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Negotiating Care and Power: Masculinities Among Middle-Aged Men in Urban China

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Abstract. This study investigates masculinities among middle-aged men in first-tier Chinese cities using qualitative methods. It explores how these men enact caring masculinity, how hegemonic norms permeate their lives, and how family relations shape their masculine identities. Findings show that participants express caring masculinity through emotional engagement (e.g., intentional domestic labor), altruism (e.g., supporting extended family), and negotiation of intergenerational care conflicts. Yet they continue to internalize hegemonic norms such as economic status anxiety, emotional restraint, and the public–private division of masculine roles. Family dynamics—including parental expectations and in-law evaluations—strongly influence their gendered self-understanding. This study contributes to culturally grounded masculinity research by highlighting the coexistence of care-oriented and hegemonic elements within Chinese men's lived experiences. It also offers implications for men's mental health and family policy, while acknowledging limitations related to sample size and geographic scope.

Keywords: Masculinity, Caring masculinity, Hegemonic norms, Middle-aged men, Family dynamics

1. Introduction

Gender, as a core dimension of social construction, has long been a focus of scholarly inquiry. Masculinity, in particular, is typically understood as the set of social and cultural norms associated with male identity, embodiment, behavior, and values [1]. It is not a fixed, essential attribute but rather a historical, situational, and relational product. Sociology and gender studies emphasize that masculinities are constantly produced, performed, and negotiated within social structures, cultural traditions, and power relations [2]. Consequently, masculinity should be understood as a dynamic social practice, embedded within gender orders, family relations, labor divisions, and cultural representations, while also being shaped by the intersection of other social factors like race, class, and sexual orientation [3]. Significant scholarship has sought to understand how men perceive and express their masculine identities, revealing it to be a socially constructed hierarchy rather than an innate trait. Pioneering scholars like R.W. Connell and, subsequently, others like Bareket, have provided foundational frameworks for this inquiry [1, 4]. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity proposes a hierarchy where dominant norms, such as dominance, emotional restraint, and economic success, subordinate alternative masculine expressions [1]. Meanwhile, Bareket identified systemic

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male dilemmas, pressures that push men toward potentially harmful behaviors, such as avoiding vulnerability and adhering to traditional gender specification at home, which can lead to suppressed emotions and self-injury [4]. For decades, hegemonic masculinity has profoundly shaped men's self-perception and social expectations. Unattainable figures, like U.S. presidents or fictional characters like James Bond, set standards that leave many men feeling inadequate, limiting their capacity for caregiving or emotional expression and ultimately reducing their holistic well-being [5]. In recent years, a new form of caring masculinity has emerged in modern urban contexts [6, 7]. Initially conceptualized in Western studies to describe involved fatherhood, this construct is defined by empathy, active caregiving, and relational responsibility [8]. It challenges traditional masculinity research by expanding conventional masculinity hierarchy to include a caring character, showing that men can integrate care into their identity without rejecting masculinity altogether. Evidence from recent research on the Western context showing Nordic men taking paternity leave to become stay-at-home fathers and American fathers increasingly involved in hands-on childcare and domestic labor exemplifies the emergence of caring masculinity [8]. This concept challenges the traditional hegemonic masculinity paradigm, opening new directions for research.

However, existing research remains highly Western-centric, focusing primarily on Western populations and often overlooking non-Western cultures [4, 8]. Many non-Western cultures exhibit distinct social contexts that produce culturally specific masculinities. Masculinity in East Asian societies, grounded in collectivist values, often differs markedly from Western individualism. This Western-centric focus is particularly problematic when considering middle-aged men aged 50 to 60, a group critical to intergenerational norm transmission but rarely studied in the context of caring masculinity [9]. Their significance stems from their position as the primary productive pillar of society; they often still hold decision-making power and discursive authority. As the generation that socialized the current younger adults and continues to be looked upon for leadership and support, their conceptions of masculinity are pivotal in shaping familial and societal norms during a period of rapid change. In China, traditional masculinity is deeply rooted in the wen-wu (scholarly-warrior) ideal, which historically tied men's worth to breadwinning, family leadership, and emotional stoicism [10]. This ideal has evolved with societal changes, but middle-aged men face unique tensions: as the sandwich generation—a term describing adults caring for both aging parents and children, they must balance these caregiving roles while navigating lingering hegemonic expectations of success [11]. Yet few studies explore how this group negotiates the coexistence of caring masculinity and traditional norms, leaving a substantial gap in understanding the complexity of contemporary Chinese masculinity. This study addresses these gaps by examining the complexity of masculinity among middle-aged men in first-tier Chinese cities. Using qualitative data, it investigates how these men exhibit caring masculinity, how hegemonic norms permeate their caregiving practices, and how family relations shape their masculine identities. By centering non-Western experiences, this research aims to enrich masculinity studies and provide insights relevant to men's mental health and gender education.

2. Literature review

2.1. Masculinity: hierarchy, transitions, and challenges

Within masculinity studies, Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity stands as a foundational framework [1]. This theory posits an internal hierarchy within masculinities, where a dominant form legitimizes patriarchal power by subordinating other masculinities and femininities. A key insight from Connell is that the ideal hegemonic masculine figure, such as a U.S. president represented as

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having unchecked authority, or a fictional character like James Bond, portrayed as suave, justified in using violence, and free of domestic burdens, is rare or even fictional. Yet, these figures set powerful, often unrealistic standards for all men. Western studies frequently show that men who cannot achieve such status may internalize feelings of inadequacy, experiencing guilt for failing as breadwinners or suppressing emotions like grief to avoid perceived weakness [12]. These hegemonic norms can have detrimental or toxic consequences [5]. Traits like emotional suppression are linked to higher rates of self-injury and a lower likelihood of seeking mental health support among men, as they are socialized to reject coping strategies deemed feminine [12]. In extreme cases, adherence to hegemonic ideals, such as the rigid provider role, correlates with a higher likelihood of justifying intimate partner aggression [13, 14]. It is important to note that hegemonic masculinity is not static. Some men actively renegotiate these norms. For instance, Western research documents instances of men rejecting strict breadwinner roles to engage more actively in caregiving and domestic life [8, 15]. However, scholarship on such renegotiation remains predominantly focused on Western contexts. In recent years, the concept of caring masculinity has gained attention. Centered on empathy, active caregiving, and relational responsibility, it represents a shift away from domination [8]. Elliott argues that caring masculinity involves rejecting domination, embracing vulnerability and interdependence, and valuing care and empathy [6]. This framework challenges the hegemonic paradigm and highlights the potential of alternative masculine expressions.

2.2. Masculinity in the Chinese context: cultural ideations

Existing masculinity theories are deeply Western-centric, relying heavily on the ideas of individualism and nuclear family structures that are prevalent in the West [4, 16]. However, contexts that show different cultural values, such as collectivism, are largely neglected. For example, the Chinese society, characterized by collectivism and expanded family structures, understands masculinity from a perspective that could be completely different from their Western counterparts, as the presentation of masculinity is intertwined with distinct cultural ideals and obligations. China's cultural bedrock, influenced by Confucianism, emphasizes collectivism, the wen-wu ideal, xiao (filial piety), and a family-centric worldview [9, 10, 16]. The wen-wu ideal originally denoted scholarly refinement and martial prowess but has evolved to signify broader cultural and economic leadership [10]. Consequently, the family holds a paramount position in Chinese men's life. Unlike in the West, where men's success is often measured by individual career and financial achievement, a fulfilling and intact family is often considered a mandatory component of a successful man's identity in China [17]. Social institutions, such as companies and governments, also tend to favor men with stable family lives, believing these men are more trustworthy than those who are single. Against this backdrop, studies on urban Chinese fathers indicate a diversification of gender roles, with many men now balancing paternal authority with hands-on child-rearing, framing this involvement as responsible masculinity [18]. For the sandwich generation, caregiving extends to elderly family members, though Hong Kong-based research notes contradictions between traditional filial piety norms and actual care practices, such as guilt over prioritizing children's needs [11]. Several critical gaps persist in the literature on Chinese masculinity. Theoretically, few studies explore the intersection of caring and hegemonic masculinity, neglecting the potential complexity of masculinity where men embody both care and cultural ideals. Furthermore, a cultural and contextual gap is evident; research often ignores the influence of pop culture and market forces [16, 19] and fails to adequately link masculine practices to core Chinese family values like filial piety [9], connections that are critical to a nuanced understanding of Chinese masculinity. Importantly, a significant population gap exists, as research focuses on young fathers while ignoring middle-aged

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men aged 50 and above, a generation that still holds most of the socially and financially powerful positions in China. Meanwhile, these middle-aged men also play a critical role in intergenerational norm transmission as their understandings of gender and family values cast a significant influence on the younger generations [9].

2.3. Family relations as a core to understand masculinity in China

As a primary site for masculinity socialization in China, family relations warrant attention. Rooted in Confucian ideals, the wen-wu framework translates into specific normative expectations: men are expected to prioritize the needs of their parents through financial provision, assume primary responsibility for major family decisions, and refrain from behaviors culturally coded as weak, such as crying [9, 16]. Modern societal shifts have challenged these norms. Online discourses critique patriarchal views, and younger generations increasingly value emotional openness. Middle-aged men, socialized in a more traditional era, find themselves caught between these forces. The pressure to adapt and be more caring is often driven by the real-world consequences of adhering strictly to traditional norms, such as potential deterioration in parent-child or spousal relationships [17, 20]. Given the enduring importance of family harmony within the wen-wu and collectivist value system, these men are compelled to respond to these changing expectations. In addition, several family dynamics shape Chinese men's masculine identities. Parental expectations are a powerful influence. Research on urban Chinese families shows that fathers emphasizing toughness often raise sons who adhere more strongly to traditional norms in adulthood [9]. Moreover, middle-aged men's understanding of their masculinity is largely affected by how their important family members, wives, and parents-in-law, for example, recognize their economic and social status. Those who have received strong recognition from important family members tend to reject hegemonic norms of masculinity [17]. It is also important to note the role of extended family ties. Unlike Western nuclear family models, Chinese men often bear obligations to support siblings and other relatives, and failure to meet these obligations can lead to feelings of guilt and diminished self-worth [11, 20]. Culturally, these dynamics stem from complementary conceptions of gender, where men are expected to lead the family economically and decisionally, while women are framed as nurturers, a division that continues to influence how men understand caregiving [17].

2.4. Research questions

1. How do middle-aged men in first-tier Chinese cities exhibit caring masculinity through their statements, daily actions, household roles, and extended family interactions?

2. In what ways do hegemonic masculinity norms, including emotional restraint, economic success, and gendered role divisions, permeate the caring masculinity exhibited by middle-aged men in first-tier Chinese cities?

3. How do family relations, spousal dynamics, in-law evaluations, and parental expectations) And broader contexts, such as pop culture, market forces, shape middle-aged men's understanding and practice of masculinity in first-tier Chinese cities?

3. Theoretical framework

This study employs three interconnected theories to analyze the manifestation of masculinity among middle-aged urban Chinese men. Three interconnected theories provide the analytical lenses for understanding how participants negotiate, perform, and embody masculine identities. First, Bareke's

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concept of systemic male dilemmas offers a framework for identifying the specific pressures that create tension for men navigating hegemonic expectations. These dilemmas, which include the mandates of mandatory breadwinning and the avoidance of vulnerability, manifest as internal and external conflicts [4, 5]. For example, a man may experience guilt for not meeting economic expectations imposed by family or society [17]. Applying this framework is particularly relevant for understanding Chinese middle-aged men, who likely face dilemmas shaped by both global hegemonic norms and local cultural imperatives like filial piety [9], potentially creating unique configurations of pressure distinct from Western contexts. Second, Connell's theory of masculinity hierarchies, comprising hegemonic, complicit, and subordinate positions, helps categorize the strategies men use to navigate competing norms [1, 21]. This theory allows for an analysis of how men might display complicit adherence to hegemonic ideals, such as workplace toughness, while simultaneously embracing subordinate practices like caregiving within the home. This framework is essential for moving beyond a simple binary and capturing the nuanced coexistence of different masculine expressions. Third, the Doing Gender perspective, primarily associated with West and Zimmerman, informs the analysis of masculinity as a daily performance achieved through interaction [3]. This theory posits that gender is not what one is, but what one does. It guides the observation of how men actively enact masculinity in their everyday lives, for instance, by framing acts of care as a form of male responsibility rather than as a challenge to gender equality. This lens is crucial for understanding how caring practices are assimilated into masculine identities without fundamentally disrupting existing gender hierarchies.

4. Methods

This study uses qualitative data to capture the complexity of middle-aged men's masculinity experiences, with a focus on aligning data collection with theoretical frameworks from existing research on Chinese masculinity. Key data sources include in-depth semi-structured interviews and social observations designed to explore the intersection of caring and hegemonic masculinity. Interviews cover topics such as definitions of a good man, experiences of caregiving, struggles with gender norms, and influences of family, pop culture, and work—topics informed by research on masculinity socialization and family dynamics [9, 20]. Social observations document daily behaviors related to family interactions, work dynamics, extended family engagement, and leisure activities that reflect how masculinity is enacted in real-world contexts [22]. Data are analyzed using thematic analysis, which includes three key steps. First, transcripts and observation notes are coded using a combination of deductive codes from theory: hegemonic emotional restraint, caring filial piety [1, 9], and inductive codes from data: selective generosity, pop culture influence [16, 19]. Second, codes are grouped into overarching themes that reflect core patterns in masculinity expression, for example, care as gendered performance, which captures how men frame caregiving in ways that align with traditional gender roles [17]. Third, themes are integrated with existing literature, for example, linking experiences of economic guilt to research on family relations and men's mental health, to highlight the study's contributions to understanding Chinese masculinity [20].

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5. Results

5.1. The central role of caring masculinity

Caring masculinity, as exhibited by the participants, is not limited to fulfilling traditional breadwinner roles; instead, it involves actively recognizing and nurturing the emotional needs of family members, a key distinction from hegemonic masculinity's focus on economic dominance [6, 18]. This emotional engagement fosters deep, reciprocal bonds that participants identified as a core source of their masculine identity. Unlike the one-way authority associated with traditional masculinity, their care involves listening, adapting to family members' preferences, and framing actions as expressions of love rather than obligation. This shift reflects a redefinition of being a good man around relational responsibility, where emotional presence carries as much weight as financial support. Mr. D, a middle-aged professional in a first-tier Chinese city, emphasized his role in daily household care: Every weekend, I make sure to cook for my family. Last week, I spent two hours preparing my daughter's favorite spare ribs because I wanted them to feel loved at home. This statement illustrates how caring masculinity is performed through intentional, detail-oriented domestic labor. Mr. D's choice to cook, an act often marginalized as feminine in traditional norms, was not a passive chore but an active attempt to meet his daughter's emotional need for feeling valued. The two hours he invested in a specific dish (her favorite ribs) signals attention to individual family members' preferences, a practice that builds emotional trust. For Mr. D, this act reaffirms his identity as a caring father and husband, complementing his economic role and creating a more holistic masculine identity. This aligns with Wang & Keizer's finding that urban Chinese fathers frame hands-on care as responsible masculinity, reframing care from a threat to masculinity to a marker of it [18]. A defining feature of participants' caring masculinity is altruism, selfless concern for the well-being of others, particularly when family needs conflict with personal desires. Altruism here refers to their willingness to sacrifice personal convenience, status, or resources to support family members, even when such sacrifices are emotionally or physically taxing. This altruism is distinct from hegemonic masculinity's focus on individual achievement; instead, it is rooted in collectivist values that prioritize family harmony and intergenerational well-being. For participants, this altruism is not a sign of weakness but a source of pride, as it aligns with cultural ideals of wen-wu, a moral leadership through care and filial piety.

Another participant, Mr. G, a pharmacist, spoke about supporting his extended family: When my sister needed money for her child's tuition, I transferred half of my monthly salary to her. My car is old, but my niece's education can't wait; family comes first. This example highlights the extension of caring masculinity beyond the nuclear family, a hallmark of collectivist-influenced masculinity. Mr. G's choice to prioritize his niece's education over upgrading his 10-year-old car demonstrates altruism: he forgoes personal status for a newer car, which ties to hegemonic ideals of economic success. to meet a family member's critical need. For Mr. G, this sacrifice is justified by the belief that family comes first—a value rooted in filial piety and extended family obligations. The guilt he might have felt over his old car, which was addressed later in hegemonic norms. is overridden by the pride of fulfilling his role as a supportive sibling, showing how caring masculinity can mitigate the pressure of hegemonic standards. Caring masculinity also involves active negotiation of conflicting family demands, a task that requires empathy, flexibility, and emotional labor [6]. As part of the sandwich generation, participants often faced tensions between the needs of aging parents and their immediate family, like spouse/children, and their ability to navigate these tensions became a key part of their masculine identity. Unlike traditional masculinity's focus on decisive authority, their approach involves compromise and prioritization, even when it leads to personal exhaustion. This

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negotiation reinforces their self-perception as good men, as it aligns with cultural ideals of maintaining family harmony [17].

Mr. D, for example, lived with his nuclear family in a city three hours away from his parents. His mother expected him and his wife to visit every weekend, while his wife found the travel exhausting after a long work week. Mr. D described his solution: I talk to my mom every other day to update her, and we visit every two weekends instead of one. I also take my wife out for coffee on the weekends we stay home to make up for it. This negotiation reflects emotional labor: Mr. D listens to both his mother's need for connection and his wife's need for rest, then finds a middle ground. The exhaustion he acknowledged, It's tiring to balance both, but it's worth it, is offset by the sense of accomplishment he derives from maintaining family harmony. For him, this effort is not a burden but proof of his ability to be a responsible son and husband, a dual role that anchors his masculine identity. This aligns with Lam's observation that the sandwich generation in Chinese contexts uses compromise to resolve caregiving conflicts, framing this as a form of responsible masculinity [11].

5.2. The permeation of hegemonic norms within caring masculinity

Despite their commitment to caring masculinity, participants still internalized hegemonic norms that equate masculine worth with economic achievement and status [1, 5]. They regularly compared themselves to successful men, for example, defined by career advancement, wealth, or material possessions, and these comparisons often triggered feelings of inadequacy, even when their caring actions were recognized by family. This suggests that hegemonic norms do not disappear but coexist with caring masculinity, creating a double bind where participants must meet both care and success standards.

Mr. G expressed guilt about his economic status, revealing how he internalized these comparisons: My mother-in-law mentioned that other sons-in-law have new cars. I feel like I'm less of a man because my car is 10 years old, and I should earn more. This statement reflects the influence of hegemonic norms that tie masculine value to material symbols [17]. Even though Mr. G's caring actions supporting his sister's family align with cultural ideals of family loyalty, his mother-in-law's comment triggers guilt because it invokes a hegemonic metric, for example, a new car equals success. For Mr. G, this creates cognitive dissonance: he views himself as a caring brother/uncle but questions his masculinity because he lacks the status symbol of a new car. This aligns with Inckle's finding that men often experience guilt when they fail to meet hegemonic economic standards, even if they excel in other domains like care [12]. Hegemonic norms of emotional restraint persist in participants' behavior, particularly when they perceive their toughness as necessary to maintain authority or avoid being seen as weak [1, 5]. Even during caregiving, they often avoided expressing vulnerability or downplayed emotional reactions, framing this restraint as a way to protect family members or uphold their role as leaders. This emotional suppression contrasts with the empathy central to caring masculinity, showing how hegemonic norms can limit the full expression of care.

When asked about a recent period where his daughter was ill and his mother was hospitalized simultaneously, Mr. D said: I didn't let them see how stressed I was. I just told them it'll be okay and handled the hospital runs and work. This response reflects emotional suppression, a key trait of hegemonic masculinity [12]. Mr. D framed his restraint as protective, I didn't want to add to their worry, but it also aligns with the norm that men should be calm under pressure and avoid burdening others with their emotions. While his actions, like managing hospital runs, are caring, his emotional suppression prevents him from sharing his stress with family, limiting the reciprocal emotional connection that is part of caring masculinity. This shows how hegemonic norms can dilute the

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emotional depth of care, even when the intent is to support others. Participants maintained a strict division between their masculine expressions at work and at home: at work, they embraced hegemonic traits like authority and toughness, while at home, they engaged in caring behaviors. They viewed this separation as necessary to succeed in professional contexts, where they believed vulnerability or care would be perceived as a weakness. This division reveals that caring masculinity is often confined to the private sphere, while hegemonic masculinity remains dominant in public domains like work, reinforcing the idea that hegemony is context-dependent rather than eliminated.

Mr. D, when discussing his workplace behavior, stated: At work, I can't be soft. Last week, a subordinate disagreed with a plan, and I told him, We follow this plan, no more discussion. Men need to be tough in management. This statement contrasts sharply with his caring behavior at home, such as cooking for his family. Mr. D frames workplace toughness as a requirement for being a good manager, aligning with hegemonic norms that equate leadership with authority. He does not see this as conflicting with his caring masculinity; instead, he views it as a separate role he must perform to maintain professional credibility. This separation is consistent with Duncanson's observation that men often negotiate hegemony by adapting their masculine expression to context, rather than rejecting it outright [15]. For Mr. D, this means being tough at work and caring at home, a complex approach that allows him to meet both professional and family expectations.

5.3. The shaping influence of family dynamics on masculinity perceptions

Parental norms, particularly from fathers, play a lasting role in shaping participants' understanding of masculinity, with many internalizing traditional ideals of providing and toughness from childhood. These norms act as a foundation for their masculine identity, even as they adopt caring practices in adulthood. Participants often referenced their fathers' teachings as a benchmark for being a man, showing how intergenerational transmission of norms influences their current behavior.

Mr. D described how his father's expectations shaped him: My dad worked 12-hour days in a factory. He always said, A man's responsibility is to provide. So I know I have to support my family, no matter what. This statement reflects the intergenerational transmission of hegemonic provision norms. Mr. D's father's emphasis on providing through long work hours instilled the belief that a man's core responsibility is economic support, a norm Mr. D still upholds, even as he adds caregiving to his masculine identity. For Mr. D, this norm does not conflict with caring; instead, he sees cooking and providing as complementary. I provide for them financially and emotionally. This aligns with longitudinal research showing that parental norms predict adult adherence to traditional masculinity, even as men adapt to modern expectations.

Moreover, the evaluation of economic status held by participants' parents-in-law exerts significant pressure on participants to meet hegemonic standards. Negative evaluations from in-laws, for example, criticism of income or status, trigger a sense of failure and frustration.. This shows that extended family, beyond immediate parents, plays a key role in reinforcing or modifying masculine norms. Mr. G highlighted how in-law pressure shaped his feelings of adequacy: When my mother-in-law criticizes me for not being successful enough, I avoid her calls. I feel like I'm failing as a man if she's not happy. This avoidance reflects the power of in-law evaluations to influence masculine self-worth. Mr. G's mother-in-law's focus on success, defined as economic achievement, reinforces hegemonic norms, and her criticism makes him question his masculinity. Notably, when his mother-in-law praised him for supporting his sister's family, he reported feeling more confident about his role as a man, showing that in-law approval of caring actions can partially offset criticism of economic status. This suggests that in-laws act as norm enforcers, but also as potential allies in validating caring masculinity.

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Furthermore, participants' caring masculinity is deeply tied to obligations to extended family, siblings, nieces/nephews, a norm rooted in Chinese collectivist values and filial piety. These obligations go beyond Western nuclear family norms, requiring participants to prioritize the well-being of extended relatives and framing this support as a core part of their masculine identity. Failure to meet these obligations leads to guilt, while fulfillment reinforces their sense of being responsible men. Mr. G's decision to transfer half his monthly salary to his sister for her child's tuition, even at the cost of his own car upgrade, reflects extended family obligations. He explained, In my family, we help each other out. My sister can't afford the tuition alone, so I have to step in. This statement links his caring action to cultural ideals of family loyalty and filial piety. For Mr. G, supporting his sister is not a choice but a duty, and fulfilling this duty reinforces his identity as a good brother and responsible man. When asked if he ever resented the sacrifice, he said, No, my parents taught us to look out for each other. If I didn't help, I'd feel like I let them down. This shows how extended family obligations integrate caring into masculinity by framing it as a cultural duty, rather than an optional extra. It also aligns with Chiu & Ho's finding that Chinese men's mental health is tied to meeting extended family obligations, as failure triggers guilt and diminished self-worth [20].

6. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the field in several ways. Theoretically, it addresses the intersection of caring and hegemonic masculinity in China, providing empirical support for a complex masculinity framework. By demonstrating how middle-aged men simultaneously embody caregiving and traditional norms, it challenges simplistic traditional/modern binaries and extends understanding of hegemonic masculinity's potential for change, showing it can be responsive to personal and cultural shifts. Practically, the insights offered could inform men's mental health interventions, particularly concerning the link between emotional suppression and self-injury, and family counseling aimed at resolving intergenerational norm conflicts and in-law pressures. In addition to familial influences, broader societal contexts likely shape contemporary Chinese masculinity, given the country's rapid social transformation over recent decades. For instance, East Asian pop culture, including Hong Kong films and Korean dramas, presents diverse masculinity ideals, from heroism to soft masculinity, that compete with traditional norms [16]. Similarly, luxury marketing on social media promotes an elite masculinity centered on consumption and international travel, which overlaps with hegemonic economic success norms and may intensify pressure on men to achieve in ways aligned with both commercial and traditional standards [19]. However, the study has several limitations. The sample size was limited to two participants, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to all middle-aged men in first-tier cities. Future research should aim for larger and more diverse samples. There is also a geographic bias, as the focus on first-tier cities overlooks rural or lower-tier urban contexts where traditional norms, such as emphasis on the extended family, might be stronger; exploring these regional variations is critical for a holistic understanding of Chinese masculinity. Additionally, the study did not fully explore the influence of factors like transnational media or rural-urban migration, which are increasingly relevant in globalized China. Finally, while triangulation helped mitigate social desirability bias, where participants might downplay traits perceived as non-masculine, it could not eliminate it entirely.

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7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides a crucial examination of the complex negotiation of masculinity among a critically understudied group. By centering the experiences of middle-aged men in urban China and revealing their hybrid masculine identities, it not only fills a significant gap in the literature but also offers a more dynamic and culturally grounded model for understanding gender in an era of rapid social change. Future research can build on this foundation by expanding the scope of inquiry to include more diverse participants and contexts, further enriching our understanding of Chinese masculinities.

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