on January 15, 2010 and remains the most popular dating show in China even today. Each episode features five single men looking for a date among the 24 women who stand in an arch with a light on top of them. Each round starts with

a man introducing himself through three video clips about his personal information, his attitude to love, and his friends'/relatives' comments, respectively. The women can switch off their light to vote the man off anytime. In the end, if two or more lights are still on, the man can pick and date with one of the remaining women.

If You Are the One has caught considerable scholarly attention, with studies covering many aspects of the show, for example, how the show has glocalized *Take Me Out*, the original UK version (Morrow 2014) and the impact of the aforesaid state's intervention on the show (Guo 2017; Shei 2013). The show has probably been most extensively studied in terms of gender-related issues (e.g. Luo and Sun 2015; Li 2015), mostly in the critical discourse analysis paradigm to unmask patriarchal norms. For instance, Luo and Sun (2015, 253) deconstructed how the show takes advantage of the stigmatization of single womanhood in society and of many female participants' internalization of the stigmatization to "polic[e] post-socialist femininity, reinforc[e] male privilege, and convey[ing] the new gender mandate".

While there seems no lack of gender studies on *If You Are the One*, most of them focus on women and femininity. Exceptions include Chen (2017) and Luo (2017), both in the area of cultural studies, which are of particular relevance to our research. Chen (2017) examined the influence of the aforementioned state regulations on the construction of ideal manhood in the show by conducting a comparative textual analysis between the construction of masculinities before and after the state regulations. She found that before the regulations, many men materialistically foregrounded their income and luxurious possessions; many women similarly expressed their interest in men's financial prospects. After the state's intervention, the show has clearly downplayed materialistic masculinity, with men often highlighting their talents, romantic inclinations and sense of social responsibility and women paying more attention to inner attributes, e.g. being caring, respectful and romantic. Luo (2017) examined the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the show by identifying masculine traits in male participants' talk, and by exploring how female participants represented ideal manhood. She found that both male and female participants embraced "the hegemonic ideal of versatile, successful, upper-middle-class manhood" (Luo 2017, 206), which combines capitalist and patriarchal ideologies. Despite their contribution to the understanding of Chinese masculinity, Chen (2017) and Luo (2017) explored the topic from the perspective of cultural studies and paid no attention to how the gender attributes identified were discursively constructed. We still have a very limited understanding of how gender attributes are constructed using multimodal semiotic resources.

3. Data and analytical framework

As mentioned earlier, the dating show *If You Are the One* features each male participant introducing himself to the single women on the stage through three video clips and the women can vote him off anytime. This study is concerned with the first clip, where single men talk about their career, education background, personal life, and so on. The reason is that male participants have to showcase all their best 'selling points' in the first video. The first clip is thus "usually guided by the male participants' own idealized versions of themselves" (Chen 2017, 103), which is exactly what our research interest lies in. Our dataset consists of 91 videos, all aired in 2013. This time period was chosen because it was after the aforesaid state intervention and before the drastic change of format in 2015 after which the show focused more and more on entertainment. Among the 91 participants involved, 43 have successfully won a date, while the remaining 48 have not.

Our research investigates how the single men construct their identities using linguistic and visual resources. Adopting a discourse analytical approach, we argue that identities should be interpreted based on the systematic analysis of multimodal texts. We consider identity as a set of evaluative attributes that are realized by different semiotic resources on the one hand, and are shaped by the broader socio-cultural context on the other hand. Our approach is operationalized as two levels of analysis. First, our analysis of attributes is based on the attitude system in Martin and White's appraisal theory (2005). Martin and White (2005) distinguish between three types of attitudinal meanings, namely, values of emotional response (affect), values by which human behavior is socially assessed (judgment) and values by which things are evaluated (appreciation). As this study focuses on identities and attributes, we only work with the judgment system, which is concerned with the assessment of human behavior and attributes according to social sanction and social esteem. Judgment of social esteem is subcategorized into normality (how special one is), capacity (how capable one is) and tenacity (how determined one is), whereas judgment of social sanction is subcategorized into veracity (how truthful one is) and propriety (how ethical one is). Su (2015, 69) suggested that the judgment categories do not take into account "attitudes construed towards emotional types of personality", e.g. a cheerful/confident person, and proposed a new subcategory of emotivity.

At the second level, evaluative attributes are realized by different lexicogrammatical resources. Martin and White (2005) distinguish between attitudes inscribed in attitudinal lexis and those invoked by the description of events and behaviors. Extending the lexicogrammatical model to include visual resources, we propose the framework illustrated in Figure 1 to explicate the construction of

participants' attributes.¹ The primary distinction is between attributes articulated by participants as verbal judgments and those embedded in visual depictions. For articulation, following Martin and White, we distinguish between explicit and implicit judgments. Explicit judgments are realized through attitudinal lexis, e.g. 'generous' and 'rich'. The speaker's 'commitment' (Martin, 2008) to the attributes is high as it is his/her own attitude. Implicit judgments are realized through recounting events that elicit the attitude (e.g. "she donated all her money to the orphanage"; "he went to college at 12"). In this case, the speaker's 'commitment' to a certain attribute (and hence attitudinal responsibility) is reduced as he/she is merely stating facts and it is the listeners who infer his/her attributes. Such implicit expressions of attitude are frequent in our data for their seeming objectivity, especially in the context of the aforementioned state regulations. For example, rather than stating "I am a very rich man", the participant may say "My hobbies include horse riding and boating", which are very expensive sports. Even more implicit are visual depictions of participants' actions and analytical features. Typical actions in our data include sports activities such as playing basketball and exercising in a gym, work-related activities such as teaching and examining patients, and family activities such as cleaning and dining. Analytical features include a participant's appearance, height, clothing, accessories, cars and other things which he 'possesses' (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2006 for details). In visual depictions, participants' responsibility is further reduced as they simply 'perform' and are 'targets' of viewers' judgments. In the videos, the choices of identity construction are often multimodal, i.e. verbal judgments are often accompanied by visual depictions (e.g. showing a video of skiing when saying "I go skiing in the Alps every year").

Working with this analytical framework, we first annotated all judgments in the 91 videos and identified the general patterns in the data. Based on the patterns, we deduced major identity categories through repeated discussions between the two authors. Our approach is therefore both theory-based and data-driven, which further develops Martin and White's (2005) categories based on empirical data in the specific context of identity construction. We then analyzed how the attitudinal attributes are realized through different semiotic resources.

1. Square brackets represent selective choices and curly brackets represent simultaneous choices. That is, an articulated judgment is either explicit or implicit, but not both; an evaluative attribute can be verbal and visual at the same time. The slanted arrows represent realization relations. For example, articulated attributes are realized by verbal judgments.

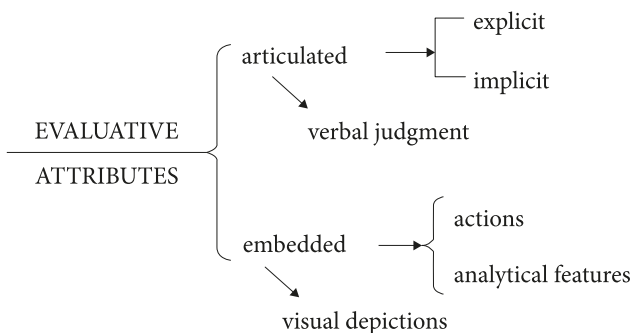


Figure 1. Identity as evaluative attributes

4. Results

4.1 Overall distribution of identity categories

Our analysis of attributes shows two key findings. First, judgments of capacity are most frequently drawn on, centering upon two aspects. The first aspect is the non-socioeconomic type of talent including special skills (e.g. martial arts), professional skills (e.g. teaching skills) and academic performance (e.g. examination results), while the second one is the material aspect of capacity including career achievement, financial conditions, and education achievement (e.g. a Harvard graduate). Another major finding is the participants' heavy use of judgments of emotivity, tenacity and propriety to highlight their inner qualities. While judgments of emotivity and tenacity are mainly used to construct personality qualities (e.g. perseverant), judgments of propriety are constantly used to construct moral characters (e.g. filial piety). Three distinct identity categories emerge from our detailed analysis of the dataset: (1) inner qualities (judgments of emotivity, tenacity and propriety); (2) capability (non-socioeconomic type of judgments of capacity); and (3) socioeconomic status (socioeconomic type of judgments of capacity). The category of inner qualities is further divided into personality traits (judgments of emotivity and tenacity) and virtues (judgments of propriety). Table 1 shows the distribution of these categories in the participants' self-introduction videos.² These three categories enable us to understand not only the heterogeneity of Chinese masculinities, but also differences between participants who have won a date and those who have not.

2. We look at the two groups of participants separately because they exhibit notable differences. Our analysis simply captures the differences and provides interpretations. We fully acknowledge that there may be other factors making a participant 'successful' or 'unsuccessful'.

Table 1. Distribution of identity categories

Categories	Number of participants		
	Successful	Unsuccessful	Total
Inner qualities	22	38	60
– Personality traits (emotivity, tenacity)	20	34	54
– Virtues (propriety)	6	13	19
Capability (capacity)	28	24	52
– Special skills	22	15	37
– Professional skills	7	11	18
– Academic performance	1	5	6
Socioeconomic status (capacity)	28	22	50
– Career achievement	15	11	26
– Financial conditions	13	9	22
– Education achievement	5	6	11

The inner quality is the most frequently represented identity category in the data, appearing in 60 participants' videos, and socioeconomic status is the least frequent one, appearing in 50 participants' videos. This is probably due to the aforementioned state regulations that the show should emphasize moral values and control the mention of wealth. Another salient feature is the different patterns exhibited by the participants who have successfully won a date ('successful participants') and those who have not ('unsuccessful participants'). As far as the successful participants are concerned, capability (28 cases) and socioeconomic status (28 cases) are the most important identity categories; as regards the unsuccessful participants, their identity construction most often concerns inner qualities (38 cases). This suggests that socioeconomic status still forms an important part of the successful participants' identity construction despite the state regulations. The failure of the participants who emphasize their inner self may indicate that personality and virtues are not the most important mate selection criterion for the female participants. In what follows, we will provide a detailed analysis of each category of attributes and how it is constructed. We will report findings on the ideal attributes highlighted by the male participants and differences between the successful and unsuccessful participants.

4.2 Inner qualities

For the two subcategories of inner qualities, i.e. personality traits and virtues, the former clearly dominates the videos of both the successful and unsuccessful par-

ticipants. The most remarkable feature of personality traits is the large proportion of attributes valued in the workplace, e.g. being confident, ambitious and career-oriented, which are stereotypically associated with masculinity. These traits are prominent in both groups of participants' videos and are typically realized by explicit judgments complemented with the visual representation of participants performing their work duties. For example, in Excerpt 1, ZM³ explicitly evaluates himself as career-oriented and ambitious and in Figure 2, he is shown busy working with a computer and some documents at his office desk.

Excerpt 1.

我是一个事业心和野心非常强的一个男人。

[I am a very career-oriented and ambitious man.]

(ZM, January 6, 2013)



Figure 2. Screenshot from ZM's video, January 6, 2013

Another key finding is that many unsuccessful participants try to construct a funny personality through explicit judgments. Seven participants represent themselves in relation to their childishness or immaturity. For example, KZ describes his personality in Excerpt 2 with several evaluation markers, including *活泼可爱* (*lively and lovely*), *挺缺心眼儿的* (*quite senseless*) and *经常犯二* (*always behave in a silly manner*). Visual resources, typically depictions of actions, also play an important role in constructing such personality traits. For example, while giving the above description, KZ is shown playing on a swing happily (which is a typical activity for children) (see Figure 3). These participants try to attract women by showing that they are funny and pleasant to be with. However, the fact that they could not win a date may indicate that this is not a preferred attribute of masculinity for the female participants.

3. Throughout the paper, all participants are referred to using initials.

Excerpt 2.

我的性格，活泼可爱，什么事都说。挺缺心眼儿的，经常犯二。

[In terms of my personality, I am lively and lovely. I can say anything. I am quite senseless and always behave in a silly manner.] (KZ, June 1, 2013)



Figure 3. Screenshot from KZ's video, June 1, 2013

The second subcategory of inner qualities, virtues, is mainly represented by the unsuccessful participants (13 out of the 19 cases) (see Table 1). The most prominent characteristic of this aspect of identity is that it is often underpinned by traditional Chinese values, especially Confucian family values such as *xiao* (filial piety) and *ti* (fraternal love). Different from personality traits which are usually inscribed, all representations of virtues rely on implicit judgments of propriety (sometimes supplemented with visuals), typically by expressing their care for their family or narrating how they performed their duties as sons or brothers. In Excerpt 3, QY represents how he felt and what he planned to do after discovering that his originally well-off family had become deep in debt. This example shows how QY felt morally obliged to support his family and pay off its debts, which invokes a positive judgment of responsibility and filial piety. A notable point about this example is that he explicitly relates his gender identity (i.e. as a man) to his responsibility to support his family, because traditionally it is men who are responsible for supporting their families.

Excerpt 3.

面对如此大的变故，我不得不担起作为男人应该有的责任和使命。我规划着在三年内不仅要支出赡养费用，还要还清家里的外债。

[Facing such a drastic change, I had no choice, but to bear the responsibility and mission as a man. I set a plan to support my family and pay off the debts in three years.] (QY, March 3, 2013)

4.3 Capability

The second major identity category is capability and the main focus is on special skills, as Table 1 reveals. While this result applies to both groups of participants, the two differ in terms of the types of skills referred to. The most frequently occurring type of skills for the successful participants is sports and physical skills (e.g. swimming and playing basketball), followed by performance skills (e.g. playing musical instruments and dancing). This kind of identity construction relies most heavily on visuals. Most participants only briefly talk about what they usually do during their leisure time, which is by no means evaluative. They however showcase their talents through images of themselves skilfully playing sports or performing athletic/physical skills, as in Figure 4. The success of these participants suggests that modern sports, physical fitness and versatility are important components of masculinity for the female participants.



Figure 4. Screenshot from HZ's video, June 29, 2013

As regards the unsuccessful participants, the most frequently mentioned skills are martial arts and other forms of Chinese cultural heritage. Different from the successful participants, who mainly construct a healthy middle-class lifestyle, the unsuccessful participants tend to refer to their achievement more explicitly and some even show tokens of their achievement. For instance, in Excerpt 4, ZM recounts his participation in an international martial arts tournament and the awards he won.

Apart from special skills, a small number of participants, mainly the unsuccessful ones, construct their capability by foregrounding their professional skills. This aspect of capability is mostly realized by explicit or implicit verbal judgments. For example, in Excerpt 5, XS positively appraises his competence as an IELTS teacher by highlighting his ability to predict questions in IELTS. In contrast, professional skills appear less in the successful participants' videos, which

seems to contradict our finding that work-related personality traits are highlighted. This is probably because job prestige and income are considered more relevant than professional skills. Indeed, professional skills are highlighted more by the participants without a prestigious job. Their inability to win a date may suggest that professional skills are not valued unless they can transform into income and socioeconomic status. Similarly, academic performance is the least represented attribute (6 in total, with only 1 being a successful participant) probably because it is not directly related to materialistic achievements.

Excerpt 4.

我从2001年开始习武，曾经代表美国传统武术队参加了中国郑州的首届世界传统武术节，并且获得两个银牌的名次。

[I have practiced martial arts since 2001. On behalf of the US Traditional Martial Arts Team, I took part in the first International Martial Arts Festival in Zhengzhou, China and won two silver awards.] (ZM, January 6, 2013)

Excerpt 5.

因为我是有了名的神算，90%的题我都能押对。所以我的学生遇到再刁钻的题目都会大声地说“so easy”。

[As I am a well-known ‘psychic’ and can guess 90% of the questions [in IELTS], my students can boldly say “so easy” even when coming across the trickiest question.] (XS, July 6, 2013)

4.4 Socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic status is the most important attribute that the successful participants construct in their videos (28 cases); in the case of the unsuccessful participants, despite being outweighed by inner qualities and capability, socioeconomic status is still referred to by 22 out of the 48 in total. Socioeconomic status includes three interrelated subcategories, namely, career achievement, financial conditions, and education achievement. They are often mentioned together, or sometimes financial conditions are implicitly represented by recounting job or education achievement.

The most remarkable feature concerning the construction of socioeconomic identities is that both the successful and unsuccessful participants often accentuate their career achievement (15 successful and 11 unsuccessful participants). There are two major types of realization. First, some participants who are professionals or have a high-status job simply refer to their occupation and visually show themselves in their workplace. This can be illustrated with the self-introduction of LM, an oncologist, in Excerpt 6. By pointing to his identity as a medical doctor and his possession of a doctoral degree, he represents his career and educational

achievement and implies his high social position and good financial condition. He also reinforces his professional image by visually representing himself inspecting a patient in a ward (see Figure 5). His uniform (as an analytical feature), the setting of a ward and his action of inspecting a patient all suggest his identity.

Excerpt 6.

我是*doctor*。在美国，*doctor*有两个办法可以得到*medical doctor*和*professor*博士。我两种都有拿到。

[I am a doctor. In America, there are two ways you can become a doctor: medical doctor and the ‘professor’ type of doctor. And I have both.] (LM, January 6, 2013)



Figure 5. Screenshot from LM's video, January 6, 2013

Aside from the prestige of the occupation itself, some participants highlight their career achievement. Such achievement relates to the construction of professional skills discussed in the previous section, but the two differ in that while professional skills, e.g. housekeeping and teaching skills, are nothing to do with one's financial conditions or social status, career achievement has clear financial implications. For example, in Excerpt 7, ZM, who owns two real estate investment companies, implicitly evaluates his achievement by recounting what he has done within three years after his graduation.

Excerpt 7.

在毕业后短短三年中，我创办了两个房地产投资公司，做了很多成功的地产投资方案。

[Within just three years since my graduation, I have set up two real estate investment companies and have done many successful cases of real estate investments.]

(ZM, January 6, 2013)

The final attribute is financial conditions, which appears in 13 successful and 9 unsuccessful participants' videos. While the successful participants' identity construction is featured by an accentuation of wealth (10 out of the 13 cases), most

of the unsuccessful participants highlight their poor financial conditions or class mobility (7 out of the 9 cases). The successful participants most often represent their wealth visually, while explicit verbal articulations are rare due to the state regulation. Images of luxury cars and hobbies abound in their videos, which sometimes interact with the verbal content. For example, Figure 6 features a close shot of the Mercedes-Benz logo, while ZY is narrating how he made money from investing in the real estate market on Hainan Island. The image interacts with the narration and indexes the success of his investments and his wealth.



Figure 6. Screenshot from ZY's video, May 1, 2013

Unlike the successful participants, some unsuccessful participants highlight their poor financial conditions and class mobility through education and hard work. This kind of identity construction is the most complex and often relies on full-fledged multimodal storytelling which involves the concomitant use of explicit and implicit judgments and visual depictions. Those stories usually start with verbal and visual representations of the protagonists' poor living conditions during their childhood, followed by their education achievement (i.e. going to university) through hard work at school, and end with career success in big cities. A good case in point is the video of MC. While recounting his childhood poverty, scenes of his poor village are shown (see Figure 7). He then utters "I knew that studying hard and getting to university was the only way to get out of the mountain area". At the same time, he is visually represented as leaving the mountain area with scenes of the mountain shot in a moving vehicle. When talking about his university life, he appears on the screen viewing the mountain from afar (see Figure 8). By showing himself inside the mountain area in his childhood, then beholding it inside a moving vehicle when getting to university, and finally from afar, he is metaphorically representing himself successfully lifting himself out of poverty through education achievement.

Another group of unsuccessful participants have not lifted themselves out of poverty yet and construct their identities by highlighting their aspirations and future plans. This echoes the political slogan of the Chinese Dream, which has



Figure 7. Screenshot from MC's video, March 31, 2013



Figure 8. Screenshot from MC's video, March 31, 2013

been advocated as everybody's dream for a better life (Xi 2013). For example, in Excerpt 8, WJ first evaluates his mother's life condition (and by implication also his) as "miserable". This is followed by his expression of his dream and plans to improve his financial conditions. Inspired by the success of the picture book writer Jimmy Liao and his mother's friend who earns, he articulates his ambition of producing products based on his comics to support himself.

Excerpt 8.

在我20岁的时候，我的妈妈下岗...我的妈妈生活得那么地惨...其实我的人生规划实际上是非常清晰的。我就想把这三千多张漫画做成手机壳，丝巾啊，冰箱贴这些周边产品，让我能够存活下去。

[When I was 20, my mother lost her job...My mother leads such a miserable life...Actually, I have very clear life planning. I want to produce peripheral goods such as mobile phone cases, silk scarves, and fridge magnets based on my 3,000-ish comic pictures so as to support myself.] (WJ, October 5, 2013)

5. Discussion and conclusion

Reality dating shows are a multimodal discursive construct where participants perform their identities. Our analysis of the male participants' self-introductory videos in *If You Are the One* reveals the heterogeneity of their identities and the complexity of how the identities are constructed using linguistic and visual resources. As noted earlier, gender performance is context dependent, and our concern is with masculinity in reality dating shows, instead of that in dating more broadly. In this final section, we will discuss the dialectic relation between the discursive construction of identity in the show and the relevant social contexts, that is, how the self-introductory videos both reflect and shape reality. We consider reality television as a form of governance which is socio-politically constituted on the one hand and is used to guide people's conduct on the other (cf. Ouellette and Hay 2008; Palmer 2003; Song and Hird 2014). We will start by summarizing the attributes of ideal manhood that emerge from the participants' identity construction, as listed in Table 2. These attributes manifest two types of idealized masculinity in China, one characterized by modern or globalized values, and the other by traditional Chinese values.

Table 2. Summary of the attributes of ideal manhood constructed by the participants

	Attributes of ideal manhood
Successful participants	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Capability (especially in terms of sporting and athletic prowess) 2. Career success 3. Wealth 4. Personality traits valued in the workplace, e.g. confident and ambitious
Unsuccessful participants	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Capability (especially in terms of martial arts and working/academic performance) 2. Personality traits valued in the workplace 3. Career success 4. Virtues based on traditional Chinese morals, e.g. filial piety 5. An interesting or funny personality 6. Poverty and class mobility through hard work

The first type represents a modern version of ideal manhood which is defined in socioeconomic terms, including wealth and career achievement. Most of the successful participants are from the (upper) middle class with prestigious jobs. Some unsuccessful participants from the working class also show concerns over socioeconomic factors. Even though they have no wealth to show off, they often express their socioeconomic goals and career potentials. The inner quality forms

a less important part of the successful participants' identity construction. Even when talking about their inner self, they mainly focus on attributes valued in the workplace. Those highlighting their funny personalities have mostly failed to win a date, which indicates the female participants' preference towards mature and sophisticated men. This finding echoes Luo's (2017, 206) observation of the dating show's participants' embrace for "the hegemonic ideal of versatile, successful, upper-middle-class manhood". This version of ideal manhood reflects and keeps pace with the social changes in recent decades in China and is often embraced by the upper-middle-class participants, who most benefit from the changes. Following China's economic reform from a planned to a market economy and under the influence of capitalist globalization and cosmopolitanism, masculinity is increasingly defined in terms of one's earnings or material wealth. As a result, the Westernized white-collar metrosexual masculinity has become the new hegemonic identity in contemporary China (Song and Hird 2014). As Hird (2009, 181) notes, the figure of the metrosexual has become "the apogee of affluent, hedonistic consumerist success, and represents the pinnacle of white-collar achievement in the boom atmosphere of China's post-millennial metropolises". This explains the emphasis on career achievement and financial wealth by many participants and the popularity of those upper-middle-class participants who foreground their career success, wealth and luxurious lifestyle.

The multimodal construction of masculinity in the show does not simply reflect socio-economic changes, but also serves to guide the conduct of the audience in terms of how socio-economic status should be performed. The aforementioned SARFT regulation against materialism and the worship of money is realized through the participants' language and behaviors in the show. This reflects Palmer's (2003) observation of the increasingly media savvy role of government bodies and their collusion with reality television producers in Western countries, which also happens in China. As Brady (2009, 437) points out, China's mode of governance "has deliberately absorbed the methodology of political public relations, mass communications, social psychology, and other modern methods of mass persuasion commonly used in Western democratic societies, adapting them to Chinese conditions and needs". "The use of culture and entertainment as a vehicle for political messages is one noticeable example of this" (ibid, 442). Our analysis shows that explicit mentions of wealth are rare and socio-economic status is mostly implicitly realized through verbal and visual depictions of one's personal and professional prowess, hobbies, and lifestyle. Therefore, we can argue that "monetary power" alone cannot do justice to the depth of the association of this hegemonic ideal. A key element in the discourse of ideal manhood is demeanor and a sense of *pinwei* (high-quality taste) in their choice of products (e.g. clothes, cars, and watches) and hobbies (e.g. horse riding, golf, and traveling). A high-class

pinwei, often influenced by the (imagined) Western consumerist lifestyle, reflects the emergent (upper) middle class' pursuit of distinction (Song and Hird 2014). Similar to lifestyle reality television discussed by Ouellette and Hay (2008) and Palmer (2008), such gender performance, and the fact that it is preferred by the female participants, also serve to educate newly rich people not to directly show off their wealth, but to accentuate their prowess, change their lifestyle, and refine their *pinwei*.

The second major type of ideal manhood, mainly embodied by the unsuccessful participants, is underpinned by traditional Chinese values and is under the influence the Chinese government's socio-political agenda. The most noteworthy set of values in this version of ideal manhood is Confucian family values, e.g. filial piety and fraternal love. Seeing the family as the basic unit of society, Confucianism attaches great importance to family relations and sees filial piety and fraternal love as the foundation of *ren* (仁, benevolence), which is considered the supreme form of virtue. While filial piety and fraternal love are universally valued, they are probably considered irrelevant when it comes to choosing partners in many societies. This can be seen by the fact that such family virtues were not mentioned at all by any discourse studies on dating advertisements/websites in our literature review above. As Kline and Zhang's (2009) cross-cultural mate preference research also revealed, filial piety was rated as one of the top three preferred traits in a partner by their Chinese informants and was valued much more highly by them than by their US counterparts.

The projection of traditional ideal masculinity reflects a more explicit presence of the governance exerted by the SARFT, which requires that the dating show should provide moral guidance for the public. In this context, the highlight of traditional Chinese values, e.g. filial piety, reflects the government's effort to restore morality in contemporary society through television programs (see Feng 2016, 2019). Skills related to traditional Chinese culture, such as martial arts, are also frequently represented in the videos. As many cultural heritages have lost popularity and some are even facing extinction among the younger generation, popular television programs shoulder the responsibility of promoting Chinese culture. Another feature of this type of traditional ideal manhood relates to the governance of public attitudes towards poverty and class mobility. The show advocates equal opportunities by including participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These participants often talk about their personalities and talents, especially those related to traditional Chinese values and culture. Some participants, as well as the host and commentators of the show, emphasize that poverty should be appreciated and upward mobility through education and hard work is possible, echoing the political slogan of the Chinese Dream (cf. Feng 2019). Poverty and class mobility are often represented through more fully-fledged multimodal

narratives to achieve more effective educational purposes. Such attitude toward poverty and class mobility reflects a fundamental strategy of governance in hierarchical Chinese society and has become part of Chinese culture. Well-known ancient proverbs and poems such as “寒门出贵子 (successful people are born to poor families)” and “梅花香自苦寒来 (plum blossom’s fragrance comes from the bitter cold)” all highlight the value of poverty and hard work.

However, most of the participants enacting traditional masculinity have not won a date in the show. This outcome suggests that traditional and modern versions of ideal manhood do not simply coexist in the show, but may be competing or conflicting. This further demonstrates the complexity of Chinese masculinities under the influence of multiple contextual factors. While such an outcome may undermine the effectiveness of the show in delivering moral and cultural messages, it seems consistent with urban Chinese women’s true partner selection preference (Luo 2017; Yang 2017). The show emphasizes authenticity to engage its audience and maintain its popularity (Shei 2013). In this sense, we may say the show prioritizes market needs over social needs, reflecting the influence of global capitalism on commercial media in China (Song and Hird 2014).

To conclude, our research provides new understandings of the negotiation of traditional and modern masculinities in the socio-cultural context of contemporary China by analyzing the multimodal construction of ideal manhood in the most popular reality dating show in China. The distinction of modern and traditional ideal manhood effectively captures the heterogeneity of hegemonic masculinities in China and our detailed multimodal discourse analysis provides empirical evidence for their complexity. The analysis also provides fine-grained categories of Chinese masculinity within the modern/traditional distinction. It is found that modern ideal manhood, which highlights wealth, career achievement, sporting and athletic prowess, and personality traits valued in the workplace, is preferred over traditional ideal attributes such as family values, class mobility through education and hard work, and skills in Chinese cultural heritages, reflecting the overwhelming influence of global capitalism on urban Chinese women’s mate selection. Meanwhile, the performance of socio-economic status and the inclusion of traditional masculinity reflect the show’s role of governing conduct of the public in the context of moral and cultural reconstruction in China. The performance of masculinity is mainly through the combination of implicit verbal evaluations and visual depictions of behaviors and events, which indicates the importance of investigating multimodal resources in studying identity. Methodologically, the study provides a systematic theoretical framework for analyzing identity as evaluative attributes, and to explicate how they are constructed through linguistic and visual resources. The framework can be used to

investigate identity construction in various multimodal discourse types such as reality shows, movies and advertisements.

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