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# Migrate to (not) be 'gurus': Unpacking workplace masculinity in China's tech sector

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## Abstract

Through an intersectional analysis of gender, class, and migration, this article reveals how a hegemonic culture of workplace masculinity, embodied by a group of 'gurus,' is constructed in China's tech companies. The guru masculinity is characterized by proactivity and aggressiveness at work, 'putting work first' and overwork, and the ability to navigate boundaryless careers and settle down in first-tier cities. It translates hegemonic masculine norms of material success, enjoying urban life, and men's breadwinner position in contemporary China on the one hand, and responds to a labor regime of precarious employment relations and prevalent overwork norm on the other hand. The article contributes to the literature on hegemonic masculinity in work organizations by showcasing how a hegemonic masculinity in China's tech workplace is constructed at the juncture of hegemonic gender norms at a societal level and the distinct labor regime in the tech sector. It also reveals that many male workers fail to conform to this cultural ideal, experiencing masculine frustration rooted in the nature of the 'workplace masculinity contest,' uneven urban development, and the demanding labor regime. It thus opens further discussions on how men resist hegemonic gender norms and construct alternative masculinities.

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**KEYWORDS**

hegemonic masculinity, labor migration, tech industry in China, workplace masculinity, workplace masculinity contest

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Previous research has exposed and critiqued the gender gap in tech work, revealing that the tech workplace is dominated by men and masculine workplace culture (Alegria, 2019; Alfrey & Twine, 2017; Campero, 2021; Li, 2023a; Sun, 2019). This line of research tends to treat male workers as a unity to explain male ascendancy in tech work. Less researched is the heterogeneity of male tech workers. Meanwhile, a growing literature in the critical studies of men and masculinities has revealed that men enact diverse masculinities (Collins, 2015; Elliott, 2016; Giazitzoglu & Muzio, 2021; Haywood & Johansson, 2017; Kong, 2021; Martin, 2001). Male workers, even those in the same workplace, are not a homogenous group. Drawing on ethnographic data, this article reveals the inequality between male workers in Chinese tech companies. Building on the theorization of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and studies of diverse masculinities, this article focuses on variability in complicity with a hegemonic culture of workplace masculinity in China's tech sector, and male workers' practices of alternative masculinities.

Hegemonic masculinity refers to 'the currently most honored way of being a man,' requiring 'all other men to position themselves in relation to it' and ideologically legitimating 'the global subordination of women to men' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). In reviewing research applying the concept, Messerschmidt (2012, p. 74) calls for more research 'exploring how hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities are constructed in the periphery countries through the theories, concepts, and data *peculiar to the periphery countries themselves*' (emphasis in original). This article represents such an investigation in China. It recognizes masculinity as 'situated' in a certain 'place' and examines how masculinities 'emerge within local networks and respond to and shape social circumstances' (Hopkins & Noble, 2009, p. 814). In particular, this article reveals how cultures of masculinity in China's tech workplace are contextualized in hegemonic gender norms in contemporary China. One feature of China's tech sector is that a substantial number of tech workers are internal migrants in the tier-city system. Work and employment are the primary parameters of social class. These factors inform the importance of intersectional analysis in understanding tech workers' masculinities.

This article first outlines why an intersectional analysis of gender, class, and migration is necessary to understand workplace masculinities in Chinese tech companies. It then explains hegemonic masculine norms in contemporary China relevant to this study, including the hegemony of material success, enjoyment of urban life, and the male breadwinner role. It also reviews the studies on workplace masculinity in the tech sector and explains how the concept of 'workplace masculinity contest' contributes to this field of research. After summarizing the research process, it reports how the hegemonic form of masculinity, embodied by a group of workers we call 'gurus,' is constructed in daily interactions in tech companies. These local hegemonic norms are constituted by showing proactivity and aggressiveness at work, an ethic of 'putting work first' and overwork, and the ability to settle down in first-tier cities. They are coupled with a labor regime characterized by high employment flexibility and prevalent overwork norm in China's tech sector. Yet few men can live up to all the aspects of this cultural ideal. The findings also reveal how male workers fail to conform to the norms. The discussion and conclusion summarize the theoretical contributions to the understanding of organizational hegemonic masculinity and discusses broader implications for alternative (workplace) masculinities.

## 2 | THE INTERSECTION OF MASCULINITY, CLASS, AND MIGRATION

This article examines Chinese tech workers' workplace masculinity at the intersection of gender, class, and migration. Messerschmidt (2012) calls for a holistic grasp of gender hierarchy that appreciates the intersectionality of gender with other social dynamics. The concept of intersection, initially raised by Crenshaw (1996) to study the

predicaments faced by Black Women, has inspired researchers to explore the complex privileging and marginalizing processes at the interactions of various vectors such as gender and sexuality, class, race and ethnicity, and migration (e.g., Bohonos, 2021; Choi & Li, 2021; Choi & Peng, 2016; Wright, 2016).

Migration and the corresponding changes in class position at the destination have complicated influences on migrant workers' sense of manhood. Male migrant workers have to (re)negotiate (the erosion of) their sense of manhood because they are frequently frustrated by a lack of control over their working conditions, disadvantages in the labor market, incapacity to financially support their family, and their lower class and/or ethnic minority status in the local society (Choi, 2018; Datta et al., 2009; Gao, 2019; Pande, 2017; Ramirez, 2011). Meanwhile, they can also be empowered in the migration process 'through the absence or loosening of traditional patriarchal social controls' in the new social-cultural context (Batnitzky et al., 2009, p. 1282). These studies also show that male migrant workers usually mobilize available cultural, religious, and gender discourses to construct alternative discourses of manhood.

In the Chinese context, previous research pays close attention to how male rural-to-urban migrant workers renegotiate their sense of manhood because of their lack of social, cultural, and economic power in the cities (e.g., Choi & Peng, 2016; Gao, 2019; Liu & Lin, 2023). With the state-imposed *hukou* (household registration) system and urban-rural development gap, rural-to-urban migrant workers in the factory, construction, and service sectors generally have lower socio-economic status and less cultural capital than urban residents and thus are marginalized in the urban society. As 'un-modern' others, they are frequently labeled as 'low quality' (Gao, 2019). In such circumstances, male migrant workers usually refer to their heterosexuality, family responsibility, and moral obligations to construct alternative notions of desirable manhood, such as a 'caring masculinity' in dating activities to please their partners and potential parents-in-law (Liu & Lin, 2023), a 'respectable manhood' by conceding in household decision-making and family division of labor (Choi, 2016; Choi & Peng, 2016), and a 'moral manhood' by tactically deploying religious discourses (Gao, 2019).

The situation of Chinese tech workers provides a more complicated case for an intersectional analysis of gender, class, and migration. As China's tech industry is clustered in first-tier cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Hangzhou, a large proportion of tech workers are also internal migrant workers without permanent dwelling property or primary family networks. Compared with most rural-to-urban migrant workers, tech workers in this research are better educated (with college-or-above degrees), have obtained a relatively higher social-economic status as white-collar workers, and are more integrated into urban life with greater consumption power. They also have diverse places of origin, including lower-tier cities and rural areas. Therefore, 'masculine frustration' is not necessarily what tech workers experience in migration. To reveal how migration and employment shape Chinese tech workers' masculinity/ies, this article provides a novel empirical investigation into their workplace behaviors.

### 3 | TRANSLATING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

In assessing academic appropriation of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Messerschmidt (2012, p. 59) calls attention to the 'links between the local, regional, and global forms of hegemonic masculinities.' Moreover, Lee et al. (2019, p. 1467) argue that 'there is a gap about how masculinity carries over from a broad social context to an organizational context' within masculinity scholarship. Answering the call, this article explains how the hegemonic form of workplace masculinity at a *local* level (constructed in arenas of face-to-face interaction of organizations, as defined by Messerschmidt, 2012, p. 59) links to the hegemonic gender norms at a *regional* level (constructed at the society-wide level of culture or the nation-state, Messerschmidt, 2012, p. 59). The following will review hegemonic masculine norms in contemporary China that are relevant to our discussion and then explain the focus on workplace masculinity.

### 3.1 | Hegemonic masculine norms in contemporary China

Hegemonic masculine norms have changed dramatically in China since economic reforms in the 1970s. Growing class inequalities, consumerist values, and increasingly uneven geographic development have put more emphasis on material success and consumption power in city life as the ideal masculine norms (Choi & Li, 2021; Liu, 2019; Song & Hird, 2014). Through interviews with male Beijingers, Liu (2019) demonstrates the hegemony of *chenggong* (success), emphasizing that individual achievement and consumption capacity should be a precondition for being a good husband and son.

An implicit factor in Liu's (2019) analysis is that the interviewees were from Beijing, a first-tier city. There exists a geographic hierarchy of masculinity (McDowell, 2003), and in contemporary China, a division between resource-rich, higher-tier cities and under-developed, lower-tier cities (The Economist, 2020) has established a hierarchy with gendered implications. For internal migrants in China, settling in the first-tier cities and living an urban middle-class life signals success. The complicated interaction among gender, class, and migration is also manifested in the figure of *baofahu*, literally 'suddenly rich person,' in Chinese popular culture, which is often derided as a 'low-quality' male upstart with a rural origin (Song & Hird, 2014, p. 13). The negativity attached to low quality and rural origin shows the hegemony of urbanized masculinity.

The class-coded hierarchy of masculinities is also related to the norm of the male breadwinner role. Men who fail to conform to the breadwinner norm in conjugal relationships, especially among the marginalized rural-to-urban migrant workers in high-tier cities, have to make a 'masculine compromise' and renegotiate their sense of manhood (Choi, 2016; Choi & Peng, 2016).

In summary, looking at gender from its intersectionality with class and migration, hegemonic masculine norms in contemporary China are characterized by the hegemony of material success, an urban lifestyle in first-tier cities, and men's breadwinner role in the family. Given this historic transformation, Song and Hird (2014, p. 121) argue that in the workplace, the selfless, macho, working-class Maoist heroes such as the 'iron worker' have been replaced by images of office-based, besuited entrepreneurs and businessmen, 'who symbolize materialistic dreams of apartments, cars, and salary increases.' Nevertheless, how these regional hegemonic gender norms affect the workplace masculinity/ies of tech workers requires a more nuanced, contextualized investigation.

### 3.2 | (Tech) work as a masculinity contest

Research in diverse contexts has recognized work and employment as a major element in the social construction of masculine identities (e.g., Connell & Wood, 2005; McDowell, 2003), especially for migrant men (Choi, 2018; Choi & Li, 2021; Choi & Peng, 2016; Datta et al., 2009). The connections between labor market transformation and gender identities have received particular attention in the West (e.g., Datta et al., 2009; McDowell, 2003) because (migrant) men are increasingly employed in the service sector, which has been traditionally considered the domain of feminized work. The tech sector provides a contrasting case. According to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of China (2022), the 'software and information technology services' sector has grown over the past decade to employ 8.09 million workers as of 2021. It is an expanding sector that primarily employs professional workers. Moreover, tech work is widely considered masculine work (Alegria, 2019; Alfrey & Twine, 2017; Campero, 2021; Cooper, 2000; Sun, 2019).

In the current neoliberal system, a traditional gendered division between work and family still persists. While men could be 'ideal workers' (Acker, 1992), women are frequently forced to choose between the dichotomy of being career-oriented or family-oriented (Nemoto, 2013). In particular, studies on the tech sector reveal that workers are increasingly mobilized by the dominant neoliberal discourse of individualism and competition (Dorschel, 2022; Kunda & Barley, 2004). A key reason why many workplaces are still male-dominated with a gendered organizational culture is that 'work remains the site of masculinity contests among men' (Berdahl et al., 2018,

p. 422). The concept of Masculinity Contest Culture (MCC) highlights an organizational culture of people competing for masculine dominance in four dimensions: showing no weakness, strength and stamina, putting work first, and dog-eat-dog competition (Berdahl et al., 2018). Masculinity Contest Culture varies across different occupational settings, shaped by occupational features such as the team structure, the spatial and temporal structure of work, and the nature of work tasks (Connell & Wood, 2005; Reid et al., 2018).

The masculinity contest in tech work is likewise shaped by its industrial and occupational features. Tech work is frequently affiliated with a 'geek' figure, who is a computer-obsessive person with mastery over technology, a talented, capable, and self-driven entrepreneur, and yet a social failure (Varma, 2007). Given the 'geek culture' in American tech firms, Cooper (2000) reveals a new masculinity rooted in technical expertise, working long hours, and 'getting things done' among male workers in Silicon Valley, who paradoxically perceive displaying one's exhaustion in the workplace as a sign of masculine stamina and virility. Wu (2020) reveals that the way labor games played by software engineers are organized is deeply rooted in the masculinity contest among engineers: 'Broggers' (hyper-masculinized engineers who embody the stereotypically macho masculinity) and 'tech hobbyists' play their corresponding labor games to display their more desirable masculinities (dog-eat-dog competition and technology-addictive, respectively), while minority groups (Asian and female engineers) 'choose to distance themselves from these labor games, which reinforce their marginalized status' (p. 336).

The computer-addicted, socially-challenged geek image suits the 'overtime work culture' in China's tech workplace (Li, 2023a). However, there is little research on the local features of the masculinity contest in China's tech workplace and its links with institutional arrangements of the industry. In particular, few studies have explained how the high employment flexibility and overtime culture (re)shape tech workers' masculinities. This article addresses empirical and theoretical lacunae by showing how the hegemonic form of workplace masculinity is constructed within such a context.

Another missing piece in the literature on MCC in tech work is theorization of the alternative masculinities observed in the tech industry. As Whitehead (1999, p. 59) remarks, while certain hegemonic masculinity is 'recognized as historically contingent and privileged in the organizational setting,' researchers should also look at 'the ways in which certain masculinities become subordinated and marginal to dominant organizational discourse.' This article thus pays attention to men's heterogeneous work experiences, revealing the actual workplace behaviors of those who are marginalized. The social process of marginalization, as Haywood and Johansson (2017, p. 5) note, 'is caused by the structural organization of social and economic relationships that affect men.' They remind us to examine what structural factors prevent many workers from conforming to hegemonic masculine norms.

## 4 | DATA COLLECTION AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The theme of this article emerged during the first author's ethnographic research of China's tech sector between 2018 and 2020.

In 2019, the first author conducted 4 months' participant observation in a tech startup of about 240 employees in Beijing. The startup, HMO (a pseudonym), was established in 2014 during a boom of Chinese online-to-offline businesses and had expanded to fields including digital media, business analysis, consulting, and big data. Through personal networks, he gained access to the startup and worked as a full-time intern analyst for participant observation with the permission of a vice president. He mainly interacted with co-workers in daily work routines and breaks. All co-workers were informed of the author's researcher role and his objective to research 'working experiences in Internet companies.' The observation was field-driven. Field notes were jotted down daily to grasp whatever was experienced as meaningful and important.

The first author also interviewed a number of Chinese tech workers from big and small companies in multiple cities during 2018–2020. In this research, 'tech worker' refers to someone involved with the development or maintenance of computer software, network, or online services. This article draws on interview data with 60 male workers (Table 1),

TABLE 1 Interviewee background.

Age	Range = 22–36 years, average = 27.6
Education	Vocational college = 3, bachelor = 36, master = 21
Location of work	Beijing = 42 (with two locals) Shenzhen = 6 (with one local) Guangzhou = 2 (no locals) Shanghai = 3 (no locals) Hangzhou = 6 (no locals) Jinan = 1 (a local citizen who recently migrated back from Beijing)
Job positions	Software developer = 23, operations worker = 9, product manager = 4 Product director = 1, technical manager = 8 Others (e.g., analyst, sales, user research) = 15
Marital status	Married, no children yet = 12 Married with child(ren) = 5 Single = 40 Unreported = 3
Years of experience	Range = 0.5–13 years, average = 4.1 years

including seven from HMO and 53 from other firms. The 53 interviewees were reached through personal contacts and snowball sampling. The open-ended, semi-structured interviews (in Mandarin) were audio recorded with informants' consent and transcribed *literatim*. The interviews covered various topics, including daily routines, job history and career plans, opinions on management, gender differences at work, and how technological changes affect daily work.

The field notes and interview transcripts were coded with Nvivo 12 software for two rounds. The first round was a spontaneous process during which we extracted any text related to the topic of 'workplace masculinity' with the 'Nodes' function. The second round was a process of constant comparing and reorganizing the Nodes, during which the key themes of this article (the constitutive elements of guru masculinity and the discrepancies workers faced) emerged. The following section will report the findings based on these themes. The names of informants in the article are all pseudonyms.

## 5 | 'GURUS': CONSTRUCTIONS OF HEGEMONIC WORKPLACE MASCULINITY

The word 'guru' (a translation of '*daniu*' or '*dalao*' from Chinese) frequently appeared in daily conversations with tech workers. They used the term to refer to the most successful (male) workers who embodied the most desirable workplace masculinity. Only a few tech workers live up to most aspects of this cultural ideal. Rather than referring to any particular man, workers collectively constructed an ideal image of gurus from multiple perspectives.

### 5.1 | Proactivity and aggressiveness at work

Gurus usually graduated from prestigious universities at home and abroad and thus had access to job opportunities in established tech giants such as Alibaba, Tencent, and ByteDance. They also took desirable, preferably managerial, jobs in startups like HMO. In the workplace, gurus showed professional confidence and aggressiveness in a culture

of dog-eat-dog competition. In HMO, gurus frequently showed their superiority over other (male and female) workers in daily workplace interactions. Ted, in his 30s, was the head Product Manager (PM). His performance in an internal training session was illustrative. He frequently tried to impress others by bragging about his previous experience in a leading Internet company, implying his expertise was valued at a leading firm. During the session, his mentee Xiaoma, a junior PM at HMO, occasionally raised questions. Instead of providing the answers in a supportive tone, Ted enjoyed teasing him for 'not knowing the basics about PM work' and belittling him for being 'incompetent' in his role. He also quizzed other participants during the session and enjoyed the 'teaching moments,' correcting others in public when they could not answer correctly. Male workers who demonstrated their confidence and aggressiveness dominated the workplace at HMO. George, a junior analyst, shared a similar observation: 'Our company is increasingly dominated by aggressive middle managers; we underdogs are the ones who suffer.'

Interviewees outside of HMO also emphasized the importance of being aggressive and competitive at work in China's Internet companies, especially in the leading firms. When the author asked Fan, a six-year-experienced senior operations worker in a leading game company, what factors influenced junior workers' career development, he said, '[It jeopardizes their development if] young workers cannot be aggressive! ... It requires workers to be aggressive and have a strong aspiration to do [the job] well.' Later, we talked about job-hopping and career development in the sector, and the author asked Fan how a potential layoff might affect him. Fan responded that he could bear unemployment economically for a while but could not bear 'becoming indolent' and 'not keeping up with others.' In his words, 'Now the new hires in our company are all from elite schools. They are competitors with potential. They will likely surpass you.'

Don, a four-year-experienced junior operations worker in another tech giant, also acknowledged that 'there is internal competition between peers [because the company] has strict rules for reward and punishment [that encourage competition].' Don believed he must be proactive at work to secure the performance-based bonus. He cited the company saying, 'If it's not difficult, we won't need you.' In other words, taking the initiative to solve work problems was management's expectation of gurus.

The ideal of showing proactivity and aggressiveness was congruent with the dominant neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse in China's tech industry. With the flourishing of internet-related entrepreneurship, the cultural ideal in China's tech industry was characterized by entrepreneurial success with an innovative business and the resulting wealth (Zhang, 2023). This ideal was embodied by highly visible tech elites such as Alibaba's founder Jack Ma, Tencent's Pony Ma, and ByteDance's Yiming Zhang, who survived the fierce market competition and achieved huge accomplishments in the market system. Tech firms referred to the entrepreneurial spirit of these highly visible successes to motivate their workforce, proposing that an ideal worker, if he aimed for a successful career, should also polish an 'entrepreneurial self' so that he would treat his own career as an entrepreneurial project and his co-workers as potential competitors. As a result, they would be proactive and aggressive at work. One interviewee, Gary, illustrated how this entrepreneurial spirit translated into proactivity at work. He had worked in the sector for 4 years and aspired to start his own entrepreneurial project. When asked about his work pressure under long work hours, he responded, 'Because I am a career-focused person, I don't feel much pressure. Or I feel it, but I won't complain about it. [Because the pressure is coming from] my own aspiration.'

## 5.2 | Putting work first and overwork

The temporal structure of work in China's tech sector bolstered the masculine ethic of 'putting work first' and 'strength and stamina.' Overwork has been a prevalent norm in China's tech sector (Li, 2023b; Yan, 2020). Gurus volunteered to overwork, sometimes without the direction of management. Extremely long work hours, as a sign of male stamina, appeared not coerced but enjoyable for them. Anderson, married with a child, was the director of the analyst department at HMO. Not originally from Beijing, he had worked in Beijing for 8 years since graduation. During the observation, Anderson frequently talked loudly in the open office, making his presence vividly felt.



Sometimes, he was almost 'lying' in his chair, confidently advising or instructing his subordinates. After a meeting at 7 p.m. one day, Anderson was almost pleased to announce that he 'hasn't been home for 3 days' because of a work-related event, which was a sign of busyness and importance. Still, he did not leave immediately but continued 'hanging out' in the office until 9 p.m. The office seemed a place of comfort for him. With Anderson spending so much time at work and on frequent business trips away from Beijing, it could be inferred that he did not accept much caregiving responsibility at home.

Workers who could 'put work first' were selected and rewarded by the masculine work norm at HMO. Hanson joined the company less than a year ago but had been learning fast to enact the guru masculinity. As a result, he had become Anderson's go-to guy for critical projects. After the week-long National Day Holidays of 2019, Hanson recalled that, instead of relaxing, he was occupied by an urgent task for the whole week. Rather than complaining about the overtime hours, he referenced that he was deemed the most trustworthy employee by the department head to signal his superiority over his peers.

Interviewees outside HMO also reported the importance of having a mentality of 'thinking about work all the time' in their companies. In the interview with Zheng, a developer with 4 years of experience in a startup, he associated overwork with male stamina. He believed that male developers, unlike female developers, could 'bear the pressure of overworking until 2 or 3 a.m.' Some interviewees explicitly associated 'putting work first' with their sense of manhood by expressing their belief that men *should* put work first in the tech industry. Fan, the six-year-experienced operations worker in a leading game company, echoed, 'The tech industry is the place for you to hustle. It makes no sense if you don't.' The 'hustle' implied committing to (over)work at the cost of personal life. Gurus should not be distracted by family responsibilities. Rongge was a 30-year-old technical manager at a startup. When asked if he had work-family balance problems, he denied it and asserted that it was only about 'time management ability.'

You should survey those people in higher positions. They wouldn't have any family problems. If he deals with work well, he could also deal with family well. Of course, there are exceptions. But for most, I believe this ability manifests in all aspects.

Men in junior positions who need not overwork aspired to conform to the cultural ideal. Star, a junior worker in a startup, had a relatively low workload and a standard 9-to-5 work schedule. But he said he 'would totally accept overtime' to get 'double pay.' When asked, 'Will starting a family hinder your career development?' he responded without hesitation, 'Unlikely. I would, of course, put work first. If you must work overtime for urgent projects, your family must compromise.' His response implied that, ideally, a man's family should support his commitment to work.

### 5.3 | Showing 'ability' in migration for work

Migration from lower to higher-tier cities for work in China was a process full of uncertainty, with precarious employment and the skyrocketing housing prices in first-tier cities two major obstacles to settling down there. Specifically, low employment security and high labor mobility have become endemic features of China's tech sector (Li, 2023b). A large proportion of urban social welfare benefits, such as pension, medical insurance, and unemployment insurance, depend on formal employment (Gallagher, 2020, p. 186), which would exacerbate the sense of uncertainty among precariously employed tech workers.

In this socio-spatial context, gurus experienced migration positively as a process of 'seeking development opportunities' unavailable in their hometowns or lower-tier cities. Simon, originally from Shanxi province, had received his master's degree from a prestigious university and worked in Beijing for 3 years. Initially, he worked for a consulting firm, and 2 years later, he joined ByteDance, a top platform company. When asked why he volunteered to job-hop, he explained that, borrowing a popular term in Internet companies, he wanted to 'embrace the change

[in the rapidly developing tech sector].’ In his perception, the fast expansion of ByteDance’s business meant more upward mobility opportunities. After Simon saw ‘plenty of opportunities in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou,’ returning to his hometown, ‘where more people are in conventional [non-tech related] industries,’ became unacceptable for him.

In Simon’s opinion, the high employment flexibility in China’s tech sector was also a chance for workers to ‘embrace the change’ as they could pursue better opportunities in their job-hopping. In an ideal scenario, gurus navigated a boundaryless career, that is, achieving one’s career development in inter-organizational mobility to validate their professional competence repeatedly. Given the rapidity of technological and skill changes, this was consistent with the norms of ‘proactivity at work’ and ‘putting work first’ because gurus should take the initiative and invest plenty of time to keep up with business trends and update their professional skills. Robert, a worker in his 20s originally from Anhui province, had worked in ByteDance’s Guangzhou branch for 2 years. He repeatedly mentioned the necessity of regular training in his daily work because of the rapid change in ByteDance’s technologies. He believed this was actually ‘a good thing.’ ‘I can keep moving forward instead of taking the benefits left by my predecessors.’

Gurus gained substantial remuneration as they would take senior or managerial positions in tech companies in their 30s. With their increasing economic capital, their family would be able to settle down in first-tier cities (sometimes with parental financial support for a down payment), and they would have the *ability* to play the breadwinner role. Nevertheless, they would not expect their spouses to be housewives but usually expected to have dual-earner families. The key was not *actually* being the sole source of economic resources but possessing the *ability* to be the breadwinner. Meanwhile, usually, there was a neo-traditional family division of labor, with women typically working fewer hours than their male partners but taking more family responsibilities (as defined by Van Wanrooy & Wilson, 2006). It should be noted that in some families, both husband and wife were committed to career development (sometimes both were employed in the tech sector), and they would outsource the caregiving labor to retired parents (a generational division of labor) or domestic workers.

One interviewee, Weizong, had worked for two top Internet companies and co-founded a startup as the chief technology officer in the past 7 years. The startup failed after surviving for 2 years, and afterward, he returned to a salaried technical position in Baidu. He was used to a life of overworking. As he admitted, he ‘never had a work-life balance.’ A senior engineer like Weizong, working for a tech giant, could expect an annual salary above 500,000 yuan (approximately 72,000 US\$), sometimes reaching one million yuan (approximately 145,000 US\$). Given their high family income, Weizong and his wife had bought an apartment to settle in Beijing. With his extreme work hours, he said, he did not even have time to decorate their apartment. Luckily, his wife, who worked in a state-owned enterprise, had a standard 9-to-5 work schedule. Weizong felt happy that his wife took the primary burden of decorating their apartment and also took on more caregiving responsibilities for the family, especially their child.

Settling down in a first-tier city and distancing from the traditional notion of the ‘male (sole) breadwinner’ also implied that some gurus were distanced from traditional norms in rural China if they had a rural origin. Zhangge, a technical manager at Tencent, was happily married with a child. The couple had bought a property and lived in Hangzhou for almost a decade. When asked how much he cared about his ‘social status’ in the city and his hometown, he shared how he had distanced himself from his rural origin.

In rural China, many people think I must honor my ancestors when I return to the village, for example, by building a shrine in the village or donating a lot of money. I have no such notions at all. I don’t really care what kind of person I am in the eyes of others [in my hometown village].

In summary, gurus demonstrated their *ability* (*nengli* in Chinese) to navigate boundaryless careers, be the major family income source, and achieve a middle-class life in China’s first-tier cities through migration for work. It conformed to hegemonic norms of material success, urbanization, and men’s breadwinner role in contemporary

China. It was also closely associated with workplace performance because the ability to live a middle-class life and support a family depended on showing proactivity and aggressiveness at work and a willingness to put work first.

## 6 | MASCULINE FRUSTRATION IN WORK AND MIGRATION

The image of gurus shows hegemonic masculine norms in China's tech companies. In work organizations, men in disadvantaged positions usually aspire to learn and enact the hegemonic form of masculinity (Giazitzoglu & Muzio, 2021), while our research brings attention to the heterogeneity of Chinese male tech workers' *actual* workplace behaviors. The following reports the various ways in which male workers failed to enact this culture of hegemonic masculinity. Their masculine frustration was rooted in structural constraints embedded in the local labor regime and uneven urban development in the tier-city system.

### 6.1 | Conceding in workplace masculinity contest

Only a few male workers enacted guru masculinity in daily work, while others had to concede in the workplace masculinity contest. At HMO, many male workers did not display male aggressiveness in daily interactions. Instead, they accepted their relative lack of professional competency and were not proactive in competing for key work projects. As Hanson, the most outstanding junior worker in the team, became the department head's go-to guy, other junior workers recognized his professional superiority over them. Some expressed a lack of professional confidence. Rick had worked for 3 years across three different startups in Beijing before joining the company (much more experienced compared with Hanson's experience of 1 year), but he believed he was unable to perform like Hanson and did not deserve a better position. When talking about his career prospects in the interview, he blamed himself for not being proactive in fully utilizing his previous experience for self-growth.

Some male workers felt more frustrated when they encountered female workers who were able to enact (part of) the guru masculinity. At HMO, among four team leaders, three were female. In daily work, female team leaders also showed their professional superiority over male subordinates, and sometimes they were as aggressive as their male co-workers in work-related arguments. George, a junior analyst with 2 years' experience, felt threatened by women's active participation in the workplace competition. During a lunch chat, he complained that he had suffered from a lack of professional and career guidance. Then he commented on gender inequality at work: 'Admittedly, women have glass ceilings, but at least they have the chance to reach them. The upward path for men is too narrow to be accessible for most of us.' The comparison showed his masculine frustration when female workers adapted better to the masculine workplace culture than he did.

The frustration in daily work and lack of upward mobility made some men doubt the 'putting work first' norm and refuse to show their masculine stamina through overwork. At HMO, George felt so tired of the office atmosphere that he left the office as early as possible, even if he sometimes had to bring work home. The workplace was never an enjoyable place for him. During the workday, Rick frequently asked a couple of close male co-workers to join him for smoking breaks, sometimes taking 20–30 min. During these breaks, he shared how he was harshly criticized by his (female) supervisor and the department head Anderson, being a victim of their aggressiveness. Such daily work interactions made him feel incompetent. His take-it-easy workstyle was in sharp contrast to those 'role models' who conformed to the masculine norm of the company. During these smoke breaks and casual chats, other junior male workers would console him, sharing their troubles and predicaments at work and telling jokes to lighten the atmosphere.

In the interviews, male workers from different companies described the emotional and physical challenges of continuous overwork, including sleep insufficiency, neck pains (due to prolonged computer use), weight gain, reduced personal social life, and increasing family responsibilities (e.g., having a child or caring for aging parents).

Some senior workers decided to reduce their overtime hours because they felt they did not have as much energy as fresh graduates. Zhaojie, a senior developer with 8 years' experience, said, 'When you were a fresh graduate, there were so many things you didn't know and needed to learn. [With many] work tasks, you often overworked all night... But many feel they cannot stay up late when becoming older.' This revealed an age dimension of the workplace masculinity contest. While all workers could display their male stamina through long hours, younger workers in their 20s were more likely to embrace the masculine norm because they were more energetic and had fewer family responsibilities.

## 6.2 | Frustrated in itinerant professional lives

When a substantial number of male workers conceded in the workplace masculinity contest, the ideal of boundaryless tech careers was not achievable, especially due to several structural constraints. Some workers obtained a bachelor's or even master's degree but not from prestigious schools, which limited their access to the leading tech firms. Their typical job trajectory was moving among small or medium-sized tech firms (hundreds of employees), and some obtained junior managerial positions (but not at executive levels). As testified by the interviewees, upward mobility from startups to key positions in tech giants was the rare exception.

Even men from prestigious schools might misuse the early years of career development and be excluded from prestigious firms. The worker mentioned above, Rick from HMO, graduated from an elite university in Beijing and obtained a master's degree in the US. With many alums in the tech industry, he could have been well-connected. However, his first job was in an unpromising small company, and later he worked for three other small firms consecutively, which inevitably stigmatized his resume. Consequently, he was stuck seeking jobs at other small firms, as more prestigious firms would not hire him.

Those with promising career outlets might also withdraw from the workplace masculinity contest, some voluntarily and some frustrated by a scarcity of upward mobility opportunities. Shan, a senior developer with 13 years' experience, worked in a giant game company. Even with his seniority, he felt disappointed in the company because he was not offered any career development opportunities. Instead, he worried about his job security, especially future job-seeking in case of a layoff: 'When your age goes up, they won't focus on training you. They focus on training you only if you are young, but if you are older, some people over 35 won't even have a chance to get job interviews.'

In summary, male workers kept falling behind in the masculinity contest in the long run because there was a decreasing number of well-paid senior or managerial positions along the organizational pyramid. For most, the reality contradicted the ideal scenario of reaping great financial rewards by being proactive and competitive at work. As a result, many workers distanced themselves from the neoliberal narrative of polishing an entrepreneurial self.

## 6.3 | Nomadic life in first-tier cities

Frustration in the workplace added a strong taste of precariousness to many male workers' migration experiences. Moreover, the skyrocketing housing prices and social welfare attached to formal employment hindered settling down permanently in first-tier cities. Many workers considered themselves only passers-by in these cities, preparing for a future elsewhere rather than settling down. Eric, a developer originally from Inner Mongolia who had worked in a startup in Beijing for 3 years, said, 'We have accepted that we are just ordinary people. Why consume our entire life [to buy an apartment] in Beijing?' In the labor market, workers with about 5 years' experience, if unable to get key positions in leading firms, earned an annual salary of 200,000 to 350,000 yuan (28,000 to 50,000 US\$) and reached a bottleneck for career development. While this was significantly higher than the per capita

disposable income of 75,000 yuan in Beijing as of 2021 (BMBS, 2022) or the average income in their hometowns, it was insufficient for a residential property worth millions of yuan. As in Eric's case, many workers migrated to cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Hangzhou primarily for the economic gains of temporary employment.

Some workers lived a nomadic life moving back and forth between these cities and their hometown provinces. The story of Xiao, a young migrant from Shandong province, was illustrative. He studied automobiles in a college in Jilin province, but was self-trained and found a software development job in Beijing after graduation because he heard it paid well. Without outstanding educational credentials, he could only get into a small company. After 2 years, he was exhausted by long hours of commuting and overwork and decided to return to Shandong to be closer to his family.

However, there were much fewer tech-related jobs in lower-tier cities. Consequently, workers either relinquished their previous professions or accepted a wage cut, and in many cases, both. In Xiao's case, he was soon disappointed by the significant wage gap between Beijing and Shandong. With his experience, he could earn about 10,000 to 20,000 yuan per month in Beijing, but in Shandong, he could only find a job that paid about 7000 yuan. One year later, he was considering migrating to Beijing again. But it was only an economically pragmatic choice, and he would eventually reunite with his family in Shandong.

Their frustration with work and nomadic life in first-tier cities distanced many men from the guru ideal because they could not show the *ability* to provide and settle. Jack was a junior worker with 2 years' experience in a tech giant but worked in a periphery position. Originally from Fujian province, he shared that his family had a 'traditional' view of family. If choosing to hustle in Beijing, Jack believed he would not be able to have a family (get married and have children) because, as a man, he would not be able to buy an apartment there. Instead, he said, 'If I want to start a family, I must leave Beijing. I would say 95% of migrant workers in Beijing will eventually leave.'

## 7 | DISCUSSION

The construction of hegemonic masculinity in work organizations is congruent with the hegemonic neoliberal discourse in the tech sector, as illustrated by the emphasis on an 'entrepreneurial spirit' and competition. While previous studies have revealed how neoliberalism infiltrates tech workers' subjectivity (Dorschel, 2022; Kunda & Barley, 2004), some scholars (Vallas & Hill, 2018; Wang & Yang, 2019; Yan, 2020) adopt the Foucauldian notion of 'enterprising-self' to argue that workers have internalized managerial discipline when they accept the neoliberal discourse and commit to overwork. Following these studies, this research shows that the guru masculinity, especially its constitutive elements of proactivity, putting work first and overwork, is complicit with the hegemonic neoliberal discourse and the disciplinary labor control in tech workplaces. Male workers' conforming to these hegemonic masculine norms also facilitates managerial control of the labor process and perpetuates the hegemony of neoliberal discourse. In other words, these hegemonic masculine norms at work, labor discipline in tech workplaces, and the hegemony of neoliberalism are mutually reinforced. As some men internalize the neoliberal discourse of individualism and competition and outperform others in the workplace masculinity contest, they would be selected by management and allocated to crucial or managerial positions, perpetuating men's 'ideal worker' (Acker, 1992) role under neoliberalism.

However, the heterogeneity of male workers shows that workers have not fully surrendered to the disciplinary power of the neoliberal discourse. When workers concede in the workplace masculinity contest, we do not necessarily imply that they consider themselves as inferior workers or inferior men. Rather, how workers gradually decouple from hegemonic masculine norms could manifest their agency in resisting hegemonic gender norms as well as challenging the Foucauldian disciplinary power in work organizations.

Echoing previous studies on how men in disadvantaged positions construct alternative notions of desirable masculinities (Choi, 2016; Choi & Peng, 2016; Gao, 2019; Liu & Lin, 2023; Pande, 2017), we anticipate that male Chinese tech workers would also construct alternative forms of 'respectable' masculinities. Given an age dimension

in enacting the guru masculinity, male workers after their 30s usually have more family responsibilities and less physical endurance to outperform younger workers in overwork. One speculation is that some men might gradually retreat from overwork and invest more in their family relations as 'caring husbands' and 'caring fathers,' constructing a respectable masculinity of 'family men.' This represents a possibility for constructing caring masculinities, 'that reject domination and its associated traits and embrace values of care such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality' (Elliott, 2016, p. 240). Although studies in contemporary China mainly reveal how marginalized men re-negotiate their male identities through the discourse of caring masculinities in family relations (e.g., Liu & Lin, 2023; Liu & Zheng, 2021), as Johansson and Klinth (2008) reveal in the Swedish context, the new ideal of 'the caring and present father' might gradually change the image of hegemonic masculinity and make work 'not as highly valued as previously' (p. 59).

Male workers might also construct 'caring masculinities' at work (Scambor et al., 2023) by showing support, empathy, attention, and a spirit of cooperation and rejecting male dominance and cut-throat competition. For example, we observed how junior male workers at HMO emotionally supported each other in casual daily conversations. When workers withdraw from the culture of dog-eat-dog competition, they might attempt to build healthier work norms and more supportive work relationships.

As some workers migrate back to lower-tier cities or their hometown cities, they might also embrace more locally constructed desirable masculinities, resisting the hegemony of urban lifestyles in most-developed cities and the universal values imposed by neoliberalism. Future research on these alternative masculinities in (tech) work should examine how men might 'undo' gender in work organizations (Kelan, 2018) and how the gendered work organization (Acker, 1992) could be thus transformed.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

This article reveals a hegemonic culture of masculinity in the workplace in China's tech sector through an intersectional approach of gender, class, and migration. It shows the links between the local and regional forms of hegemonic masculinities (Messerschmidt, 2012) in general and how hegemonic masculine norms in contemporary China translate to an organizational context of the tech workplace in particular. The research contributes to the academic understanding of organizational hegemonic masculinity by showcasing how the hegemonic culture of workplace masculinity in tech companies is constructed at the juncture of hegemonic gender norms in the local society and distinctive labor regimes in China's tech sector.

Grounded on ethnographic data, our research reveals that male workers in China's tech companies have constructed a cultural ideal of 'guru masculinity,' which is characterized by showing proactivity and aggressiveness at work, 'putting work first' and overwork, and an ability to provide for family and settle down in first-tier cities. On the one hand, this hegemonic culture of masculinity is embedded in hegemonic masculine norms of material success, enjoyment of urban life (in most-developed cities), and the male breadwinner role in contemporary China. The guru masculinity corresponds to a middle-class life in China's first-tier cities. On the other hand, it is also closely associated with a neoliberal valuation of entrepreneurial spirit in the tech sector and a labor regime characterized by high employment flexibility and prevalent overwork norm.

This article also illuminates that masculinity is a fractured form of subjectivity. In China's tech sector, a large proportion of male workers experience frustration in work and migration and concede in the workplace masculinity contest. Their masculine frustration is rooted in the nature of the workplace masculinity contest, uneven urban development in China, and the overly demanding labor regime in China's tech sector. To fail to live up to hegemonic masculine norms suggests a deficit in male workers, yet the ideal is almost impossible to reach anyway and undesirable in efforts toward gender equality.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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