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**Shifting Discourses from Boy Preference to Boy Crisis: Educating Boys and Nation  
Building in Neoliberal China**

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## **Abstract**

It is well established that China has emerged as a major economic power, resulting from the nation's neoliberal modernisation. What is less understood is the socio-cultural and educational impact of this change on public institutions. This article focuses on the education system, which is currently seen as central to delivering the nation's modernisation project, particularly through *suzhi jiaoyu* (education for quality). More specifically, we engage with a pervasive public discourse of a boy crisis. We suggest the need critically to explore the local (national) meanings within a contemporary Chinese context of this assumed projected crisis that appears to be established as a western phenomenon. We argue that the discourse of a boy crisis can be read as a strategic move to re-inscribe an earlier discourse, that of the boy preference, that in turn is discursively linked to nation building at a time of globally-inflected socio-economic transformations.

## Introduction

The last few decades in China has witnessed a remarkable discursive shift. Traditionally, a notion of *boy preference* has had a major cultural impact on the behaviour and sensibility of the population, experienced as an exclusive discourse in society's relation to boys. Currently, the discourse of a *boy crisis* is circulating in the public domain and most visibly across mainstream and social media, with the suggestion that it is displacing a boy preference (Sun et al., 2010). While the former tended to be domestically located, the latter is increasingly located within education. For example, social research (Li & Zhao, 2010; Chao et al., 2015) has particularly focused on education, highlighting the wider society's anxiety that 'boys are becoming more girly'. Recent spectacular media accounts of 'feminised boys' are resonant of a projected US/UK/Australian concern about the war on boys (Sommers, 2000; Haywood et al., 2015). The discourse of a boy crisis is particularly salient at a time when China is undergoing deep social-economic transformations with an emphasis on enhancing the quality of the whole population, with *suzhi jiaoyu* (education for quality) becoming a major concept of education reform.

Studies of boys, masculinities and education are at an early stage in China. A major issue is how we respond to the complexity of the discursive shift involving notions of *boy preference* and *boy crisis*. Firstly, we suggest that the image of failing boys pervasively circulating in the public domain is derivatively borrowing from western neoliberal policy discourses about gender relations with a particular emphasis on selective descriptive narratives that have wide populist rhetorical appeal but little explanatory value.

Secondly, there are major problems with these media accounts, including that they write out girls as illegitimately over-achieving compared to boys, homogenise and overly psychologise boys and distract from the wide range of diverse social and cultural issues that different cohorts of boys experience in their schooling, including working class students in the context of the emerging new urban middle class and children of internal migrants (see Liang and Chen, 2007; Lin, 2013). Significantly, this article seeks to intervene in the discourse of a boy crisis that assumes boys' experiences are universal (global application). In response, we suggest the need critically to explore the local (national) meanings within a contemporary Chinese context of this assumed projected crisis. We argue that currently the discourse of a boy crisis can be read as a way of reinscribing an earlier discourse, that of the boy preference tradition, that in turn is discursively linked to nation building at a time of globally-inflected socio-economic transformations. Our conceptual intervention through a socio-cultural and historical understanding of this discursive linking of the figure of the strong *embodied boy* with the strong *modern nation* has enabled us critically to engage with a notion of a boy crisis, located within a wider debate on the reconfiguring of gender relations in the current modernization era. More specifically, we examine the particular institutional dynamics of how the discourse of a boy crisis operates within the context of contemporary neoliberal schooling, in which a crude dichotomy of under-performing boys are being projected as being displaced by over-aspiring girls in terms of academic achievement that is pervasively circulated in the public domain.

The paper begins with an exploration of the playing out of neoliberalism at a local (national) level with reference to *suzhi jiaoyu* (education for quality) and the one child policy in tracing the discursive shift from boy preference to boy crisis. It is followed by a direct focus on the linking of a boy crisis to a projected national crisis, in relation to the media's claim of the de-masculinisation of education, which we are reading as an attempted re-inscription of the boy preference discourse. Finally, we explore moving beyond western discursive frameworks, and in so doing reflecting on the media's linking of the figure of the *strong embodied boy* and building the *strong modern nation* within neoliberal conditions of modernisation.

**Shifting discourses ‘from boy preference to boy crisis’: neoliberalism, *suzhi jiaoyu* (education for quality) and the one child policy**

Boy preference or son preference (Wang, 2005; Murphy et al., 2011) has been highly valued and deeply rooted in Chinese Confucian tradition. Within patriarchal agrarian society, boys were viewed as the future labour of the family<sup>1</sup>. *Men for the outside, women for the inside* was a typical description of a gendered division of work in traditional Chinese society (Fei, 2008). Alongside the economic rationale that privileged boys' social position in the society, boys' positions were strengthened when they became adult men through marriage and subsequently carried on the family name by having a child, preferably a boy. Such heteronormative and patriarchal gender norms were seen as key attributes of an adult man's masculinity (Lin, 2013; Zheng, 2015). For a son, the biggest

offense against fulfilling filial responsibility was not to have a kin-related heir (Lin, 2013), while a daughter was metaphorically treated as splashed water that would be poured away and no longer belong to her parents' family once she was married (Zhang, 2009). Until recently, the legacy of the logic of the discourse of a boy preference continued to have a major impact upon the gendering of parents' response to their children's education. Due to his status as a permanent member of the family, a son and his parents maintained the financial and care taking relationships throughout their life course. Hence, parents' investment in their sons' education was also in their own self-interest, ensuring that in return for their investment that they would be looked after when they were older (Murphy et al., 2011). Currently, equally of importance, investing in his education and cultivating him to become a human being is seen as an important step to realise the son's masculinity, that contains moral responsibilities and interpersonal skills, as expressed in the concept of 'zuo ren' (to become a human being) (Ho and Wong's, 2006).

We suggest that policy initiatives, such as *suzhi jiaoyu* and the one child policy, are the most central visible state changes which media commentators are interpreting as causal of the disappearance of the traditional boy preference, outlined above, with the suggested resulting emergence of a boy crisis.

*Suzhi jiaoyu (education for quality)*

In tracking the apparent decline of the discourse of a boy preference, media commentators have particularly focussed upon the area of education, which is projected as an overly feminised institutionalised space that is de-masculinising boys. This is occurring at the same time as education reform is officially intended to be a central strategy in delivering the nation's neoliberal modernization project, its aspiration of development, modernization and a pathway to becoming competitive in the international arena. The primary aim is to develop the quality of the whole population. Suzhi education (*suzhi jiaoyu*, in Chinese: education for quality) has become a key concept in China's educational reform, as explored by several writers. For example, Dello-Iacovo (2009:242) argues that: 'The ultimate goal of *suzhi jiaoyu* is national strength. The government has identified the skills China's workforce needs to acquire which it sees as critical to sustaining its modernisation drive. Practical skills and innovative ability have been identified by the leadership as areas which need to be improved in order to raise China's global competitiveness.' For Anagnost (2004: 189-90), 'in the movement from a planned to a market economy, the representation of value has undergone a reorganization in the realm of the biopolitical in which human life becomes a new frontier for capital accumulation. This changing relationship between value and bodies is encompassed by the term *suzhi*, which roughly translates into English as "quality."' A major discussion among researchers critically engaging with the meaning of *suzhi* education is that it still advocates a *yingshi* approach (exam-oriented education) (Kipnis, 2011), even though initially *suzhi* education was aimed at trying to shift away from this traditional system to focus on the formation of the individual as an all-round, capable citizen.



Thus its effect is to promote a neoliberal self-governed subject by displaying quality of a capable citizen, with academic credentials seen as major attributes to demonstrate individual quality, which in turn, as suggested above, disproportionately effects a range of subordinately positioned boys, including working class students in the context of the emerging new urban middle class and children of internal migrants (Lin, 2013). As Mills and Keddie (2010: 411) argue within a western context, this move: ‘with its focus on individualization tends to attribute disproportionate blame on particular groups of boys, who already tend to be marginalised by race, ethnicity, class and sexuality’. The discussion of individual performance or ‘biao xian’ (表现) in Chinese has been central in educational discourse regarding a boy crisis, that is, boys’ underperformance in contrast to girls’ overachievement is seen as illustrating the global phenomenon of a boy crisis, which as we suggest in this article can be read as an attempt to re-inscribe the Confucian-based patriarchal discourse of a boy preference.

China’s exam oriented education system has a long history that can be traced back to the imperial period, from the Sui Dynasty (581-618) through to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)<sup>2</sup>. For example, the *keju* examination (civil service examination) illustrates how this method of assessing young people’s progress through school was highly valued by families in terms of their expectations and aspirations for their children, especially for boys. Importantly, the *keju* examination was regarded as a way to bring honour to the family and hometown, enabling social mobility, for example, the highly valued promotion to a government official. In exploring the discourse of the boy preference, for men, if you could bring honour to the family, it was a way of fulfilling your filial piety

and thus demonstrating your masculinity (Lin, 2013). What remains under-researched is a contemporary translation of *suzhi* education within the context of the reconfiguration of gender relations that makes sense to a younger generation and the emergence of new subjectivities among boys and girls at school operating within a neoliberal regulatory regime.

### *The one-child policy*

The one child policy is another key social policy that has had a major impact on changing public understandings of gender relations and perhaps more implicitly unpinning the apparent decline in the traditional discourse of the boy preference. In the context of political economic transformations, a major policy development in recent Chinese history is changing legislation on the one-child policy during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The legislation shifted during that period, from rewarding families who had only one child to penalizing those who had more than one child (Banister, 1987). It restricted married couples to having only one child, thus challenging Mao's political stance on population growth, as well as the traditional Chinese view of 'more sons more prosperity', which influenced many families to continue to give birth until a son was born (Yao and Tao, 2015), thus having a profound effect on Chinese society.

China's one child policy was in line with rapid social and cultural transformations since its economic modernization in the late 1970s. However, recent research has suggested

that changing attitudes are taking place among urban parents towards boys' and girls' education, alongside the cultural legacy of the Confucian traditional son preference that is still central to Chinese culture. For example, Tsui and Rich's (2002:74) study on urban parents' attitudes to their only child's educational success maintains that 'gender equality in education is an unintended consequence of the one-child-per-family policy and that under China's current social and economic conditions, girls are better off living in one-child families in the big cities of modern China'. Other studies suggest that boys' educational success is valued as more important, compared to equally successful girls among the pre-one-child generation (Tsui and Rich, 2002). For example, Wang's (2005) study on 'son preference and educational opportunities of children in China' maintains that: 'the continued son preference value, based on traditional views as well as on perceived financial returns to families, leads to a lower level of educational attainment among daughters in rural areas of China' (2005:3). The above studies provide mixed evidence of social change with reference to gender and education, with some evidence of a gradual change of attitude to girls' education, particularly in urban areas, where girls tend to share equal educational opportunities with boys and that the traditional view of 'girls without talent is of virtue' is being challenged as a result of changing social policy on family planning and the promotion of *suzhi* education at a time of rapid urbanization resulting from modernization. Major weaknesses of media accounts of a boy crisis are the failure to locate the question of gender and schooling within this wider local/national context of the inter-play between China's socio-economic development, modernisation and social policy development over the last 50 years and an understanding of the impact

of these changes on the tensions within contemporary society's cultural values, such as Confusion tradition on gender relations, as lived out in schools.

So far, we have suggested that media accounts assume the discourse of a boy crisis is a global phenomenon and in response, we critically have explored local (national) meanings within a contemporary Chinese context. In the next sections of the article we wish to illustrate in more detail the limitations of these media descriptive accounts, arguing that currently the discourse of the boy crisis can be read as a way of attempting to re-inscribe the earlier discourse of the boy preference, that in turn is discursively linked to nation building at a time of globally-inflected socio-economic transformations.

### **The boy crisis – a national crisis: the (de)masculinization of education and the re-inscription of the boy preference**

Media discourses articulated from a position of institutional privilege tend to reflect hegemonic positions that make claims of normative outcomes (Matheson, 2005). The power of such media discourses needs to be challenged by a critical media analyst in order to expose both the privileged as well as the subordinated subjectivities inscribed in these discourses (Richardson, 2006). The role of discourse analysis as a methodology is to denaturalise taken for granted or common-sense appeals by the powerful through their use of media discourses and to disrupt the relationship between the media industries and the state apparatus. In the process of discourse analysis, key arenas of influence and exercise of power are identified by the critical researcher through her knowledge of and

engagement with the debate and the analysis itself will be carried out on a sample of texts that are considered both representative and impactful. National media outlets in present day China, especially the English language media, are closely aligned with and reflective of government policies. The hegemonic role of state authority is clear in terms of regulation, ownership or content production of strategic media sectors (Lagerkvist, 2010) so we have selected a range of texts from media outlets we believe that reflect current government policies and which have significant uptake internally as well as presenting a crystallised version of these policies towards the outside world.

We have drawn upon a selection of texts from Xinhua News, People.cn, QQ web and China Daily, using keywords, including ‘boy crisis’ and ‘boys’ education’ in Chinese for our search in response to the media discourse of a boy crisis within Chinese society. The reason for choosing the commentaries from the above media platforms is due to their potential size and reach of readership and the range of ways that they address this issue. For example, Xinhua news agency and people.cn are among the largest state owned media organization in China. QQ is one of the most popular websites that is popular for its social media app QQ and Weibo (micro blog), and the China Daily is a state-owned English language media organization targeting its English speaking readers. The scale of the debates has been overwhelming. For example, a major website has dedicated a theme and forum for the discussion of a boy crisis; the QQ website has set up a forum<sup>3</sup> on ‘Save the boys: Does Chinese ways of education produce a boy crisis?’ With reference to the methodological approach underpinning our engagement with the selected media texts, the choice of a limited number of articles is in accordance with the practices of discourse

analysis, especially as we consider that the media outlets that have produced these texts have a particular impact due to their close alignment to authoritative segments of the Chinese state. English language media in China tends to reflect very closely government thinking of the day through careful filtering of content. The same content is reflected, sooner or later, in various other media outlets in the country. Using discourse analysis methodology we do not make claims for a comprehensive and fully representative picture of the Chinese media landscape, but we feel confident that the chosen texts are both authoritative and impactful. We accept that other competing discourses are present in the public sphere, but their impact or potential alignment with government thinking might be more difficult to substantiate.

In summary, there are four key aspects that are seen as constituting a boy crisis that are circulating in the public domain, as follows: (1) boys' academic performance are falling behind girls; (2) the qualities of boys' bodily health are not as good as they used to be; (3) boys' psychological state is a concern as more boys than girls are seeking help; (4) boys' ability at social adaptation is limited, leading more of them to become involved in violence and crime<sup>4</sup>. The media discourse has constantly highlighted selective statistics, such as, those outlining that girls are outnumbering boys in higher education to emphasise the problem (see *Saving the Boys*, Sun et al., 2010). Other discussions include the emerging 'feminine' patterns of boys' behaviour and the claim that the feminization of teachers (Fu, 2000) is contributing to a boy crisis, with a lack of boys' male role models within schools due to the lack of male teachers.

In response, it is important to note, that the public discourse of a boy crisis is located within a broader educational debate, that of the student-centred curriculum reform, focusing on ‘education for quality’, and aiming to shift away from an exam-oriented approach. This shift has opened up a wider discussion about what should be included in *suzhi jiaoyu* (education for quality) and whether such a shift has transformed student experiences as well as the delivery of positive outcomes. A particular issue in this transition between systems is that the measurement has traditionally primarily relied on examination results and academic performance. According to Zhang (2013: 28), academic performance in relation to examination results continues to be the key metric to measure ‘suzhi’. This has been illustrated in the high profile media coverage of China’s *Gao Kao* (college entrance examination), which tends to represent a touchstone of individual and national academic success as an indicator of future economic prosperity. In summary, as exemplified in the following media headlines, China is projected as facing a potential national crisis as a result of a boy crisis made manifest in their relative poor academic performance compared to that of girls (our emphasis added).

*‘Boy crisis is a problem of overall importance and trend. Falling behind girls for a extended period of time will generate the feeling of inferiority and revolt. This will cause confusion regarding gender difference. It will **affect the development of the whole society**’ (Xinhua News, 2015)<sup>5</sup>*

*‘Wang Ronghua, director of the Shanghai Education Development Foundation, has long maintained that the underperformance of boys in schools will **negatively affect scientific and technological innovation in China.**’ (China Daily, 2012)<sup>6</sup>*

In the above comments, contemporary boys’ identities are imagined not simply in terms of individual gender deficit but simultaneously highlight an association between failing boys and gender (masculine) processes involved in an assumed major threat to the nation’s science and technological innovation. In turn, the cultural construction of a boy crisis illustrated through the over-gendering of boys’ academic underachievement is linked to a wider anxiety about the nation’s perceived international standing in terms of global achievement/under-achievement – the ‘underperformance of boys in schools will negatively affect scientific and technological innovation in China’. This argument evokes memories of specific historical periods, in which China was represented as a weak nation. For example, during the late imperial Qing Dynasty, especially after being defeated in the Sino-Japanese War, 1894-95, China was labelled as the ‘Sick Man of East Asia’ (*Dong Ya Bing Fu*) (Hu, 2013).

Within this context, the representation of a boy crisis and the accompanying feminization of education are made sense of in terms of challenging the public narratives about projecting a strong national image, both internally and globally, emerging from the late 1970s economic reform. The power relationship in terms of the dichotomy of ‘the west and the rest’ has been internalized within the modern ideology of China’s planned progress for its future position on the global stage, with nation building and physicality as



central in China's modernization process. According to Xu (2006: 92), 'In the process of new nation building, they were endowed with a nationalist mission to transform the 'sick man of East Asia' (*Dong Ya Bing Fu*) into a strong and modern nation respected by the world. The link between sport, the military, and national salvation has persisted even until today.' This resonates with Zheng's recent study on the media 'phenomenon of fake women' (伪娘) (Zheng, 2015:348), which highlights that 'effeminate men are considered a peril to the security of the nation because it reflects powerlessness, inferiority, feminized passivity, and social deterioration, reminiscent of the colonial past when China was defeated by the colonizing West and plagued by its image as the "sick man" of East Asia' (2015:349).

We suggest in this paper that the media anxiety about the development of school boys' future as productive and healthy citizens contributing to the wider society illustrates that schooling is currently perceived as a central microcosm of the wider political aim of building the new nation. In so doing, the narratives regarding the responsibility of educating masculine boys for future nation-building and sustainable economic development may be read as further illustrating that education is a key masculinizing process. More specifically, we suggest that the rhetorical claims of the feminization of classroom practice might be read as a wider political intervention to re-masculinize education in preparing boys (and girls) for a future neoliberal based economy and nation.

Alongside the pervasive narratives of failing boys explored above, the mainstream media have proposed expert advice online, suggesting gender specific strategies in order to

overcome the boy crisis. Drawing upon western policy models, such media accounts have distracted from internal understandings of contemporary Chinese schooling, gender and boyhood in relation to the reconfiguration of wider gender relations at a time of global transformations. Rather, in appropriating a version of boy preference, that the media claim has been displaced by boy crisis a reductionist appeal is made to align the figure of the strong embodied boy with building the strong modern nation that is now explored in more detail.

**Beyond western neoliberal discursive frameworks –the figure of the *embodied boy* and building the *strong modern nation***

This section of the paper illustrates some examples taken from online media outlining strategies for educating the ideal ‘male’ citizen for the nation’s future. In so doing, we critique the public debate that derivatively adopts western neoliberal discursive frameworks as explanatory models of contemporary Chinese male students’ schooling experiences, which with the globalization of education has seen policy borrowing increase as a common social practice (Madsen, 2006; Blackmore, 2000). Such accounts tend to borrow simplistic and reductive western policy discourses focusing on dichotomised gender attributes and the overly-psychologised individual embodied (boy) subject (our emphasis added). This has resulted in a failure to ground their understanding within society’s socio-historical reconfiguration of gender relations and accompanying shifting models of boyhood and masculinity within the context of Confucian, Maoist and

neoliberal periods and how these are played out within historically-specific schooling systems.

*'To educate a masculine man, it is essential to have physical training. However, psychological building is also crucial. **Physical strength** can represent a strong psychological condition. A strong psychological condition can support people's whole life. As a boy should be **strong** from the inside to outside, which will enable him to have comprehensive masculine confidence and to be called a **real masculine man.**' (China Daily, 2015)<sup>7</sup>*

*'Authorities in Shanghai are considering establishing an all-boys high school in response to a so-called "masculinity crisis" among male Chinese youth... The idea of a masculinity crisis in China has been gaining ground in recent years, with some experts citing the **physically and emotionally weak appearance of Chinese boys** as evidence of an erosion of masculinity.'* (China Daily, 2012)<sup>8</sup>

Some on-line media commentators, such as Wang (2015)<sup>9</sup>, suggest strategies for a new model of educating boys, including: 'to enable boys to have the quality of toughness and to challenge their limitations through military training; to cultivate boys to have the sense of collectiveness, the spirit of teamwork, strong willpower and physique; to develop courses on street dancing, debate, in order to cultivate boys' quality to be wise and bold, quick in expression, collaborative in team work and to have a wide field of vision'. For such media commentators, a central index of masculinity in boys' education can be

symbolically highlighted by locating sport and physical activities at the centre of the curriculum, as they believe that this curriculum restructuring will highlight a distinctive masculinity that is appropriate in preparing boys for their future careers.

In these media accounts, alongside reflecting western policy discourses focussing on how to resolve a boy crisis, there are other influences at play here. For example, the on-line media commentators' new model of educating boys resonates with an image of masculinity projected during the Maoist period, which was associated with the notion of revolution and military action, visually represented through bodily images of rural peasants and industrial workers. During 1967-1978, the government set up a programme of 'Shang Shan Xia Xiang' (Go up to mountain and go down to village), in which 17 million urban youth were sent to live, work with and, be 're-educated' by peasants in rural areas (Zhou and Hou, 1999). They were represented as the state's master, who would teach and lead the whole nation to common prosperity (Chen, 2002). Gender relations in terms of masculinity and femininity in the early Maoist period were masculinized. For example, there was 'gender erasure' of women, which involved the intersection of 'class struggle' and 'masculinisation' within which 'women were pressured to dress and act like men, but not vice versa' (Brownell and Wassertrom, 2002:251). It was seen as 'progress' to be physically strong like a man, while to act like a woman was labelled as weak and regressive (Honig, 2002). At the same time, the symbolic signifier of peasants and industrial workers served to contribute to an ideal masculinity that was represented by peasants and industrial workers' bodies. Central to the argument of the media is that the current restructuring of an 'overly-feminised' schooling closes off such historically tough masculine subjectivities that are natural to

boys.

Importantly, a series of anxieties of what both boys and the current educational system lack are articulated in the public discourse. At the same time, these accounts have emphasised the need explicitly to link curriculum, pedagogy and assessment reform to boys' characteristics, in order to enhance their gender-specific way of learning.

*'The emergence of "boy crisis" does not simply demonstrate problems of teachers, parents and the boys, but the problems of educating the boys. Boys' ways of study do not match the current education model. **Boys have been gifted with strength, courage and energy.** They need sport, less speaking and more physical activities. They need to learn through a large amount of physical and bodily activities.'* (People's Net, 2014)<sup>10</sup>

For practitioners, such comments often appear as a practical common-sense response to everyday classroom problems with under-achieving boys. However, from a critical educational perspective, these comments can have an unintended effect of essentializing boys' assumed 'natural' characteristics (Liu, 2006). For example, such emphasis on boys' physical strength and capability, as we have highlighted in the text, tends to re-inscribe a normative binary division between boys and girls that is simplistically read off as associated meanings of young educational masculinities and femininities that are and should be lived out in the classroom. At the same time, notions of being tough and physically capable are central characteristics required for the development of the imagined future nation, in which heteronormative attributes have been highlighted in media commentary on how to educate boys in China. For example, the following news

headline illustrates how simplistic heteronormative assumptions inform the discourse of a boy crisis and prescribes accompanying strategies in developing a new educational model.

*'On the morning of 4<sup>th</sup> June, more than 30 school boys stood in a multi-functional room of Qinling Road primary school in Zhengzhou City, holding their heads high and loudly read the 'Masculine Men Declaration': I am a masculine man, my body is as hard as iron...I am a masculine man, a real "ye men" ' (Xinhua News, 2010) <sup>11</sup>*

The notion 'ye men' is translated as macho men, entailing 'non-feminine' and heterosexual characteristics, in terms of psychological attitudes and behaviours. It traditionally refers to a representation of masculinity that is associated with men from the northern region of China, though recent research within other wider Chinese contexts have identified these characteristics as being promoted within education (see Chan, 2005; Yang, 2014). For example, Chan's (2005:75) study acknowledges the qualities of 'individuality, self-reliance, aggression, competitiveness, instrumentality, entrepreneurial orientation, rationality, and the ability to live with pressures' in Hong Kong's schooling processes. The above extract illustrates that a 'proper boy' should be trained to become a heterosexual adult man. Interestingly, such promotion of developing a macho man may be seen as a way of privileging specific western-based versions of white middle class heterosexual masculinity that unintendedly disconnect from Chinese historical understandings of gender relations.

In shifting beyond a western neoliberal perspective, it is also important to engage critically with the claim of the feminization of education that primarily and exclusively focuses on individual embodied (boy) subjects (Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2013). Within conditions of a globally-inflected regulatory regime, outlined above, we might begin with locating this reductive discussion about gender and education within the Chinese local cultural system and its attendant values (see Connell, 1998). Song and Hird (2013) suggest a transformation of the representation of Chinese manhood in light of the discourse of the ‘crisis of masculinity’ in the post-Mao era. They maintain that ‘the Chinese “crisis of masculinity” in the post-Mao era goes hand in hand with economic reform and opening up to the outside world and these changes have swept away both the Confucian and Maoist models of manhood’ (p. 8).

Hence, in exploring Chinese institutions, such as schools, it is important to address the continuing impact of Confucian gender ideology and how it plays out within contemporary society. Although the notion of ‘nan zi qi gai’ 男子气概 (masculinity in Chinese) is widely circulated across the media in relation to the boy crisis, there is little mention of what it means in a contemporary Chinese context. Louie conceptualizes the ideal types of traditional Chinese masculinities: ‘wu’ masculinity and ‘wen’ masculinity, as well as the divisions of ‘yin’ and ‘yang’ (see Louie, 2002, 2015; Song, 2004). In theorizing Chinese masculinities, Louie (2002: 16) suggests that ‘ideal masculinity can be either *wen* or *wu* but is at its height when both are present to a high degree’. For example, *wen* is associated with the cultural, intellectual, civil and non-physical, while *wu* is associated with the martial, military and physical. Ideals of masculinity and femininity

are at the same time subsumed within Confucian social relations of the family and other social institutions within which men are ascribed a dominant position (Louie, 2002:10). Paradoxically, Zheng (2007:433) acknowledges that a ‘traditional sense of identity did not glorify physical prowess’. This means the emphasis on the body and physical capability does not necessarily carry prominent masculine meanings. In exploring contemporary understandings of educational gender arrangements, such nuanced and complex conceptions of (young) manhood and masculinity (and we might add boyhood) make a highly ironic contrast to media rhetorical claims of the urgency of the patriotic duty to save the next generation of boys in crisis, that is based on historical amnesia about Chinese cultural politics while drawing upon neoliberal western policy discourses.

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to make a research intervention into public discussion about perceptions about changing gender relations in light of the neoliberal modernization project in China since the late 1970s. Our focused intervention explaining the complexity of the discursive shift involving notions of the *boy preference* and the *boy crisis* and in turn the strategic move to use this public discussion to make a discursive link between the strong embodied boy and building the strong modern nation within a school context can be read as a microcosm of a wider socio-political tension within a globally inflected modernization project adapting to local traditional (Confucian) values. Future sociological work, in exploring the reconfiguration of (public) institutionally-based



gender relations and accompanying concepts of boyhood, girlhood, masculinities and femininities might draw upon local (national/regional) and international studies in highlighting the potential creative interplay across geo-political spaces, in addressing how this modernity-tradition couplet is culturally played out within specific institutions, such as schools.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Here, we use an historian's technique in applying a heuristic device, to suggest what is an ideal type. In practice, there would have been variation, for example, at regional and family levels.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www1.chinaculture.org/library/2008-02/16/content\\_22184.htm](http://www1.chinaculture.org/library/2008-02/16/content_22184.htm) (accessed on 06-11-15)

<sup>3</sup> <http://cq.qq.com/zt2012/nhwj/> (accessed on 05-11-15)

<sup>4</sup> <http://news.163.com/12/0326/10/7TH02VST00012Q9L.html> (accessed on 05-11-15)

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- <sup>5</sup> [http://education.news.cn/2015-10/21/c\\_128342292.htm](http://education.news.cn/2015-10/21/c_128342292.htm) (accessed on 09-11-15)
- <sup>6</sup> [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-09/17/content\\_15761449.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-09/17/content_15761449.htm) (accessed on 05-11-15)
- <sup>7</sup> [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/dfpd/dfjyzc/2015-09-30/content\\_14229453.html](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/dfpd/dfjyzc/2015-09-30/content_14229453.html) (accessed on 06-11-15)
- <sup>8</sup> [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/regional/2012-12/31/content\\_16071918.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/regional/2012-12/31/content_16071918.htm) (accessed on 09-11-15)
- <sup>9</sup> Wang, X. (2015) Boy Crisis? Don't treat 'boy education' as something special. <http://news.sina.com.cn/zl/zatan/blog/2015-09-30/09084627/1231409562/4965d19a0102vu2l.shtml> (accessed on 15-11-15)
- <sup>10</sup> <http://edu.people.com.cn/n/2014/0118/c1053-24158373.html> (accessed on 15-11-15)
- <sup>11</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2010-06/04/c\\_12182976.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2010-06/04/c_12182976.htm) (accessed on 08-11-15)