

## **Fatherhood in Focus: A Semiotic and Representational Analysis of TV Commercials in the Asian Context (2003-2019)**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the portrayal of fatherhood in 20 Asian TV commercials aired between 2003 and 2019, employing Semiotic Theory as analytical frameworks. Through qualitative content analysis, the research decodes the visual, textual, and symbolic elements used to construct fatherhood and investigates how these representations reflect or challenge cultural norms and societal expectations in Asia. At the denotative level, commercials often depict fathers as providers, protectors, or mentors. However, connotative analysis reveals a deeper narrative of evolving masculinity, where fathers increasingly embody emotional expressiveness, caregiving roles, and modern values. This duality signifies a shift from traditional patriarchal archetypes toward more nuanced portrayals aligned with socio-economic transformations in the region. Representation theory is further applied to explore power dynamics, cultural ideologies, and the reframing of fatherhood in response to audience expectations and marketing strategies. Findings highlight recurring themes such as sacrifice, authority, and family harmony, underscored by visual symbols like household settings, tools, and family rituals. The analysis also identifies patterns of inclusivity and exclusion, pointing to persistent stereotypes and emerging counter-narratives. This study contributes to the fields of advertising, cultural studies, and gender representation by offering insights into how fatherhood is constructed in media and how these representations influence and are influenced by societal trends. It provides practical implications for advertisers aiming to resonate with diverse Asian audiences while addressing broader academic discussions on gender and cultural identity in media.

*Keywords:* fatherhood, advertising, TV commercial, semiotic analysis, gender roles in media

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## Introduction

In the rapidly evolving media landscape of the 21st century, advertising serves as both a mirror and a mold of cultural values. It reflects societal norms while simultaneously shaping perceptions of identity, gender, and familial roles. This dual function is particularly salient in the portrayal of fatherhood, a role deeply rooted in tradition yet increasingly redefined by shifting sociocultural currents. In Asia, where rapid urbanization, economic growth, and generational clashes over values have transformed family structures, TV commercials provide a compelling lens through which to examine the tensions between enduring cultural archetypes and emerging ideals of masculinity.

This study investigates the semiotic and representational construction of fatherhood in 20 Asian TV commercials aired between 2003 and 2019. Anchored in Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory (Barthes et al., 1967) and Stuart Hall's Representation Theory (Hall, 1997), the research interrogates how visual, textual, and symbolic elements encode meanings of fatherhood. It further explores how these portrayals negotiate cultural ideologies across diverse Asian societies. The chosen timeframe spans nearly two decades, coinciding with pivotal shifts in Asia's socioeconomic fabric, including rising discourse on gender equity, the normalization of dual-income family models, and the globalized reimagining of paternal roles.

While existing scholarship has extensively explored motherhood and female representation in media, fatherhood remains understudied, particularly in non-Western contexts. Asian fatherhood, often framed through Confucian ideals of authority and stoicism (Chua & Fujino, 1999), presents a unique case study. Advertisers increasingly balance tradition with modern narratives of emotional vulnerability and caregiving, reflecting broader societal transitions. By dissecting commercials from industries such as consumer goods, automotive, and technology, this study unpacks how media producers encode messages of sacrifice, authority, and familial harmony while subtly challenging patriarchal norms.

This research contributes to interdisciplinary dialogues in media studies, cultural sociology, and gender theory by mapping the semiotic evolution of fatherhood in Asia's advertising landscape. Practically, it offers actionable insights for advertisers navigating the region's complex cultural terrain, where nostalgia for tradition often coexists with aspirational modernity. The following sections detail the methodology, theoretical frameworks, and findings, ultimately arguing that Asian TV commercials serve as contested sites where fatherhood is both nostalgically memorialized and dynamically reimagined.

## Literature Review

Advertising functions as a cultural text that both reflects and constructs societal norms (Goldman, 2005). The portrayal of fatherhood in media and advertising has been examined through multiple theoretical lenses, with semiotics and representation theory offering critical frameworks to decode the cultural and ideological underpinnings of these depictions. Semiotic analysis, rooted in Roland Barthes' distinction between denotative and connotative meanings (Barthes et al., 1967), has been widely applied to dissect gender roles in advertising. Studies of Indian print media (Revathy & Hemmige, 2022) and Indonesian TV commercials (Putri & Undiana, 2022) reveal how visual and textual elements encode patriarchal norms, such as associating femininity with domesticity and masculinity with authority. Similarly, Bell and Milic's (2002) re-examination of Goffman's gender display theory through semiotic analysis underscores how advertisements naturalize gendered behaviors, positioning men as

active agents and women as passive recipients. These findings resonate with critiques of Greek TV commercials, where women's identities are often reduced to decorative or caregiving roles, reinforcing hegemonic gender hierarchies (Nina-Pazarzi & Tsangaris, 2008). Such analyses highlight the universal tendency of media to mythologize social roles, a process Barthes et al. (1967) attribute to the transformation of cultural constructs into seemingly natural truths.

However, Barthes' semiotic framework has faced critiques for its perceived rigidity. Scholars argue that interpretations of signs are inherently contextual, shaped by the audience's cultural and historical background (Safavi & Gümüş, 2019). This challenges Barthes' assumption of static, universally legible semiotic systems. Monticelli (2016) further contrasts Barthes' model with Lotman's cultural semiotics, emphasizing the latter's recognition of heterogeneous cultural systems capable of generating new meanings. This critique is particularly salient in Asian contexts, where diverse cultural codes, from Confucian paternalism to neoliberal individualism, intersect in advertising. Stuart Hall's representation theory, which integrates structural linguistics, semiotics, and Foucauldian power dynamics (Cheng, 2016), offers a more flexible lens to analyze these complexities. Hall's work acknowledges the interplay between media producers and audiences, where representations of fatherhood are neither wholly imposed nor passively consumed but negotiated within sociocultural power structures. Yet, as Bennett (2016) notes, Hall's reliance on Continental philosophical traditions risks obscuring non-Western epistemologies, a gap this study addresses by centering Asian cultural specificities.

### **Fatherhood in Media and Advertising**

Globally, advertising has increasingly grappled with evolving notions of masculinity and fatherhood. The rise of "dvertising" in Western media reflects a shift from fathers as distant providers to emotionally engaged caregivers (Mueller et al., 2023). Marshall et al. (2014) trace this transition in Good Housekeeping advertisements, where fathers evolved from overt breadwinners in the 1950s to peripheral figures by 2010, signaling a tension between nostalgic paternalism and modern egalitarianism. Similarly, Stevens (2015) identifies discursive barriers to involved fatherhood in Australia, where stay-at-home fathers are stigmatized as deviating from traditional norms. These trends mirror broader cultural anxieties about masculinity in neoliberal economies, where advertising both challenges and reinforces gendered ideals (Gentry & Harrison, 2010; Zayer et al., 2019). For instance, campaigns promoting "real men" as assertive yet nurturing (Islentyeva et al., 2024) reflect a dual appeal to progressive values and entrenched stereotypes. However, such portrayals often remain aspirational, masking persistent structural inequities (Hamad, 2010).

In Asia, the interplay of tradition and modernity in fatherhood representations is particularly pronounced. Confucian ideals, which prioritize paternal authority and filial piety (Lim, 2019), clash with neoliberal narratives of involved, emotionally expressive fatherhood. Hong Kong's stay-at-home fathers, for example, face societal skepticism despite their caregiving roles, as their identities conflict with entrenched notions of masculine productivity (Liong, 2017). Advertising in the region often negotiates these tensions by depicting fathers as symbolic figures, silent providers or leisure companions, whose presence signifies familial completeness rather than active participation (Yang et al., 2014). This aligns with broader media strategies that commodify "The Happy Home" (Chen, 2011), idealizing harmony while obscuring the pressures of urbanization and overwork (Labour Party, 2012). The emotional demands of familial relationships, as Goldman (2005) observes, are frequently

reduced to material exchanges in advertisements, where gift-giving substitutes for genuine intimacy. Yet, as Chang (2006) argues, cultural dimensions of masculinity and femininity shape advertising appeals: in collectivist societies like China and Japan, familial harmony is prioritized, whereas individualist contexts emphasize personal achievement.

Despite these insights, critical gaps persist. While Western studies dominate discussions of fatherhood in advertising (e.g., Marshall et al., 2014; Stevens, 2015), Asian contexts remain underexplored, particularly in terms of semiotic mechanisms and longitudinal shifts. Existing research often isolates cultural or economic factors, neglecting their interplay in shaping representations. For example, Doi and Bester's (1973) analysis of Japan's "fatherless society" underscores the psychological impact of absent paternal figures yet fails to address how contemporary advertising reconciles this legacy with modern expectations of involved fatherhood. By applying Barthes' and Hall's frameworks to Asian commercials, this study bridges these gaps, interrogating how visual and narrative codes, such as household settings or paternal gestures, reflect and reshape cultural ideologies amid socioeconomic transformations. Furthermore, it challenges Eurocentric theoretical assumptions by contextualizing semiotic analysis within Asia's diverse cultural landscapes, where Confucian legacies, postcolonial identities, and globalized consumerism converge.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the construction of fatherhood in Asian TV commercials aired between 2003 and 2019. Grounded in Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory and Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, the methodology integrates systematic coding of audiovisual content with interpretative analysis to decode cultural meanings and power dynamics. The design prioritizes understanding how visual, textual, and symbolic elements collectively shape representations of fatherhood, while tracing shifts in these portrayals over time.

The theoretical framework combines Barthes' semiotic model, which distinguishes between denotative (literal) and connotative (symbolic) meanings, and Hall's emphasis on representation as a site of cultural negotiation. Barthes' framework guides the identification of surface-level imagery, such as fathers engaging in caregiving activities, and the interpretation of deeper symbolic associations, such as nurturing gestures signifying a departure from traditional masculinity. Hall's theory complements this by interrogating how these representations reinforce or subvert societal stereotypes, positioning fatherhood as a contested cultural symbol shaped by power dynamics and audience reception.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 20 TV commercials featuring father figures, sourced from diverse Asian countries, including Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, and South Korea, and spanning industries such as consumer goods, automotive, and technology. The commercials were identified through YouTube using keywords "Father Advertisement" and "Family Advertisement," with selection criteria prioritizing high view counts and engagement metrics to reflect narratives resonant with popular audiences. Each advertisement was cataloged by product category, air date (year), geographic region, and duration, showing in Table 1.

**Table 1***List of the Selected 20 TV Commercials*

	<b>Region</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Brand</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Tone &amp; Manner</b>
1	South Korea	Insurance	KB Financial Group	2017	4:38	Emotional, warmth
2	Thailand	Insurance	MetLife	2017	3:20	Emotional, warmth
3	Taiwan	Insurance	TCB Life	2012	6:19	Emotional
4	Japan	Car	Toyota	2015	3:26	Warmth
5	Thailand	Branding	ICC	2017	4:32	Emotional, warmth
6	Taiwan	Household product	Andante Tissues	2016	5:05	Emotional, warmth
7	Malaysia	Branding	Bernas	2013	3:09	Emotional
8	Taiwan	Insurance	Cardif	2015	4:29	Emotional, warmth
9	Japan	Musical Instruments	Tosando Music	2014	3:30	Emotional, warmth
10	Japan	Gaming	Final Fantasy 14	2017	1:10	Funny
11	Taiwan	Electrical appliances	E-life Mall Corporation	2019	10:00	Emotional, Funny, warmth
12	Taiwan	Electrical appliances	E-life Mall Corporation	2018	10:00	Emotional, warmth
13	Taiwan	Car	Toyota	2016	7:43	Emotional, warmth
14	Japan	Household product	Tokyo Gas	2016	1:30	Warmth
15	Thailand	Communication	LINE	2017	1:30	Emotional, warmth
16	Hong Kong	Insurance	HSBC	2019	1:10	Relax, warmth
17	Hong Kong	Electrical appliances	Phillips Hue	2016	1:44	Funny, relax
18	Hong Kong	Healthcare	Mannings	2003	0:30	Funny
19	Hong Kong	Communication	Wilson	2012	0:30	Problem-solving
20	Hong Kong	Healthcare	GNC	2014	0:46	Preaching

*Note.* Sorted and cataloged according to the data collection process.

Data analysis unfolded in two interconnected phases to decode the construction of fatherhood in Asian TV commercials. Representational analysis focused on the recurring visual elements were cataloged and themed, while semiotic analysis investigated the narrative and symbols implied in the TV ads. MAXQDA software facilitated systematic coding and visualization of patterns, enabling cross-comparison of themes and narratives. Intercoder reliability was ensured through iterative discussions with a second researcher, resolving discrepancies via consensus to maintain analytical rigor. By adhering to this methodology, the study provides a

nuanced exploration of how Asian TV commercials negotiate tradition and modernity in constructing fatherhood, offering insights into cultural delivery and continuity.

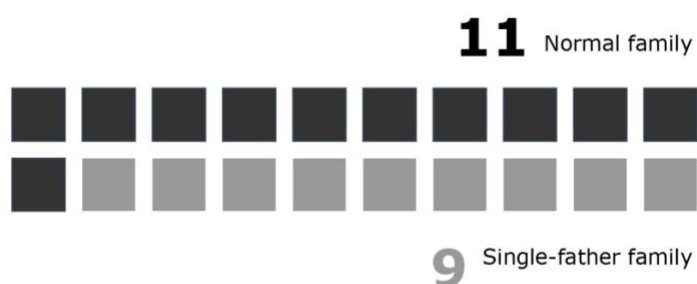
## Results and Findings

The data analysis process yielded critical insights into the representation of fatherhood in Asian TV commercials, structured around three core findings that emerged from the repetitive patterns through thematic analysis.

### Single-Father Prevalence

Figure 1 concluded that nearly half of the sampled TV commercials (9 out of 20) prominently featured single fathers, indicating a notable narrative focus on solo paternal caregiving. These advertisements frequently depicted single fathers fulfilling dual roles as both providers and nurturers. Common scenarios included fathers working late hours, carrying heavy objects, preparing meals alone or bring children to school, often juxtaposed with visual cues of exhaustion, such as disheveled clothing or weary expressions. Notably, all nine commercials framed single fatherhood through themes of silent endurance, portraying paternal sacrifice as a heroic ideal. For example, a 2017 Thai insurance advertisement depicted a father who conceals his financial struggles by falsely assuring his daughter he holds a well-paid and comfortable job. He works multiple part-time jobs to sustain their livelihood, from construction labor to late-night delivery shifts. Despite his grueling schedule, the father meticulously maintains appearances, wearing his best clothes during daily school pickups and drop-offs, even as his worn-out work uniforms and exhausted demeanor subtly reveal the toll of his labor. This narrative of performative dignity, where the father prioritizes his child's sense of security over his own hardships, symbolizes unwavering dedication. The recurring motif of fathers masking their struggles to project stability underscores the cultural valorization of paternal responsibility. However, it also reinforces stereotypes of emotional restraint and self-reliance, perpetuating the expectation that fathers should endure suffering silently rather than seek communal support or emotional expression.

**Figure 1**  
*Family Type Prevalence in 20 TV Commercials*



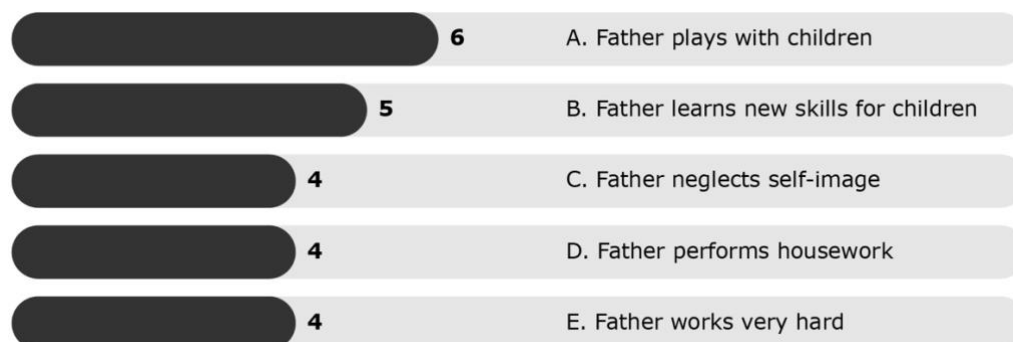
### Five Attributes of Father Images

Figure 2 shows five recurring attributes emerged as central to the portrayal of fathers in the analyzed commercials. First, fathers engaging in play with children appeared in 6 out of 20 advertisements, often through scenes of outdoor activities or shared laughter. Second, fathers learning new skills for their children's benefit, such as dancing, playing piano or using new technology, were depicted in 5 commercials, highlighting adaptability as a modern paternal

trait. Third, 4 commercials showcased fathers disregarding their personal dignity, such as wearing mismatched clothing or dancing awkwardly to entertain their children, framing such acts as gestures of selfless love. Fourth, fathers performing household chores were present in 4 advertisements, though these portrayals often framed domestic labor as occasional assistance rather than routine responsibility. Finally, 4 commercials emphasized fathers laboring tirelessly, frequently through visuals of office settings or manual work, linking paternal identity to economic provision. These attributes collectively construct a multifaceted image of fatherhood, balancing traditional expectations of authority with evolving ideals of emotional engagement.

**Figure 2**

*Frequency Count of Father Images in 20 TV Commercials*

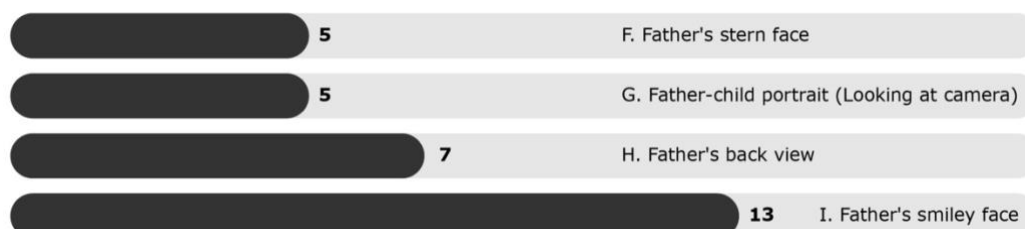


## Symbols of Fatherhood

The symbolic construction of fatherhood in the analyzed commercials is visually summarized in Figure 3, which quantifies the frequency of four recurring motifs, and Figure 4, which maps these symbols to their cultural and emotional significations. Figure 3 reveals that the father's smiley face (13 instances) was the most prevalent symbol, followed by the father's back view (7 instances), while the father's stern face and father-child portrait each appeared 5 times. Figure 4 further decodes these symbols, illustrating how visual elements signify deeper cultural ideologies.

**Figure 3**

*Frequency Count of Fatherhood Symbols in 20 TV Commercials*



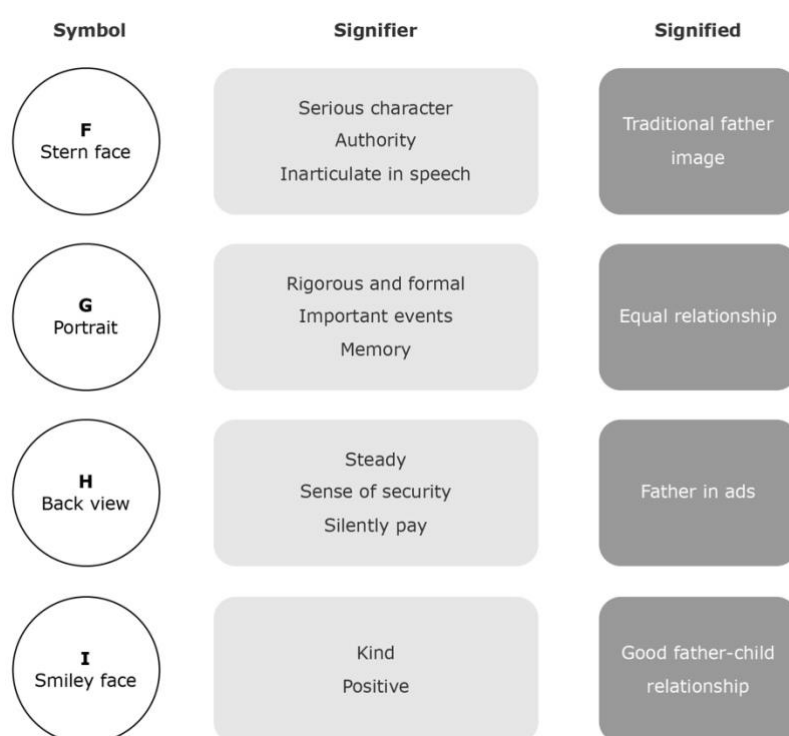
The father's smiley face, prominent in over half of the commercials, functioned as a key signifier of kindness, positivity, and an idealized father-child relationship. These smiles often framed paternal warmth within climactic scenes of familial harmony, such as reunions or celebrations, reinforcing the myth of the "happy home." In contrast, the father's back view, depicted in contexts like leaving for work or holding up an adult child, signified silent sacrifice and steadfast reliability. This symbol connoted emotional distance alongside

unwavering security, reflecting cultural expectations of paternal stoicism prevalent in East Asian contexts.

The father's stern face, appearing in disciplinary or decision-making scenarios, symbolized traditional authority and emotional inarticulacy. This symbol with seriousness and hierarchical family dynamics, aligning with Confucian ideals of paternal discipline. Conversely, the father-child portrait, featuring formal poses and direct gazes at the camera, signified egalitarian relationships and shared milestones. These compositions, often staged during graduations or holidays, subtly challenged rigid hierarchies by emphasizing collaboration and collective memory. Together, all these four symbols encapsulate a cultural tension between nostalgia for patriarchal authority and aspirational narratives of modern, emotionally engaged fatherhood.

**Figure 4**

*Semiotic Mapping of Fatherhood Symbols in Asian TV Commercials*



## Discussion and Conclusion

The portrayal of fatherhood in Asian TV commercials between 2003 and 2019 reveals a complex interplay of cultural preservation and adaptation, shaped by the dual forces of tradition and modernity. The prevalence of single-father narratives in nearly half of the analyzed commercials underscores a semiotic negotiation between Confucian ideals of paternal duty and emerging expectations of involved, emotionally expressive fatherhood. Drawing on Barthes' semiotic theory, these advertisements mythologize single fatherhood as a heroic sacrifice, naturalizing silent endurance and self-reliance as inherent paternal virtues. For instance, scenes of fathers working late or neglecting their self-image (e.g., disheveled appearances) encode martyrdom as a cultural truth, resonating with Doi and Bester's (1973) notion of Japan's "fatherless society," where fathers are physically present but emotionally distant. Yet, Hall's representation theory illuminates how these narratives also subtly challenge



traditional norms by framing single fathers as adaptive caregivers, capable of bridging provider and nurturer roles. This duality reflects a broader societal ambivalence, where progressive ideals are grafted onto enduring frameworks of paternal responsibility.

The five recurring attributes of fatherhood further illustrate this tension. Denotatively, these acts signify evolving masculinities, such as fathers engaging in childcare or housework. Connotatively, however, they perpetuate ideological contradictions. For example, fathers performing domestic chores are often portrayed as “helpers” rather than equal partners, exceptionalizing rather than normalizing their contributions. This aligns with Lim’s (2019) analysis of Confucian masculinity in Singapore, where paternal adaptability is celebrated but circumscribed by traditional authority. Similarly, depictions of fathers laboring tirelessly reinforce the Confucian ethic of economic provision, even as they obscure the psychological toll of overwork, a phenomenon well-documented in Hong Kong’s 2012 survey (Labour Party, 2012). These portrayals reflect Hall’s (1997) concept of negotiated representations, where advertisers balance audience nostalgia for patriarchal stability with aspirational modernity.

Symbolic analysis further elucidates this cultural negotiation. The father’s stern face, a recurring motif, embodies traditional authority and emotional restraint, echoing Confucian norms of paternal discipline (Luo et al., 2013). Conversely, the father’s smiley face, the most frequent symbol, commodifies paternal warmth within idealized “happy home” narratives (Chen, 2011), masking socioeconomic pressures like overwork. Such contradictions mirror Goldman’s (2005) critique of advertisements reducing familial bonds to material exchanges. The father paternal sacrifice caregiving in ads is often beautified rather than grounded in the material realities of unpaid domestic work, mirroring the Arlie Hochschild’s (2015) theory of emotional labor. Meanwhile, the father’s back view, symbolizing silent reliability, reflects a cultural reverence for stoic perseverance, even as it perpetuates emotional distance. These symbols collectively position Asian fatherhood as a site of ideological contestation, where advertisers mediate between reverence for tradition and the allure of modernity.

Theoretical implications extend to the role of media in shaping cultural identity. Barthes’ framework clarifies how commercials mythologize fatherhood, transforming contingent social norms (e.g., paternal sacrifice) into naturalized truths. Hall’s theory, however, tempers this by emphasizing representation as an active process of cultural negotiation. Unlike Western “dadvertising” trends, which often prioritize emotional engagement and egalitarianism (Mueller et al., 2023), Asian commercials remain anchored in Confucian paternalism, even as they tentatively embrace modern tropes. This divergence underscores the importance of culturally grounded media analysis.

Practically, these findings urge advertisers to reconcile nostalgic appeals with inclusive narratives. While symbols like the smiley face cater to modern aspirations, the exclusion of non-heteronormative or working-class fatherhood perpetuates symbolic violence against marginalized groups. Policymakers, too, must address the structural inequities obscured by these portrayals, such as the lack of support for single fathers in neoliberal economies. This study is limited by its focus on East and Southeast Asia, excluding South Asian and Middle Eastern contexts, and its pre-2019 timeframe, which predates pandemic-era shifts in family dynamics. Future research should explore post-2019 media landscapes and regional diversities, particularly the impact of digital platforms on paternal representation.

In conclusion, Asian TV commercials serve as cultural battlegrounds where fatherhood is both nostalgically memorialized and dynamically reimaged. By decoding these representations

through semiotic and representational lenses, this study contributes to interdisciplinary dialogues on gender, media, and cultural identity, while challenging advertisers and scholars alike to envision more inclusive narratives for the future.

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