

# Cancelling “effeminate” men: discursive constructions of the masculinity in mainstream media coverage in China

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**Abstract:** In response to the trend of Chinese men becoming more “effeminate”, the Chinese government has successively introduced relevant policies to promote masculinity, accompanied by extensive media coverage. Against this background, the study takes the mainstream news media’s portrayal of masculinity as the research object, attempting to deconstruct the discourse concerning masculinity in China. The study draws on coverage of masculinity in mainstream media as data, utilizing the method of critical discourse analysis. It is found that the discourse structure surrounding masculinity in China’s mainstream media mainly concentrates on three aspects. First is the diversification of Chinese masculinity, reflecting the influence of neoliberalism on males, and a call for an understanding of diversified masculinity. Secondly, masculinity in China is also constructed on the discourse of gender conflict, primarily based on the gender binary and the ideology of maintaining traditional gender roles. Lastly, there is a tendency towards politicization of masculinity in China, where it is utilized in the service of national security and strength. By examining how and what kinds of discourses of “masculinity” are constructed, this research can contribute to the studies of masculinity in China, and further explain the issue of societal acceptance of effeminate men.

**Keywords:** Masculinity in China; gender conflict; chinese mainstream media coverage; critical discourse analysis

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background Information

On December 8, 2020, a reply notice from China’s Ministry of Education addressing a proposal “On Preventing the Feminization of Male Adolescents” stirred up a sensation in society. This notice was criticized by many netizens as being gender discriminatory, but there were also voices stating that masculinity in China was facing an unprecedented “crisis” [1]. The notice explicitly states that a series of educational policies will be introduced to reform school physical education courses, along with the introduction of sports evaluation mechanisms. Efforts will be made to vigorously develop professional sports, such as campus football, all with the aim of cultivating masculinity in students.

If the previous mention could be seen as a proposal, less than a year later, on September 2, 2021, the National Radio and Television Administration of China issued an official directive. The directive clearly instructs to establish correct aesthetics, resolutely eliminate “effeminate” and other abnormal aesthetics, and replace them with excellent Chinese traditional culture, revolutionary culture, and advanced socialist culture [2]. This has also caused quite a stir in the news media, with mainstream news media vying to analyse and report on it. The repeated actions by the Chinese government addressing the issue of “masculinity” sufficiently indicate that China is undergoing an issue of gender norms and national aesthetics triggered by “masculinity”.

The discussion of masculinity is not exclusive to China, nor is it a recent global trend; in fact, discussions about gender issues were on the agenda as early as 1688 in the UK and 1880 in the US [3]. The reason for this, as Kimmel explained, might be that masculinity



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and femininity are interconnected, with the definition of one often depending on the definition of the other, and these definitions often change with significant historical and social transformations, thereby creating conflicts [3]. This perspective suggests that an integral component of gender traits is their social nature. For example, a study of individuals who joined the Vichy Combat Forces at the end of the German occupation revealed that, in post-war France, masculinity was founded on strength, martial violence, and the image of a soldier; young men sought to affirm their manhood under the guise of being warriors, escaping a perceived crisis in which their masculinity was being questioned [4]. On this level, masculinity is closely linked with national security and strength.

Therefore, the issue of masculinity is essentially a socially constructed crisis that, in name, is a manufactured crisis. It is considered a set of malleable standards of values dictated by society, serving as a legitimate reason to reinforce social control and state intervention, aimed at serving social order, power, strength, and ideology [5]. This consequently results in any male not conforming to these standards being put at a disadvantage. Thus, masculinity can be shaped for various purposes, and among the many pathways that shape and influence the formation or manifestation of masculinity, the media is a crucial factor [6]. As a primary source of daily information and a tool for individual socialization, mass media shapes specific images of masculinity by disseminating specific values, exerting profound influences on male self-identification, social expectations, and behavioural patterns [6].

### ***1.2. Research Questions and Method***

With this background and foundation, and in combination with the ongoing discussions of masculinity in China, this research further raises two research questions worthy of in-depth exploration: What kinds of discourses are used in Chinese news media about masculinity? How does mainstream Chinese news media construct the discourse of masculinity? This study adopts a post-structuralist perspective, using the current issue of masculinity as a microcosm, and employing Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) methods to analyse mainstream news media coverage, to deeply explore the construction of the discourse of masculinity in mainstream Chinese news media.

### ***1.3. Objectives and Significance of the Research***

This study seeks to use mainstream Chinese media to examine how and what kinds of discourses of “masculinity” are constructed, aiming to contribute to the theoretical construction in the field of gender studies, particularly in discussing aspects of socially constructed notions of gender. Besides, this study applies CDA methods for in-depth analysis of news coverage and aims to reveal hidden power relationships, values, and social structures in the media. This also intends to provide powerful theoretical and methodological tools for discourse studies and media studies. Research on men and masculinity also contributes to the emergence of multiculturalism and can deepen understanding of issues related to dominant masculinity, such as patriarchy, homophobia, heteronormativity, and gender discrimination [7]. Considering the specific sociocultural context of China in this study, it reveals the construction and application of masculinity in China’s mainstream media and ideological framework. The study further explains the issue of societal acceptance of effeminate men.

Hence, this study not only contributes to filling a gap in China’s gender studies but also enriches the English-language literature which currently lacks significant depth of debate about constructions of gender in China. It has practical importance for promoting gender equality and eliminating gender bias. In general, this study not only has a profound theoretical foundation but also possesses rich practical significance. It is valuable for understanding and addressing the issues related to gender and gender traits faced by today’s Chinese society and plays an important role in promoting the development of gender equality and gender studies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Overview of the Literature Review

This research conducts a relatively systematic and multi-dimensional literature review on masculinity. As the study is closely relevant to the Chinese-language discourses, which are likely to be most directly related to the Chinese social, political, and cultural context, it is crucial to refer to Chinese-language literature. To ensure a balanced and exhaustive overview of both domestic and international studies, key resources such as Glasgow University Library, Wiley Online Library, Google Scholar, CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), and NSSD (National Social Sciences Database) were employed.

Glasgow University Library, Google Scholar and Wiley Online Library facilitated a comprehensive review of non-Chinese literature, while CNKI and the NSSD allowed for an in-depth examination of Chinese studies. By consulting literature on the theme of masculinity, summarizing relevant research, and integrating insights across various academic domains, the review ensures coverage of the breadth of existing literature as much as possible, aligning with the complexity and subtleties of the subject matter. After conducting rounds of searches through each of these sources, four themes were found in the literature review. Firstly, the debate within Western academia over the definition of masculinity; secondly, the development and transformation of masculinity in China; thirdly, an exploration of alternative masculinity; and lastly, research into discourses of masculinity. This multifaceted approach contributes to a richer understanding of the subject and lays a solid foundation for the study.

### 2.2. Contending Perspectives on Concepts of Masculinity

This study focuses on the construction, application, and development of the discourse of masculinity within the framework of mainstream Chinese media and social ideology. However, in the literature review, it was found that systematic research on masculinity started relatively late in China, and the related literature is somewhat sparse [8]. Therefore, before further discussing the development and current state of masculinity in China, it is necessary to trace the research and definitions of masculinity in the literature review.

The discussion of definitions plays a crucial role in any form of meaning construction and the process of clarifying differences. This will provide the necessary foundation for subsequent discussions and understandings and help position and understand this concept in a broader research context. Although it is difficult to trace the research of masculinity to a clear origin, Western academia began its research earlier and has produced a large number of research results, mainly focusing on the fields of gender studies and social psychology [9-13]. They have studied aspects of the construction, experience, manifestation, and debates of masculinity in the social context. Particularly in recent years, masculinity has faced unprecedented challenges, sparking further discussions and controversies among scholars. However, within this field, there is an abundance of ambiguity in the interpretation of the definition of masculinity, inconsistent usage, or a combination of these two phenomena; although each concept has its own independent meaning and scope of application, a lot of controversy and confusion often arises from this [14].

There is a great deal of controversy surrounding the concepts of biological and sociological masculinity. According to the perspective of biological determinism, the physiological characteristics and internal biological structure of men are significant components of masculinity. For instance, studies have revealed a clear correlation between the levels of testicular hormones in men and their aggressive behaviour [15]. This viewpoint emphasises the role of biological and genetic factors in forming masculinity. From the perspective of biological science, there is undoubtedly a certain scientific basis for this. In traditional concepts, masculinity is often associated with characteristics such as aggression, emotional restraint, and self-reliance [9].

However, this view has been questioned in modern society, where this form of masculinity is now regarded as an outdated, unbalanced, and narrow stereotype. Modern masculinity no longer focuses solely on the biological characteristics of men but pays more attention to the influence of social and cultural factors on masculinity, and the definition of masculinity has expanded, covering a broader range of attributes, including emotional intelligence, empathy, and respect for others [16]. Therefore, the notion that masculinity is solely a display of aggression and competitiveness is overly simplistic. As described by the renowned sociologist Connell [17], who made significant contributions to the study of masculinity, the concept of masculinity does not merely originate from biological sex but is constructed within specific social and cultural contexts. When speaking of masculinity, people are actually “doing gender” in a specific cultural way from a sociological constructivist perspective [17]. Connell emphasises seeing gender as a social phenomenon rather than merely a manifestation of physiological or psychological characteristics. In this view, masculinity is an idealised male image socially constructed, which can be continuously created and shaped through an individual’s daily behaviour and interaction in the social context [13].

In addition, there are misunderstandings and confusion among the three concepts of masculinity, male gender, and self-identity, which are closely related to gender, social expectations, and self-recognition. These misunderstandings and confusions often arise from neglecting the complexity and diversity of male gender identity. Famous gender theorist Butler proposed a revolutionary theory of gender performativity in her research, suggesting that gender is not fixed but is formed by repeatedly performing and imitating social norms. Based on this, she further criticised gender stereotypes and advocated accepting all genders and gender identities [18].

Coincidentally, sociologist Kimmel agreed with this viewpoint and further argued that today’s society is deeply gendered. Gender is not just a biological attribute but more a basic framework for shaping social structures, individual identification, and daily interactions [19]. It is a construction of society and culture that significantly impacts individual and collective cognition, behaviour, and perception. At the same time, he also noted that gender and self-identity are not fixed binary attributes but a fluid, diverse, complex system shaped by society and culture [19]. This means that masculinity is not the only attribute directly associated with male gender. Not all men should conform to or cater to the masculinity demanded by contemporary society, and this does not affect their identity as males. Therefore, the view that completely equates masculinity with male gender and self-identity recognition has significant problems. Such a concept may limit individuals’ self-expression, reinforce gender stereotypes, and exclude those who do not conform to traditional gender norms.

Therefore, the systematic review of definitions in masculinity literature reveals the complexity of the concept. It is particularly important to understand that no globally unified definition of masculinity exists. Instead, its forms and modes of expression are often profoundly influenced by factors such as culture, nation, age, social class, gender, and race [11]. However, most studies published in the English world come from within the Western world and proceed from a Western perspective. Literature on the study of masculinity in the Chinese context is scarce and relatively unknown. While considering the global construction of masculinity in the context of globalization is important [20], studying the evolution of masculinity in China is particularly meaningful. Given that China is a country with a rich history, diverse ethnicities, profound culture, frequent historical changes in social structure, and is currently undergoing rapid development, the investigation into how masculinity has evolved within this unique context holds significant value.

### ***2.3. Transmutation of Masculinity in China***

Sociologists often conduct in-depth studies on gender, especially femininity and power under the influence of gender ideology and neoliberalism, yet often gloss over its

impact on men [21-24]. In China, masculinity is a very profound and diverse theme, and it continues to evolve under the influence of changes in Chinese culture, gender, social structure, and economy [25-29]. Therefore, most of the mainstream literature is currently exploring in-depth the reasons for the formation and evolution of masculinity in China.

Unlike the masculinity emphasised in Western countries, due to cultural, historical, and social structural differences, Chinese masculinity presents significant differences in expression forms and intrinsic traits. For instance, in Western societies, individual freedom and equality are the focus of societal attention and development, and masculinity emphasizes more on aspects of independence, strength, and courage [30]. In contrast, recent survey research in China indicates that due to the profound influences of the small-scale peasant economy and the patriarchal social culture, Chinese society still expects men to shift more focus to the family and assume social responsibilities [31]. This has led to the unique representation of masculinity in the various narratives, debates, and dialogues in Chinese society.

Nevertheless, there are subtle differences in all aspects between traditional Chinese masculinity and the masculinity described in modern Chinese society. East Asian culture, particularly the religious thoughts in Chinese cultural traditions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, are considered to have a profound impact on the formation of traditional Chinese masculinity [20]. Despite the contradictions and conflicts amongst these three philosophical and religious systems - Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, they often borrow from and blend with each other, forming a unique cultural pattern and knowledge system.

Over the course of several centuries, each doctrine has undergone significant changes, profoundly influencing the construction of masculinity hitherto. Among them, the influence of Confucianism is the most extensive and profound. Confucianism originated from the series of thoughts by the great ancient Chinese thinker and philosopher Confucius, and it primarily emphasizes morality, benevolence, loyalty, and filial piety, as well as a strict social and familial order; therefore, within Confucian concepts, the ideal masculinity is often associated with qualities such as “忠贞 (zhongzhen, integrity or loyalty)”, “礼貌 (limao, courtesy)”, “克己奉公 (keji fengong, work selflessly for the public interest in serving the public)”, and “学识渊博 (xueshi yuanbo, knowledgeable)” [20, 32]).

Buddhism, particularly Mahayana Buddhism as practised in China, primarily emphasises “悲悯 (beimin, compassion)”, “无我 (wuwo, selflessness or anatta)”, and “解脱 (jietuo, relief or liberation)” [33]). According to Buddhist theories and perspectives, although it does not have as detailed stipulations on gender roles as Confucianism does, its interpretation of masculinity is often related to the precepts for monks, focusing on “清净 (qingjing, purity)”, “自制 (zizhi, self-restraint)”, “禁欲 (jinyu, abstinency)”, and “无执 (wuzhi, non-attachment)”.

Taoism, on the other hand, is somewhat unique in this regard. Taoist priests are often considered hermits who transcend the mundane world and remain detached from fame and wealth, pursuing effortless non-action [34]. However, scholars studying Taoist philosophy traditionally describe it as having a feminine orientation [35,36] (Ames, 1981; Wang, 2008). The gentle demeanour of men and homosexual behaviours did not pose a threat to the concept of masculinity at that time. This is associated with Taoist principles of “自然 (ziran, naturalness)”, “无为而治 (wuwei erzhi, governing by non-interference)”, and “阴阳哲学 (yinyang zhexue, Yin-Yang philosophy)”. Taoism deviated from the outwardly excellent qualities emphasised in the traditional concept of masculinity and internalised them as spiritual cultivation [35], thus providing an alternative model for masculinity.

Consequently, in contrast to Western masculinity, traditional Chinese masculinity often presents more as an image of the hero and symbolic of potential homosexual behaviours in men. While the influence of Chinese religious thought has waned in modern China and many people no longer subscribe to these religious cultures, studying these



religious and philosophical traditions continues to aid in better understanding and interpreting the usage and social construction of modern Chinese discourses of masculinity.

For a long unknown period afterwards, Chinese masculinity was often interpreted as embodying strongly masculine characteristics. It was not until scholars distilled the concepts of “文 (wen, cultural attainment)” and “武 (wu, martial valour)” from the three major religious ideologies which could be seen as the culmination of the concept of traditional Chinese masculinity [37]. The concepts of “文 (wen)” and “武 (wu)” in traditional Chinese culture not only have profound effects on ideal personalities, social hierarchical structure, and educational values but also have transformative impacts on shaping traditional Chinese masculinity. Through the study of the concepts of “文 (wen)” and “武 (wu)”, the factors and reasons for the formation of masculinity can be better revealed, laying the groundwork for subsequent research.

In traditional Chinese concepts, “文 (wen)” signifies cultural attainment, typically referring to literature, wisdom, or education; while “武 (wu)” signifies martial valour, usually referring to military, martial arts, or strength [26]. The Chinese idiom “文武双全 (wenwu shuangquan)” describes the notable embodiment and dynamic balance of both “文 (wen)” and “武 (wu)” in an individual, which is also the ultimate expression of traditional Chinese masculinity.

However, there exists a traditional tendency in China where “文 (wen)” usually takes precedence over “武 (wu)” and is accorded a higher social status [20]. One reason to explain this inclination is that in Chinese feudal society, studying and passing the imperial examination to become an official was considered a crucial pathway to garner respect and elevate social status [38]. This also elucidates why education and examinations remain of paramount importance in contemporary China, as being well-read is also viewed as an essential part of masculinity. The status of the martial aspect is usually lower, with ordinary soldiers often regarded as crude and inferior. Only when a man possesses both literary and martial traits is he considered the societal ideal of a leader in China. This perspective underscores that the ideal image of Chinese men pertains not only to physical strength or combat skills but also to morals, wisdom, and self-control. However, this should not imply that only men should embody both literary and martial qualities; women can also possess these qualities and freely determine their identities.

The concept of “文 (wen)” and “武 (wu)” is deeply rooted since then. However, in the long course of history, masculinity in China has experienced a significant turning point, namely, after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, when the state system transitioned from New Democracy to Socialism. Research on the masculinity of Chinese men during this period indicates that the main focus of masculinity was particularly concentrated on the male working class, as the workers were in fact the real masters of the nation at that time [39]. At this stage of its development, masculinity essentially became closer to a Sinicized hegemonic masculinity, a symbol of state power. Hegemonic masculinity is an indispensable component in the study of masculinity. It has had a profound impact on gender activism and has opened up analytical space for global research on masculinity. As Connell first proposed in 1987, it is not only defined as the most respected and powerful male image in society but also interpreted as a social mechanism that justifies the superior status of men in society [11, 13, 40]. It concerns the acquisition and maintenance of male power and the formation and dissolution of social groups in this process. It is used to understand the advantageous position of men in gender relations as well as societal expectations of male roles [41].

At the inception of the People’s Republic of China, national rejuvenation and the enhancement of national power were seen as its primary objectives. During this time, masculinity could be viewed as serving state politics and various societal purposes. According to the theory of hegemonic masculinity, it emphasises the societal expectations and standards for men, constituting an idealised male image and role that is widely recognised and emulated in society. This image and role coincide with the expectations at the start of the

new China. Simultaneously, this also elucidates one aspect of the crisis in Chinese masculinity, namely, when men possess masculinity that does not align with societal expectations, they typically bear greater social pressure. The primary reason for this is that they do not conform to the societal expectations set by hegemonic masculinity for ideal male behaviour; in turn, this serves as a means to support and maintain the dominant status of men in the social gender hierarchy [13]. Therefore, studying the manifestation of hegemonic masculinity in China helps to reveal the profound implications of masculinity in the Chinese context, especially given its frequent association with the state, jointly shaping social structures and ideologies.

#### **2.4. *Alternative Masculinity***

Following the proposal of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, many scholars, including its originators, have critically re-evaluated it [13]. Subsequently, the academic field has expanded its perspective to a global scale, asserting that, to some extent, it reinforces the social structures of gender inequality and maintains the dominant position of men in the gender power relations [41-44]). Therefore, diverse forms of masculinity have emerged to challenge hegemonic masculinity, varying across different cultures, races, classes, and geographical locations. These diverse forms of masculinity currently lack a definitive term for categorization, but contemporary literature reviews commonly refer to them as “alternative masculinities”, considering them as a strategy to address gender violence and gender characteristics [45-47].

Alternative masculinity is a relatively new and constantly developing concept, encompassing many different forms of masculinity. One influential aspect is the concept of “female masculinity”, which advocates that traits such as bravery and boldness, traditionally associated with masculinity, can also exist in women [48]. Furthermore, it emphasizes that “female masculinity” is far from an imitation of male masculinity; instead, it offers a perspective that glimpses into masculinity, acting as a reflection of male attributes, and it is precisely because of the parts rejected by the dominant masculinity in feminine masculinity—such as gentleness and empathy—that it makes the masculinity in males authentic [48]. Additionally, the literature also addresses discussions on the masculinities of homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgender individuals [49].

The emergence of alternative masculinities is due to the continuous development and understanding of gender, sexual orientation, and personal identity. In contemporary Chinese society, research on alternative masculinities can be considered to be relatively unexplored. This is because academic research in China on self-identification and gender, especially in the field of the LGBTQIA+ community, remains relatively unknown [50]. Thus, any gender characteristics that do not align with one’s biological sex are labelled with terms like “effeminate men”, “sissies”, or “tomboys”; as for the knowledge gap regarding alternative masculinities, these are often categorised as aberrant aesthetics or even perverse [51, 52]. Therefore, the literature review and discussion on alternative masculinities can better reveal the causes of the masculinity crisis in this study, as it fundamentally challenges traditional masculinity. In addition, exploring alternative masculinities can make society aware of the broad possibilities and forms of masculinity. This open and pluralistic understanding can break down gender stereotypes and contribute to a more diverse and inclusive future for masculinity.

#### **2.5. *The Discourses of Masculinity and Media***

After exploring the definition of masculinity, the causes of its evolution, and the emerging alternative masculinities, it is not difficult to find that masculinity represents not merely a trait possessed by males. It is more intricately linked with social thought, culture, public perceptions, and national power. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, a concise literature review on the discourse of masculinity is essential. The prevailing views are mostly derived from Foucault’s theory, which posits that masculinity can be interpreted through cultural discourse. It extends beyond ideology, representing

shared cultural modes of thinking, acting, creating, evaluating, and speaking [53]. During the American Revolutionary era, the construction of the discourse on masculinity often evoked the ideal of ancient Greek and Roman citizen-soldiers, using them as paradigms, and was mostly associated with terms and concepts such as freedom and independence, serving as a standard political narrative [54]. This narrative has become the keynote of Western masculinity and has been adopted ever since, leading the Western definition of masculinity to be more individual-oriented.

In modern China, the construction of the discourse on masculinity largely revolves around the aesthetic of feminized men. While feminized men were appreciated in the aesthetics of upper-class society as early as the Ming and Qing dynasties in ancient China, the rise of the internet and the influence of Japanese and Korean culture have once again brought the aesthetic of feminized men to the pinnacle of the era [55]. Particularly with the spread of new media and smartphones, the influence of the fan economy and shifts in female aesthetics, the public has started to show enthusiasm for pursuing young, handsome, muscular male stars, singers, artists, and other public figures, collectively referred to as “小鲜肉 (xiaoxianrou, little fresh meat)”, and an aesthetic that values good looks above all has begun to prevail [56]. Therefore, at this stage, it is not surprising that the term “小鲜肉 (xiaoxianrou)” has become a cultural and aesthetic symbol, representing the image of masculinity.

Under the influence of consumer culture, the body becomes the centre of culture, and the pursuit of visual pleasure and physical beauty is understandable [57]. Scholars also argued that this discourse links male beauty to age, appearance, and physique; these three standards are related to male physiological attributes, therefore, male beauty and temperament are objectified into sexy, secular, commoditized bodies [58]. However, the term “小鲜肉 (xiaoxianrou)” has gained rich connotations as it is continuously used in new contexts and social backgrounds. The “小 (xiao)” refers to a small age range which now is constantly expanding, “鲜 (xian)” is endowed with the meaning of being innocent and free from negative news, while “肉 (rou)” has expanded from the originally developed muscles to a healthy image and outstanding appearance [59].

Nevertheless, due to some male artists' lack of professionalism and the constant emergence of negative news about them, the positive connotation of “小鲜肉 (xiaoxianrou)” as a product catering to cultural consumption quickly collapsed and in the following years, it received fierce criticism and rapidly transitioned from “小鲜肉 (xiaoxianrou)” to “娘炮 (niangpao, effeminate men)” [56].

In the term “娘炮 (niangpao),” “娘 (niang)” as a noun, means a mother or an older married woman, and with the impact of internet slang, “娘 (niang)” has gradually been misused as an adjective to describe anything related to women; meanwhile, “炮 (pao)” originally refers to heavy weapons, which carry connotations of oppression and deterrence, having implicit meanings related to men [60]. Therefore, the term “娘炮 (niangpao)” is generally used to refer to young males who display feminized characteristics in terms of their appearance, demeanour, language, and behaviours. The term carries a strong derogatory connotation. The prevalence of the term “娘炮 (niangpao)” is considered a symbol of decadence in the entertainment industry. Opinions such as “少年娘则国娘 (when boys become effeminate, the nation becomes effeminate)” and “娘炮误国 (effeminate men ruined the nation)” have emerged in abundance [61]. After such remarks, the “娘炮 (niangpao)” phenomenon has largely transcended the topic of gender characteristics and risen to the grand narrative level of social aesthetics and national destiny.

The prevalence of the “娘炮 (niangpao)” poses a significant challenge to China's male image and masculinity. The unique Chinese idiom “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi, masculinity)” has begun to be widely mentioned and used by the media and society. The terms “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” and “masculinity” cannot be simply equated. The former, influenced by traditional Chinese culture and context, carries rich connotations, and



its concept continues to evolve. “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” emphasizes “阳 (yang)” and “刚 (gang)”.

The original meaning of “阳 (yang)” is the sun, and influenced by the concept of “阴阳 (Yin and Yang)” in traditional Chinese philosophy then, “阳 (yang)” is endowed with deep meanings of masculinity, extroversion, determination, light, and heat; it is a naturalization of the universe and a binary division of gender [62]. As for “刚 (gang)”, its original meaning refers to hardness, which is extended to mean integrity, strength, and determination [63]. When “阳刚 (yanggang)” is combined, it can be extended to a rich understanding. By studying the essence of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)”, one can better explore China’s research on the subject of masculinity.

## 2.6. Research Gap Identification

Through literature review, it is found that current Chinese academia uses and researches the discourse of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi, masculinity)” mostly related to physical education. They all emphasize the extremely important role of factors on the physical quality level of physical education in cultivating “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” and explore how to reform from the perspective of education [64-66]. Some scholars have also rationally delved into the intrinsic value of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)”, the reasons for its absence, and how to reshape it [67]. In addition, the influence of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” on the fan economy and its role in shaping idols’ image in the entertainment field have also been deeply explored [68]. These studies have deepened society’s and the public’s understanding of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)”, playing a pivotal role.

However, a research gap has been found in the literature review: there are few studies that critically examine how mainstream news media construct and utilize the discourse of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” within the framework of social ideology after experiencing the crisis of modern Chinese masculinity. There is an exception here. The study by Yu and Sui has conducted an in-depth exploration of soft masculinity, making an extraordinary contribution against the backdrop of scarce research on Chinese gender studies. However, their study is limitedly structured around the debates in the proposal to prevent feminization among adolescents, focusing more on the concerns of the female aspects, providing less explanation for the issue of societal acceptance of effeminate men [69].

This study focuses on the broader concept of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)”, exploring how the discourse of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” is constructed, and further explains what kinds of discourses are used in media about it. By studying the construction of this discourse and male image by news media, it will help reveal the deeper meaning and connotation of Chinese masculinity, and further explore how it impacts society and culture.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research Design

This study utilises CDA, a tool in discourse analysis, to systematically analyse mainstream media coverage, focusing on scrutinising specific texts to deepen our understanding of how masculinity is constructed in China’s mainstream news media, as well as interpreting the connotations of gender traits within the social framework. From a post-structuralist perspective, it especially further explores what kinds of discourses of masculinity is shaped and constructed in the mainstream media.

### 3.2. Method

Considering that this study primarily delves into the deep meanings and underlying influences of Chinese masculinity within the coverage of Chinese mainstream news media, CDA presents itself as the most suitable research tool as it examines the complex interplay between power, ideology, and social complexities. Discourse analysis, despite the absence of a strict definition, can be understood as a research tool focused on investigating the

nature of language; its main purpose is to guide in-depth inquiries into specific data and problems, rather than being confined to the superficial, simple, and singular descriptions of the data [70]. More specifically, the term “discourse” is constructed from the complex language used by individuals following different patterns in their participation in various domains of social life [71]. Thus, discourse analysis is fundamentally a way to appreciate and study the complexity of language [70]. It does this by interpreting the ways language is used in real life and society, exploring how and why language operates in its specific ways, and revealing the power and impact of language.

Grounded in discourse analysis, the interdisciplinary research method of CDA was further proposed in the 1970s and it recognises the role of language in the construction of social power relations, which evolve with the development of society [72]. As described and understood by Parker [73], the theoretical foundation of CDA is rooted in Foucault’s poststructuralist theories. This theory advocates that knowledge, especially knowledge mediated by language, is not fixed in nature and it is much like the concept of truth, a dynamic concept that is intertwined with and changes with time, culture, politics, social and economic environments, filled with uncertainties [74-76]. In other words, language is not just a tool for communication or a way of speaking, but also “a system of thought and ways of carving out reality. They are structures of knowledge that influence systems of practices [77]”.

In comparison to discourse analysis, CDA is not only concerned with language itself but also pays greater attention to ideology, power, and various inequalities within society. For CDA, it’s not the language itself that holds power, but rather it gains its strength from those who use it powerfully [72]. It is fundamentally a part of social practice. Therefore, through the analysis of discourse, critical discourse analysis can reveal the social and political dynamics hidden beneath the surface of language and expose unfair and unequal language practices that may have negative impacts on groups or individuals, thereby promoting social justice. In this study, even though the object of study is news media coverage, the real focus is not merely on the coverage themselves in a surface sense, but more importantly on the language used in this coverage and the knowledge structures and inherent meanings they entail. The reason why news media coverage can be moulded into a powerful discourse is that they are closely linked to wider institutions and ideologies, and they are given broader power beyond their own content by the people who use them.

### **3.3. Strengths and Limitations**

However, CDA is not without its drawbacks. For instance, CDA is regarded as merely a qualitative method for deconstructing textual readings to understand their underlying meanings and its subjectivity can be questioned as it may not provide clear answers to questions based on scientific research, such as the reliability and validity of the text; moreover, due to its qualitative nature, CDA is incapable of conducting research analysis in exactly the same way as quantitative methods [78]. Therefore, as described by Luke [79], CDA remains an evolving, marginalized mainstream analysis method.

Despite this, CDA remains one of the most appropriate research tools for studying ideology, inequality of power, and social justice. It offers the opportunity to scrutinize the intricate relationships between text and context, discourse and society, and language and power [79-82]. Particularly in the interpretation of the hidden connotations under the language system, CDA helps extend limited knowledge systems across disciplines and systematically links them in order to obtain a wider dataset and a deeper understanding.

### **3.4. Ethical Considerations**

This study employs CDA as the research method to analyse coverage. All the coverage involved in the research are publicly available online from official websites of news media, constituting secondary data. This implies that there has been no data collection involving human or animal participants, which means that the data naturally appeared on the website after it was publicly released by the media and does not encompass any

encrypted communications, instant messages, or personal privacy information. The data is accessible to anyone online via links.

Nevertheless, this does not suggest that the analysis of secondary data is exempt from any ethical considerations, for instance, during qualitative research, there are concerns about data archiving exposing personal perspectives [83]. In this research, given the exploration of gender traits as the subject, it may be considered a sensitive topic in some respects. This is particularly the case for those who have previously been bullied due to their gender traits or for those who do not conform to traditional gender norms, as it may evoke painful memories.

### 3.5. Data Collection and Selection

Given the focus of this study on the discourse construction and interpretation of Chinese masculinity in mainstream Chinese-language media coverage, the data for this study are primarily derived from China's mainstream media. The term “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi, masculinity)” was used as a keyword for data collection. As mentioned in the background information and literature review, following a significant shift in male aesthetics, China is actively promoting the enhancement of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)”. Again, “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” cannot be simply equated to the general concept of masculinity. Put succinctly, the latter is more of a generic term that can refer to any form of masculinity from any cultural background, which does not align with the purpose of this study that is set against the backdrop of China. The former, “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” is a Chinese idiom that originated in the context of China, placing emphasis on “阳刚 (yanggang)”. It describes a strong will, a manifestation of inner tenacity transforming into a robust and forceful external representation, reflecting the immense charm of Chinese-style masculinity [84]. To some extent, it better reflects the interconnection with the economy and culture within the specific Chinese context.

After confirming the keyword for data collection, in an attempt to comprehensively cover and balance both party and public viewpoints, the study first initiated a search on People.cn and Xinhuanet on July 7, 2023. People.cn, being the digital version of the People's Daily, is directly managed by the Communist Party of China and primarily focuses on political missions and propaganda [85], thus representing the party's viewpoint to a certain degree. On the other hand, Xinhuanet, the official website of Xinhua News Agency, is a state-owned media rather than directly operated by the party [86], and it more accurately reflects public opinion. Furthermore, survey data indicates that People.cn is the largest news media platform in China, while Xinhuanet stands as the second largest [87]. Hence, these two platforms can, to a certain extent, represent China's mainstream news media.

However, following the search attempt, it's likely that due to the stringent censorship systems of these two news media platforms, the search results were not satisfactory. Upon entering the keyword “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” in a search on Xinhuanet, the display indicated that no related news was found [88]. The search on People.cn yielded extremely limited and unsatisfactory results [89]. Of the 50 pieces of literature obtained from an exact match search, only 5 articles remained after eliminating duplicates related to male traits in modern society, and the majority of the other reports were focused on literary descriptions, such as appreciating the masculine beauty in Mao Zedong's poetry, the presence of masculinity in Peking opera, and excerpts from novels for literary appreciation [89]. These were unrelated to contemporary discussions on male traits in society.

Nevertheless, during the review of various news media platforms such as People.cn, CCTV.com, GMW.cn, Xinhuanet, and Global Times, the study discovered the platform ChinaSo [90]. Supervised and sponsored by Xinhua News Agency, ChinaSo was jointly established in February 2014 by the seven major central news units, and it serves as China's national search platform, an information technology enterprise regarded as the “national team”, and a central news website [91]. As it integrates information sources from

both mainstream central and local media, this aligns well with the data collection needs – being official and authoritative. It not only centralises information sources from central media but also integrates coverage from local media.

In the end, the research utilized “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” as the search term, with ChinaSo as the platform for data collection. It’s important to note that coverage might be at risk of deletion due to censorship or may increase over time. As of July 27, 2023, 36 coverage were retrieved from the central media category [92], and 69 coverage were obtained from the local media category [93], resulting in a total of 105 coverage. Yet, the quality of the retrieved reports varied, with duplicates, inconsistencies, and content not aligning with the research objective. Hence, further selection of data was carried out through the following steps: (1) As this study focuses on discourse analysis, coverage that were in video format or consisted solely of images were excluded, retaining only text-based content; (2) Duplicate coverage were removed; (3) The coverage must be relevant to discussions about male traits in real-world society and not pertain to non-realistic contexts like fictional literary works, film or theatre characters, visual arts, or novel excerpts. After implementing the above filters, a total of 34 coverage were deemed suitable for critical discourse analysis. They are primarily news coverage and opinion pieces, and most of them are related to the issue of the cultivation of masculinity (for details, please see the appendix).

### 3.6. Data Analysis

Upon retrieving all coverage that meet the criteria, they are coded according to the method described by Potter and Wetherell, which combines discourse analysis with social psychology [94]. This method is particularly suited for the analysis of social phenomena as well as patterns of collective behaviour and cultural conflicts. It focuses on how people use language in social interactions and how this language shapes actions or is shaped by broader social and cultural factors, exploring the relationship between discursive resources and social actions [94]. More specifically, after photocopying all the coverage related to a specific theme, the coverage are carefully read to determine the themes associated with the connotations and usage of terms. After classifying according to these themes, a more detailed analysis is carried out on the coverage included under each theme. Following this, the study will further differentiate the discourse in accordance with Parker’s standards, exploring the “connotations, allusions, and implications that the texts evoke.” Besides, special attention is given to the connection with the context and how the text “embeds, entails and presupposes other discourses.” [94]

## 4. Finding and Discussion

After analysing the data according to the methodology mentioned, three dominant themes emerged: the diversification of Chinese masculinity, gender conflict, and the politicization of masculinity in China. The diversification of masculinity reflects the ideology of neoliberalism, demonstrating a certain degree of understanding and acceptance of the diversity of masculinity. It constructs a more comprehensive and complex male image. Within the theme of gender conflict, masculinity is employed to emphasize or depict the opposition between males and females in specific domains. This is fundamentally a perspective rooted in the gender binary, aimed at upholding the traditional division of gender roles. The final theme is the politicization of masculinity in China, reflecting a viewpoint where collective and national interests are paramount.

Some sub-themes also emerged in the analysis, such as the emphasis on the importance of schools, particularly male teachers, in cultivating masculinity in students [95]. There was also a focus on the significance of the father’s role and paternal love in the growth process of boys [96]. These sub-themes highlight the profound influence of male role models on the growth of boys, essentially being a phenomenon of imitation. As pre-

viously mentioned, masculinity is largely a norm that is constructed and shaped by society, and boys frequently seek out male role models around them to shape and affirm their male identity during their growth. However, these are isolated cases and, in relative terms, do not hold as much representativeness and validity. Therefore, this research primarily focuses on analysing the three dominant themes. Following are some more specific analyses and examples:

#### **4.1 Finding 1: Diversification of Chinese Masculinity**

Under the influence of neoliberalism and post-structuralism, China's mainstream media depicts a diverse range of male images, with reports presenting discourses that describe and encourage a diverse interpretation of masculinity. Neoliberalism encourages individual freedom, giving individuals more options [97], while post-structuralism opposes essentialism and determinism, emphasizing diversity, fluidity, and discontinuity [98]. Compared to the West, as the gender concepts of modern Chinese people gradually return to traditional and closed views [99], the diversification of masculinity is a groundbreaking and significant trend in gender studies in China. Discourses related to diversified masculinity have adopted an empowering perspective, largely recognizing and affirming the complexity and diversity of male identities, granting men the freedom to define their own temperament.

Example 1: It is a form of beauty for men to display strength in demeanour, mettle, and physique, but masculinity does not simply equate to 'acting masculine'. Education should not merely cultivate 'men' and 'women', but should pay more attention to nurturing responsibility and accountability in people (Masculinity = Masculinize? Expert: Education Shouldn't Be Bound by Gender Stereotypes [100].)

Example 2: We should not narrowly interpret 'yanggang zhiqi'. Instead, we should separate it from traditional gender consciousness, infusing it with psychological traits that align with modern values, such as self-confident, brave, decisive and resolute, strong-minded, full of vigour and vitality, and physically healthy (Understanding Masculinity Without Falling into the Trap of Gender Opposition [101]).

For instance, in Example 1, masculinity is not only understood as physical strength but is additionally described using the highly culturally significant Chinese adjectives "风度、气概 (fengdu and qigai, demeanour and mettle)". The term "风度 (fengdu, demeanour)" has a rich and long history in China, being described with an extremely wide range of vocabulary, its implications being profoundly rich (Liang, 1990) [102]. "风度 (fengdu)" was initially used to describe one's style and demeanour in both scholarship and personal conduct. Its connotations have expanded over time. Generally, it refers to a person's good performance in terms of behaviour, conversation, physical signs, posture, facial expressions, and clothing; it is a comprehensive reflection of an individual's intellectual level, inner strength, moral character, knowledge, talent, and lifestyle habits [102]. "气概 (qigai, mettle)", as a concept rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy, emphasizes "气 (qi)", which highlights the inclusiveness, grandeur, and rich inner properties [103]. Later, it is often used to describe a person's grandeur, generosity, courage, determination, and willingness to fight for ideals, goals, and justice. It is a term with great positive meaning, highlighting a person's spiritual strength and character. These are independent of gender, related to personality or personal qualities, not just physiological or physical discourse. And personal qualities, as a product of the socialization [104], form intertextuality with the socialized gender concept of men, further affirming the viewpoint of human sociality.

Secondly, the coverage describes this diverse Chinese masculinity as a kind of beauty, challenging the traditional Chinese definition of beauty. Traditionally, beauty is often associated with words like gentleness, elegance, and softness, which are attributed to feminine traits [105]. Seeing Chinese masculinity also as a kind of beauty is an act that redefines beauty, making beauty a broad concept that includes various traits. "阳刚之气并不等于简单的 '行为男性化' ... 更应注重培养人的担当和责任感 (Chinese masculinity does not



simply equate to ‘acting masculine’ ... but should pay more attention to nurturing responsibility and accountability in people)” Here, the complexity and diversity of masculinity are explicitly recognized, it is not “简单的行为男性化 (simply equate to ‘acting masculine’).”

On this level, it is endowed with the concept of “human,” acknowledging that Chinese masculinity should be a diverse, beautiful quality about “human,” rather than simply gendering it. In Example 2, this diverse concept is further understood and expanded, linked to “自信、勇敢、果决、有主见、朝气蓬勃、健康体魄 (self-confident, brave, decisive and resolute, strong-minded, full of vigour and vitality, and physically healthy)” in modern social values, interpreting Chinese masculinity as a collection of various beautiful qualities, further socializing it. It challenges the traditional single definition of men, noting that men’s gender traits are diverse and fluid, rather than single and fixed. The freedom and multiple possibilities of humans are emphasized.

According to the Cognitive Load Theory, in the transmission of text or information, the discourse should be as concise and clear as possible for optimal communication effects, because if a task demands too high a cognitive load, people may seek to simplify the information for better understanding [106]. In examples 1 and 2, the discourse of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” becomes rich and diverse, which is not conducive to the dissemination of information and the implantation of ideas. Therefore, in examples 3 and 4, the builders of the multi-faceted discourse of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” employ strategies of simplicity, comparison and juxtaposition, enlightenment and challenge, and ease of understanding in order to better implant this concept into the receivers of information, further condensing and summarizing the diversification of masculinity.

Example 3: However, surface strength is not the full meaning of “yanggang zhiqi” ...it can be seen that one must “civilized in spirit” while “barbaric in physique “ (Masculinity Concerns Physique, but Values Character Even More. Workers’ Daily [107]).

Example 4: Cultivating masculinity focuses on comprehensive education for children’s broad-mindedness, candid character, and strong-willed temperament... “Civilizing the spirit, barbaric in physique, and allowing the body and mind to grow healthily together, are what should be most concerned” (Eastday Commentary | Cultivating Masculinity Emphasises on Nurturing a Sense of Responsibility. Eastday [108]).

In these two examples, they both first acknowledge that the full meaning of Chinese masculinity is not “表面上的强大 (surface strength)”, but a comprehensive temperament. In order to further clarify and summarize this comprehensive temperament, it uses the highly succinct and generalized discourse of “野蛮其体魄,文明其精神” (barbaric in physique and civilized in spirit). This phrase is both concise and profound, enhancing the depth and breadth of the discourse. “野蛮其体魄 (barbaric in physique)”, where “野蛮 (yeman, barbaric)” usually implies a backward, uncivilized state, such as roughness, violence, and the ability to survive and resist difficulties. When connected with “体魄 (tipu, physique)”, it can be used to describe a strong and brave physical state, embodying a side of strength and toughness. However, the subsequent “文明其精神 (civilized in spirit)” breaks this single gender image. “文明 (wenming, civilized)”, as the antonym of “野蛮 (yeman, barbaric)”, serves as a strong contrast here, emphasizing an advanced, cultural state. Connected with “精神 (jingshen, spirit)”, it emphasizes the importance of inner qualities such as morality, wisdom, and etiquette. These traits are traditionally less emphasized in the male image in China and are more often attributed to females [109].

Therefore, this discourse embodies the understanding and acceptance of the diversification of Chinese masculinity, constructing a more comprehensive and complex character of masculinity. However, at its root, this discourse still expresses an appreciation for physical strength and spiritual civilization. Fundamentally, it remains a social expectation based on gender roles and is a modern reinterpretation of the concept of “文武 (wenwu, cultural attainment and martial valour)” in traditional Chinese culture. The diversification of masculinity as a product of male liberation and the men’s rights movement, while

granting men the freedom to choose, also implicitly encompasses greater social expectations for men [110]. This can easily lead to increased psychological and societal pressures on men, resulting in male depression and even shortened lifespan [111].

#### 4.2 Finding 2: Gender Conflict

The concept of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” is also constructed upon the discourse of gender conflict in these reports. In other words, “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” can be utilized to highlight or depict the struggles or oppositions between men and women in certain domains. Conflict theory suggests that society is defined by the struggles for dominance among social groups vying for scarce resources, and gender conflict in the context of gender pertains to issues of gender roles, gender rights, and gender expectations [112]. In China, the backdrop for gender conflict is rooted in a long-standing and deeply influential patriarchy, which is a male-dominated discourse that has significantly influenced China’s sociocultural fabric and family structures [113]. In the discursive construction of “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)”, it is regarded as a quality, power, status, and authority that transcends the feminine.

Example 5: After years of reform and opening-up, there have been significant changes in China’s social strata, with a marked rise in the social status of women, and to some extent, the social role of men has given away. This is particularly evident in their positions in society and their roles within the family. In light of these changes, there have been exclamations that China is witnessing a ‘yin-sheng-yang-shuai’, where the feminine thrives and the masculine wanes, and men no longer seem ‘manly’ (Don’t Blame Schools for Boys Lacking Masculinity [114]).

For instance, Example 5 frames Chinese masculinity within the discourse of gender conflict. The “女性的社会地位提升 (rise of women’s social status)” and “男性的社会角色让位 (the social role of men has given way)” indicate a gender role transformation within gender conflict. On the one hand, with the development of feminist theory and feminist movements, women have gained more educational and employment opportunities, and as society’s understanding of gender equality strengthens, their roles and status in social, political, and economic fields have significantly improved [115,116]. This is an essential path towards achieving gender equality. However, by linking the “女性的社会地位提升 (rise of women’s social status)” to “男性的社会角色让位 (the social role of men has given way)”, the text sets men and women in complete opposition, creating a gender conflict.

To a certain extent, this discourse reveals society’s fixed understanding and expectations of gender roles. Particularly, the usage of “让位 (rangwei, give way)” connotes giving up official positions or jobs, generally referring to the abandonment of possession or dominance [117]. Within this textual context, it implies the assumption that men should hold the dominant role and be in a superior position. Only when men are in a powerful position does “阳刚之气” have its foundation and source. The phrase “阴盛阳衰” (the feminine thrives and the masculine wanes) originates from the concept of Yin and Yang in traditional Chinese culture, which categorizes everything into the two energies of Yin and Yang, and when the balance between the two energies in a human body is lost, a situation of “阴盛阳衰 (the feminine thrives and the masculine wanes)” appears [118]. In the context of gender studies, this specifically refers to the situation where the status of women rises while the status of men relatively declines [119]. Combining the latter phrase “男人不像个男人 (men no longer seem ‘manly’)”, such discourse harbours a questioning and regretful view, which in fact reflects a challenge to the fixation of traditional roles and discomfort towards the new gender order. It expresses the expectations and confusion about male gender roles, that is, they still expect men to maintain their traditional social roles and status, while feeling uneasy about the new gender order.

However, the rise in women’s status does not necessarily mean an absolute decline in men’s status, or “让位 (rangwei, give way)”. In fact, this is a prejudice, originating from the zero-sum game understanding of power and social status, that is, an increase in

one party's status or benefits implies a decline in the other party's status or benefits [120]. Under this concept, the enhancement of women's social status should be seen as a challenge to men's power and status and a trend towards gender equality in society. On the other hand, the discourse of gender conflict does not always imply the superiority or inferiority of one gender but may more emphasize the differences and conflicts in gender traits and role expectations among different gender individuals, which can be understood here as a phenomenon of gender trait displacement.

Example 6: Mr Xia said that it seems to have become a common social phenomenon that boys are not like boys. Some boys have an introverted personality, speak in a low voice, and are slow in doing things; some boys start crying a lot when they are scolded by their parents (How to Educate a Son Lacking Masculinity? Renowned Teachers Offer Strategies. Yangtze Evening Post [121]).

Example 7: Therefore, boys should look like boys, be lively and sunny, have courage and responsibility, not cause trouble, not be afraid of things, be trustworthy, and give strength to others. Similarly, girls should also look like girls, be brave, upright, confident, radiant, fearless, and not timid ('Preventing Feminisation of Male Adolescents' Proposal Sparks Heated Debate: How Should Masculinity Truly Be Understood?. Dazhong Net. [122]).

When men display traits that are commonly considered to be “女性 (feminine)” in social and cultural contexts, they may face misunderstandings or questions from their surroundings. It is important to stress that this does not mean that “feminine” traits are bad, but when they appear in men, they generate a negative connotation due to this misplacement. For instance, in example 6, traits such as “性格内向, 说话细声细语, 眼泪哗哗淌 (being introverted, speaking softly, easily crying)” are viewed as “男孩不像个男的 (boys are not like boys)”, but the implied characteristics of gentleness, quietness, and sensitivity don't seem inappropriate when they are found in women.

Here, the value and recognition of men are simply distinguished from these “feminized” traits, being endowed with different societal expectations. When boys' behaviours deviate from these expectations, gender conflict arises, and they are labelled as “不像男的 (not acting like boys)”. This discourse is further reinforced in example 7, which presents societal expectations and descriptions for men and women. “男孩应该有男孩的样子 (boys should act like boys)” and “女孩应该有女孩的样子 (girls should act like girls)”, such discourse solidifies gender expectations, emphasizing the binary nature of gender. Gender binary theory, which is based on biological sex, essentially aims to uphold traditional gender role concepts and this subtly promotes gender stereotypes, denying various gender identities, including transgender and agender, and has a negative impact on their life experiences [123].

### 4.3 Finding 3: The Politicization of Chinese Masculinity

Another discourse constructed based on Chinese masculinity is politicized discourse. In the Chinese context, masculinity is endowed with political attributes, essentially a combination of heroism, militarism, nationalism, and collectivism. It tightly links youth and the nation with the country's prospects, politicizing the concept of masculinity. Masculinized nationalism and embedded statehood are important features of contemporary state politics [124]. The intention is to shape a strong and decisive nation and state by inspiring and cultivating the masculinity of young people.

Example 8: If the youth are strong, the nation is strong; if the youth are heroic on the earth, the nation is heroic on the earth. In order to make our contemporary students tough in spirit, we need to cultivate virtues such as integrity, tenacity, and positivity. We should focus on character-building, and elevate their masculinity, so they can become the pillars of the state and the hope of the nation (Strengthening Inner Qualities to Help Adolescents Cultivate Masculinity. Jiangsu China Network [125]).

Example 9: Youth are the hope of their families, as well as the future of the nation and the people. Along their path of growth, they may have entertainment stars as companions, but more importantly, they need role models to guide them. Among these role models, the soldiers who dedicate their lives to the nation, embodying heroic masculinity, are undoubtedly essential (Chinese Youth, the Masculinity Must Not Diminish. China National Defense News [126]).

In Example 8, the statement “少年强则国强,少年雄于地球则国雄于地球 (If the youth are strong, the nation is strong; if the youth are heroic on the earth, the nation is heroic on the earth)” creates a direct correlation between the vitality of the youth and the strength of the nation. This highlights traits such as “正直、坚毅、阳光 (integrity, tenacity, and positivity)”. This discourse implies and encourages youths to demonstrate the masculine spirit believed to drive the nation’s strength. In Examples 9 and 10, phrases like “国家之栋梁、民族之希望 (the pillars of the state, the hope of the nation)” and “国家和民族的未来 (the future of the nation and the people)” clearly show a strong sense of Chinese heroism and collectivism.

The heroic image in China predominantly constructs the ideal figure of the nation, which pursues loyalty towards the family, country, and the world, and it especially emphasizes a high responsibility towards the public interest, and the willingness to sacrifice personal benefits for the interests of the ethnic brethren and the collective [127]. Here, “栋梁 (pillar)” and “希望 (hope)” portray Chinese masculinity as an individual who is highly compliant with national interests, willing to rejuvenate the Chinese nation with personal sacrifices. However, such discourse, which treats individuals as crucial pillars of the nation and assigns them the responsibility of contributing to the collective, elevates masculinity from the micro-level to the macro narrative of the nation. This largely indicates a disregard for personal interests and the fulfilment of individual values.

Furthermore, Example 9 manifests an ideology of militarizing national security. Militarism underscores the importance and powerful influence of the military, typically moulding soldiers into symbols and spiritual leaders of the nation [128]. In this context, “以身许国, 血性阳刚的军人 (the soldiers who dedicate their lives to the nation, embodying a heroic masculinity)” are moulded into “精神偶像 (spiritual idols)”, thereby establishing a close connection between masculinity and the image of the soldier. This emphasizes the social status of soldiers and their positive role in shaping the values of the youth. The phrase “以身许国 (devote oneself to the country)” reinforces the spirit of loyalty to the country and self-sacrifice for national interests, embodying a quintessential value system and ideology centred around the state and prioritizing the nation.

Example 10: National Committee member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and Director of the Institute of Political Science at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Zhang Shuhua: Moreover, the international situation in the foreseeable future is complex and severe, with competition heating up among different civilizations, regions, and countries. Under such circumstances, there is a need for a considerable number of young people in the new era who have a firm political stance, clear-headedness, resolute will, robust physique, and are imbued with masculinity (Various Methods to Boost Masculinity in Adolescents. Beijing Youth Daily [129]).

In Example 10, masculinity is utilised as a political tool, further shaping a particular political ideology. This ideology closely links “阳刚之气 (yanggang zhiqi)” with personal qualities such as “头脑清醒 (clear-headedness)”, and “意志坚定 (resolute will)”, suggesting their importance in the current severe international situation. Within this framework, masculinity is not merely a symbol of personal qualities, but a potent national ideology. Chinese masculinity is moulded into a concept and value system that strengthens national interests, centripetal force, and collective identity. “政治立场坚定 (firm political stance)” is also taken as an essential part of Chinese masculinity, referring to a resolute attitude towards external temptations and competitions. This discourse suggests that masculinity is viewed as a crucial factor in maintaining political stability, safeguarding social order,

and ensuring the country's advantage in international competition. As a societal expectation of the youth from the state, it aims to reinforce the country's strength and enhance its international status.

## 5. Conclusion

This study, set against the backdrop of the crisis in China's masculinity, employs critical discourse analysis to explore the structure and ideological role of masculinity in mainstream Chinese media coverage. It further explains the issue of societal acceptance of effeminate men. In the mainstream Chinese media discourse, three themes have been identified: the diversification of masculinity, gender conflict, and the politicisation of masculinity. In the in-depth exploration of the discursive constructions of masculinity in China, this study reveals a complex and multi-dimensional gender perception paradigm. Simultaneously, it points out the evolution and expansion of this understanding in mainstream media. Chinese masculinity, a traditional concept, has undergone reinterpretation and has been endowed with new meanings in contemporary society. The mechanisms behind this are closely related to the broad ideological frameworks of society.

The diversification of Chinese masculinity is largely influenced by the ideologies of neoliberalism and poststructuralism. Through the diversified interpretation of masculinity in China, contemporary Chinese society's understanding of gender is undergoing a significant transformation. As described by Zhang and Luo [107, 108], in modern Chinese society, men find themselves in a complex situation. On the one hand, they are expected to exhibit a high level of spiritual refinement and possess a variety of qualities beyond traditional masculinity such as kind, gentle, and considerate. On the other hand, they are also expected to have strong and robust physical strength. However, this discourse constructs an idealized Chinese male image that deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, and it is essentially the higher standards and societal expectations for men, representing a modern reinterpretation of the traditional Chinese concepts of martial valour and cultural attainment. This discourse of "perfecting" Chinese masculinity also exerts influence in a broader context, impacting the psychological well-being of Chinese men. Such an emphasis on adhering to Confucian philosophy, a sense of duty, and demonstrating societal obedience and compliance is becoming a modern male pressure, seen as a significant factor undermining their mental health [130].

Furthermore, masculinity has been constructed from the perspective of gender conflict, which reveals how traditional gender hierarchies are maintained and reinforced in the perception of gender roles and traits. This juxtaposition and conflict are not just challenges to men or women, but also essentially reflect the influence of the gender binary. In this discourse, men and women are abstracted from the unified concept of humanity and positioned in opposition. On one hand, it is a male-dominated discourse that symbolises status and power superior to feminine temperament. It assumes that masculinity can only be identified when it occupies a superior and stronger position. It maintains the traditional gender order, aiming to preserve the traditionally strong male power. On the other hand, the discourse of gender conflict does not always emphasise the advantages of one gender. It often highlights the differences and conflicts of gender traits and role expectations among individuals of different genders. Just as Wang reported, men should exhibit masculine traits, and women should embody feminine qualities [121]. This nurtures gender stereotypes, upholding only biological sex while denying the existence of gender identity, potentially harming non-binary gender groups.

Finally, a trend of politicising masculinity has also been found in the research. The societal call for and glorification of masculinity in China is imbued with political attributes, reflecting a synthesis of militarism, nationalism, collectivism, and heroism. When masculinity is imbued with political attributes, it becomes more than just an individual issue; it becomes closely tied to the fate of the nation, its strength, and its status. This politicization



may lead to an oversimplification of gender issues, overlooking the complexity and diversity of individuals. To delve into further detail, this discourse reinforces the view that individuals should subordinate to the state and collective, with collective and national interests outweighing everything else. It neglects or obliterates individual interests and self-worth, elevating masculinity from the micro level of the individual to the macro level of national security and future, turning it into a tool for political propaganda aiming to enhance individuals' loyalty to the state and strengthen the nation's power and international status.

This research sheds light on the relationship between gender traits and ideology within the unique socio-cultural context of China. It explores the intricate interplay between masculinity and broader societal ideologies and examines their impact on perceptions of gender equality and roles. Additionally, this study enriches the English-language literature which currently lacks significant depth of debate about constructions of gender in China, offering a more nuanced discussion on gender constructions in China. It challenges conventional gender binaries, emphasizes the fluidity of gender traits, and promotes an enhanced understanding of gender equality and diversity. By confronting gender issues, the study paves the way for a more equitable and just society, bearing substantial practical significance.

Nevertheless, the limitation of this study lies in its methodology. Critical discourse analysis is considered to have subjective bias [131]. Therefore, future research directions could apply quantitative methods, such as high-frequency word analysis on mainstream media coverage, to reveal the most used words and expressions in public discussion, more clearly reflecting the public's cognition of gender traits. Additionally, sentiment analysis is also a valuable research method. By analysing the sentiment tendencies in the discourse, one can understand the public's attitudes towards gender traits and gain a deeper understanding of how these attitudes influence public behaviour and decision-making. These quantitative research methods can complement gender studies, providing a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the research results.

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