

The politics of kitchen work: Co-production of a retired man's "hegemonic masculinity" during the COVID-19 quarantine

Yuchen Han 

School of Humanities and Social Science, The Chinese University of Hongkong, Shenzhen, China

Correspondence

Yuchen Han, School of Humanities and Social Science, The Chinese University of Hongkong, Shenzhen, China.
Email: hanyuchen@cuhk.edu.cn

Abstract

This article documents the reconstructed domestic masculinity of a retired Chinese man during the COVID-19 quarantine period in China. It is based on participant observation of the man and his family as a case study. It demonstrates how the man turns kitchen work into a "masculine" job, and uses it as a contested terrain for constructing hegemonic masculinity by adopting scientific discourse explicitly and traditional patriarchal discourse implicitly. It also highlights women's conscious and deliberate interactions with the man in contributing to the making of hegemonic masculinity for the sake of their own values of happiness. The author seeks an understanding of the intersection of aging, patriarchal norms, and women's agency through the case of the co-production of a retired man's hegemonic masculinity in the context of the COVID-19 quarantine.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, domestic manhood, hegemonic masculinity, relational gender making, retired men

1 | INTRODUCTION

"Just stay away from the kitchen. In such a scary period, as long as you aren't sick or in pain, I will thank the heavens," my 63-year-old father said to my healthy and energetic 85-year-old grandmother¹ to discourage her from doing kitchen work. Then he turned to my 62-year-old mother, saying "Just wash some vegetables when I ask you to." My mother is a publishing company manager and is not interested in kitchen matters, although she had been the primary home cook before the pandemic. As the working, unmarried only child, I was asked to "Just do the dishes and online grocery shopping when I ask you to." This was the essence of the labor division of kitchen work in

my family during the COVID-19 quarantine period², issued by my freshly retired father. He had assigned himself to do all the remaining kitchen work. Previously, kitchen work had rarely concerned him; however, after the pandemic broke out, he became the “Minister” of the kitchen, and there was a “gender reversal”³ of kitchen work.

In the COVID-19 pandemic/lockdown writings on domesticity, feminist observations and reflections often draw on the continued gendered division of labor which aggravates women's double or triple shifts (i.e., Clancy, 2020; Güney-Frahm, 2020; Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2020; Özkazaç-Pan & Pullen, 2020; Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020). Domestic manhood during the pandemic has been less documented, and men are usually depicted more as absent from housework, or even as forces of violence (i.e., Rauhaus et al., 2020). This reflective article is based on participant observation of a retired Chinese man who serves as a case study. It discusses how men have constructed masculinity by using kitchen work as a contested terrain during the pandemic home quarantine period.

Masculinity is not only be a term differentiating men's gender attributes from women's, but also a term reflecting the complicated dynamics, differentiation and hierarchies among men (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 2005). Retired men's masculinity, which has attracted little exploration, is usually portrayed as being trapped in a crisis of becoming physically weaker and retreating from external connections⁴. Most existing assessments of the pandemic's effects on elderly groups have reported on them as passive and vulnerable recipients of care (i.e., Baxter, 2020; O'Shea, 2020). This article does not examine elderly men's vulnerability during COVID-19. Nor does it indicate a representative or average sample of domestic manhood during COVID-19. Rather, it discusses how COVID-19 fosters, or constrains, a freshly retired man in negotiating his masculinity within domesticity.

As West and Zimmerman (1987) claim, gender is constructed through “doing” in everyday interaction. Gender is also relational and coproduced by others through interaction (Ward, 2007; Xiao, 2011). Ward (as cited in Xiao, 2011, p. 610)⁵ highlights that an individual's gendered identity is often accomplished through the recognition, validation, affirmation, celebration, and consolidation provided by others in interaction. My father's construction of masculinity during the home quarantine was largely built upon his lively interactions with me and other family members, namely, my mother and grandmother. How he acts as a father, a husband and a son, and how the three women individually and collectively interact with him, contributing in constructing his masculinity, serve as the indicators for discussion.

During this unique period, domestic life has constituted the bulk of most individual social lives. In terms of domestic life, kitchen work has come to have a significance during the public health crisis. In my family, the kitchen work, including food planning, food purchasing, choosing cooking styles, and monitoring food intake and nutrition control was rearranged. Out of this, a new domestic gender relationship emerged, along with a new masculinity.

The following text explains my father's erstwhile “hegemonic masculinity” and his short “crisis of hegemonic masculinity” after retirement. After that, I document my father's reconstruction of “hegemonic masculinity” along with the evolution of kitchen work politics during the COVID-19 quarantine period. This includes sub-sections on the “high-protein diet project,” “online food-shopping for old father's authority,” and “grandma's cookie: a dutiful son rather than a filial son.” This part also articulates how the three female family members contribute to building his new hegemonic masculinity. In the final section, I summarize the new hegemonic masculinity my father constructed, the various structural discourses he utilized to construct this masculinity, and the three women's roles in consolidating this hegemonic masculinity. I also address the article's contributions to the scholarship.

2 | THE ERSTWHILE “HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY”

In spring 1978, my father was enrolled as one of the first cohorts of university students in post-Cultural Revolution China. Due to the scarce spaces in university based on entrance examination results⁶, university students in his era were called “the chosen ones” and earned more recognition at the time than today's PhDs. My father's major was philosophy and politics, which he had chosen himself. Upon graduation in 1982, he was appointed to work in the

provincial government. In 1983, he married my mother, his college classmate. Two years later, I was born. Due to the One Child Policy, I am an only child. My father has been called a “life winner” (*rensheng yingjia*) by his acquaintances, because “he was born to an urban and educated family, he married a university classmate who worked as a university teacher and then a publisher, and he had a stable and promising government job which provided decent material life and a privileged social network, and has an intelligent daughter.”

My father's street fame of “life winner” is the synonym of men with “hegemonic masculinity” in the academic sense. In traditional Confucian culture, “hegemonic masculinity” refers to passing the imperial examinations and serving as a government official, finding a fitting marriage partner and producing descendants to expand the family (Louie, 2016). During the Socialist Era, there was a shift in standards of “hegemonic masculinity” and “a fitting marriage” when differentiations of class and gender were targets of repudiation. Still, the Confucian style of “hegemonic masculinity” has been revitalized in Reform China, albeit with having only one child, rather than “more sons, more blessings” becoming the new “correct” practice. With the reinforcement of market values, multiple “hegemonic masculinities” have emerged. Nevertheless, government work is considered a privileged factor in one's class position (Song & Hird, 2014).

Moreover, my father is also famed as the “new good man.” After the Reform, with the rise of dating culture, the “new good man” claims to embody romantic, considerate and dexterous qualities in both courtship and domesticity. Being labeled a “new good man” is a bonus for a man who has been ascribed with “hegemonic masculinity” (Chen, 2020; Song & Hird, 2014). My father opportunely conformed to the label of “new good man” apart from his conventional “hegemonic masculinity.” When they were in their 30s, my mother's workplace was far from home, and my father often did the cooking. He even cut both my mother's and my hair. As he became busier and privileged in his work, he had a long-term absence from housework. However, he retained his reputation as “a good cook,” thus preserving my mother's label of “a favored wife who does not need to cook.”

By his formal retirement in the end of 2019, my father held a high post in his job and was well respected by his colleagues. My mother and I were aware that it would take him a while to adjust to a life without work, subordinates, and flattery. Furthermore, he had to spend most of his retirement at home with his 85-year old mother, while his wife and daughter worked outside the home. During my father's short retirement before the COVID-19 outbreak, I witnessed his maladjustment to retired life, including being restless riding buses and subways which he had rarely ridden in the past, being upset by the dearth of responses when cracking jokes about being an official, and long telephone calls to his previous subordinates in which he would offer “life instructions.” All of our family, himself included, realized that his previous sense of “privilege” and “authority” had been undergoing transition. We were all striving to adjust to his retirement. Regardless, arguments occasionally broke out.

3 | RECONSTRUCTING “HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY” DURING THE QUARANTINE PERIOD

In the late morning of January 22, 2020, the day before Chinese New Year Eve, I was traveling wearing a surgical mask in a taxi to my parent's place for a gathering. It was that morning, while millions of Chinese people were on their journey back to their hometowns, that the media began calling for people to wear surgical masks in public.

As I entered my home, my mother took my overcoat and bags to the balcony in the open air. My father talked to me about one of my WeChat Moments⁷, which was a forwarded working report from an epidemiologist based on his recent fieldtrip to Wuhan. My father asked me to delete this Moment due to its potential risk of being false reporting.

During lunch, my grandmother expressed her concern about our food stock due to the unclear pandemic situation. My father paused her, and said in a “scientific-oriented” tone: “I have purchased sufficient food for 4–5 days use. Food refrigerated too long would lose its nutrition and even be harmful. Moreover, supermarkets nowadays are open all year long.”

Perhaps due to the experience of the Great Famine from 1958 to 1960, my grandmother was addicted to food shopping and stocking up the refrigerator. Before my father's retirement, she had made the kitchen decisions. After my father retired, he became more concerned about domestic issues, especially food freshness. Food shopping and cooking became a sensitive issue, which caused rounds of dispute between my father and grandmother. My mother and I preferred fresh food, but we were also concerned about family harmony, so we usually keep silent or would mediate the disputes. My grandmother used to hold a superior position in domesticity, especially in the in-law relationship with my mother. However, as she aged and depended more on family care, she became less demanding of my mother and often would compromise with my father.

My father's optimism shifted on the evening of the 22nd when China Central Television (CCTV) warned of the high disease transmission risk and announced that Wuhan would begin a lockdown at midnight on the 23rd. He worried about the pandemic and its unpredictable effects on our lives. Following CCTV's instructions, he asked us not to venture outside the home for at least the next 5 days. He also set the TV channel on the CCTV News Channel to access the most "officially updated" news. We assigned serving chopsticks and personal tableware to prevent cross transmission.

The domestic space became a terrain for defending safety and health. My father titled himself the "Defence Minister" and we all addressed him with this new title, albeit in a funny tone. "Defence Ministry" is regarded as a "masculine" sector in the state system—using manual power or military weapons to protect the people. The ministry commander is usually given highest authority in action decisions and resource distribution. As a response, soldiers and the masses comply with the commander's instructions. This reinforces the authoritative power. In these pandemic times, my father, as the only man in the family and as a former leader in his work place, titled himself the commander of the household "Defence Ministry," a "masculine sector." Tacitly, we three female family members played the conventional supporting roles.

3.1 | The "Defence Minister's" high protein diet project

To ensure domestic safety and health, the "Defence Minister" regarded food planning and cooking as the Ministry's key working tasks. "Apart from consuming sufficient vegetables and fruit, eat 100 g of beef, fish, chicken, or pork every day, to build a strong immune system to defend against the potential virus." This is nutritional common sense, but received more attention from my father during the special period. He took this advice as the master directive in meal planning, and proposed a high protein diet to "enhance our immune capacity." The "Minister" prepared us four dishes for every meal, of which three would be meat dishes. Since it was not safe to go outside to buy groceries, he did this thorough "archaeological" exploration in the storage room, and found a cache of items such as dried seafood, dried mushrooms, smoked fish and pork. These became the materials in our high-protein project. One typical lunch would be noodles in chicken soup with dried oysters, dried fish maw, pork slices, seaweed, dried mushrooms, tomatoes, and green vegetables. We would tease him and call him a *nouveau riche* who made *fotiaoqiang*⁸ for ordinary meals.

Our meat intake per person exceeded 100 g per day, and we had a debate on "how much protein we should intake everyday." Our "Minister" claimed "To eat enough protein is not only for your health, but also for the whole family's well-being." While this justification makes sense in a public health crisis, the standard of "enough protein" was determined by the "Minister."

During the quarantine period, my grandmother was worried about my father's unsustainable food consumption. She often wandered around the kitchen and the refrigerator, offering frequent advice to the "Minister," but was always rejected and even criticized by him. The "Minister" declared his responsibility for the kitchen, and even claimed to my grandmother that the reason he had taken the role of home cook had been to attain control over food planning and refrigerator use. One time, this upset my grandmother because she thought that she had been expelled from the kitchen, which had been her territory. Yet, later on, she justified my father's words and comforted

herself, "That is him. He is addicted to being the decision maker. Anyway, he is also the one who does everything. Even though he cannot help to control everything and everybody, he is a responsible father, son and husband."

My mother and I also attempted to offer our hands in the kitchen, but nothing we could do met the "Minister's" demands. To make the "Minister System" sustainable, my mother "requested" that the "Minister" assign tasks to family members. I asked my mother privately about her advocacy. She stated:

I am not interested in doing housework, and neither are you. And I do not want to argue with family members over housework. Why not give him more power to do what he wants to do to make our lives more peaceful? If we give him more recognition and power, he will be more accountable for domesticity. And we are not lazy; we also do some of the housework.

My father eventually accepted my mother's advice. Assigning labor divisions reaffirmed his authority as the "Minister." Meanwhile, my mother and I would not have a moral burden when we did our reading or other entertainment on the balcony after finishing our assigned domestic tasks.

Therefore, as for hegemonic masculinity making during home quarantine, my father turned the "feminine" kitchen work into a "masculine" project. He assigned himself the authoritative and accountable title of "Defence Minister" and acted domineering in the name of collective well-being in conducting the high-protein diet project by using scientific discourse. Meanwhile, the three female family members helped him build his new hegemonic masculinity in interaction, both strategically and reluctantly. My mother and I gained personal space by affirming and celebrating my father's hegemonic masculinity; while my grandmother justified my father's being "a good man," albeit reluctantly, in relinquishing her kitchen territory.

3.2 | Online food shopping for old father's authority

On Day 10 of quarantine, our food was running out. Fortunately, online shopping and express delivery still worked. As the online buyer, I followed the "Minister's" instructions and selected the chosen items into the shopping cart with careful calculations. When I showed the shopping cart on my phone to the "Minister" for his confirmation, he asked me to hold while that he would make several adjustments. After five rounds of adding/dropping and re-checking throughout the day from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., he still had not placed the order.

I grew intolerant in Round Four, as I was neglecting my own working tasks, and my phone had been occupied for a long time. I urged the "Minister" to make up his mind, and reminded him that we could place another order the next day if he had any new ideas. Yet he criticized me, saying, "I have done 90% of the kitchen work! You are so impatient about the only task you are assigned." After Round Five, I lost my temper, "why are you so shilly-shally in such tiny things! How did you make big decisions when you were the leader!" I did not intend to accuse him of being unable to do online shopping, but was pushing him to be more efficient and considerate of others in his actions. The "Minister" was infuriated and shouted at me, "you would be fired if you were my subordinate. You are such an unfilial daughter, even while I am still not old enough to be abandoned."

We did not talk with each other for the next day. Yet, I noticed that the "Minister" was studying online shopping on his cell phone. Three days later, the food the "Minister" had ordered arrived. These items were identical to what I had put into the shopping cart on my phone. Nevertheless, we three female family members praised the "Minister's" new-fangled talent of online shopping.

The mentality and practice of retired men in negotiating their masculinities are tensely embedded in this dispute. My father had thought that instead of being like most men who were absent from housework, he was performing an ideal masculinity by acting as a caring kitchen worker. Meanwhile, as a father, a former leader, and the "Minister," he expected me to play a filial and subordinate role, obeying his instructions with a sense of worship. This authoritative and privileged mentality is revealed in his angry critique of me.

My words had devastated the “Minister’s” sense of authority. Moreover, concern about “tiny” things and hesitation in decision-making are both antithetical to the attributes of “hegemonic masculinity.” However, as a response, my father tackled my “rebellion” by turning to his identity as a senior citizen and using the label of “disrespect for elders” as a moral weapon. By adopting a “weapon of the ‘weak,’” he thought that he was defending his authority. Furthermore, to rebuild his hegemonic masculinity, he had learned online shopping. For him, being able to make an online shopping order was an added value to the retired masculinity.

3.3 | Grandmother's cookies: A dutiful son rather than a filial son

Even though my father has conventional expectations on his child's filial piety, he has another understanding, or justification, of his role as a son in his relationship with my grandmother. My grandmother is healthy, except for a slightly elevated glycaemic index. On a different schedule, every morning when we were still in bed, she would get up and make her own breakfast. However, after my father claimed his control over the kitchen, she rarely went into the kitchen. Instead, she would often just grab some cookies for breakfast. However, this action was criticized by my father, since cookies are high in sugar and bad for my grandmother's health. Grandmother became uneasy again, because not only had she lost the kitchen “territory,” but also the autonomy of eating her favorite foods. This caused tension between mother and son.

In Chinese Confucian culture, there has been a controversy on the meaning of filial piety. In many practices, being a filial son is to be obedient to his parents. Still, it is also documented that Confucius explains that “true filial piety is to follow the righteousness, if parents' wills are against the righteousness”⁹. Meanwhile, the Confucian tradition also requires women to play an obedient role when they live with their sons after their husbands die¹⁰. This presents a moral dilemma for both sons and elderly mothers.

My father believed that rather than simply being obedient, he had acted according to righteousness. The righteousness in this claim is built upon the scientific reports circulating during the pandemic warning those with chronic diseases. He claimed, “I do not want to be the filial son only saying sweet words to her, but I am a dutiful son. If she ate sugar and her blood glucose spiked, there would be no way to cure her if she got infected by the pandemic, because there are very few medications she can use.” He justified himself as a dutiful son rather than a filial son.

Still, a more fundamental question on “righteousness” is who should be responsible for one's health and life? The son, or the elderly mother herself? My grandmother had claimed that she preferred a “high quality” life over a long but restrained life. Moreover, albeit too much sugar can be deadly for diabetics, scientific reports have also revealed that being unhappy is bad for the health, both mental and physical.

This cookie tension was finally terminated by my grandmother. She eventually chose to believe that she would be a happy old woman if she had a dutiful son who made life decisions for her. In other words, although she looked forward to an unrestricted life, what she expected more was a life secured by her son. Therefore, although my grandmother did not agree with my father's belief in the value of life, she took my father's suggestion, because she wished to vindicate that her son was responsible for her health; whereupon my father's hegemonic masculinity was reinforced.

4 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article argues that the COVID-19 quarantine established an “internal world”¹¹ (Chen, 2020) for my freshly retired father who had been undergoing a masculinity crisis in helping him build a new hegemonic masculinity through his kitchen work. As stated previously, in his youth, he had done cooking, performing as the “new good man” adding value to the traditional masculine norms for a man. Whereas, in the quarantine period, he does kitchen work by

turning it into a “masculine” job of protecting household safety and health. Appointing himself the “Defense Minister,” he centralized his authoritative management in food planning, food purchasing, food processing and the whole family's food intake. In this process, scientific-knowledge discourse was often adopted to justify and consolidate his caring and protective, (while also rigorous and even domineering) masculinity. Meanwhile, the traditional patriarchal discourse served as the hidden rule when there were objections to implementing the “scientific” plan. Additionally, the newly attained technology skills played as an approach to reconcile himself to his retired masculinity. Upon these practices, he built a new hegemonic masculinity at home which accorded with his ideals.

Moreover, as Connell and Messerschmidt note, women's practices and identities are “central in many of the processes constructing masculinity” (2005, p. 848); my father's new hegemonic masculinity is co-produced, recognized and consolidated by the female family members. My grandmother's compromise in relinquishing the kitchen work territory and consent to my father as a “dutiful but not filial” son, fosters my father's new masculinity to be hegemonic. As for my mother, there was little tension between my father and her in the quarantine period. However, in line with Judith Butler's idea of performativity (2006), my mother strategically performed a feminine role by acting as a supporter and follower of my father's role of “Minister.” By activating his passion and accountability in doing housework and affirming my father's hegemonic masculinity, she created for herself a more personal space (Han, 2020). My response to my father's hegemonic masculinity was flexible and roundabout. While I rebelled against the authoritative practices, I also yearned for personal space without the bother of kitchen work and domestic conflict. Therefore, more often I stood in line with my mother, celebrating my father's endeavor in kitchen work. Owing to my silence when being accused of “ageism” and my father's pride in doing his own online food shopping, his hegemonic masculinity was reinforced. The three women, albeit with different views in life and gender relationships, each penetrated the advantages of building my father's hegemonic masculinity, and also used his practices of hegemonic masculinity to meet their personal life desires and domestic peace (Hennekam & Shymko, 2020).

This article expands upon feminist pandemic writing, documenting an alternative domestic manhood turning kitchen work as a “masculine” job in building new hegemonic masculinity during the quarantine period. It also highlights women's conscious and deliberate performance in fostering men's construction of hegemonic masculinity, for their own values of happiness. Finally, it demonstrates that while age is a sensitive term for retired men, they sometimes use the label of “ageism” as the “weapon of the ‘weak’” to fight for their own good, including upholding their authoritative masculinity. This may offer implication to researchers of intersectionality in studying the “minority” by unfolding the dynamic intersection of the “minority's” “marginal” identity with their gendered “advantages,” rather than the “disadvantages.”

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ORCID

Yuchen Han  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6515-3097>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ My grandmother has lived with us every winter and spring since my grandfather passed away.
- ² China's domestic nation-wide quarantine period was from January 23 to February 9, 2020, in most regions.
- ³ Sabrina Ramet (2002, p. 2) has coined “gender reversal” as informing “any change, whether ‘total’ or partial, in social behavior, work ...mannerisms ...which bring a person closer to the other gender.” In this article, it his refers to the reversal of the social norm that “men control the outside, women control the inside (*nan zhu wai nü zhu nei*).”

- ⁴ Many previous studies on retired men have discussed their failing/successful adjustment to retirement (Pietilä et al., 2020), differences between their expectations and experiences after retirement, the differences between men and women after retirement (Barnes & Parry, 2004), their changing masculinity that accompanies physical aging, and class factors in their adjustment to retirement (Pietilä et al., 2020).
- ⁵ Ward, J. (2007). *Femme Labor and the Production of Trans Masculinity*. Paper presented at Conference on Intimate Labors. University of California, Santa Barbara.
- ⁶ The enrollment ratio was 4.8% for the 1977 cohort. Data from <https://baike.baidu.com/item/77级/1679320?fr=aladdin>
- ⁷ WeChat is the largest social-networking application in China. WeChat Moments is similar to Instagram Stories.
- ⁸ *Fotiaoqiang* (Budda Jumps over the Wall) is a famous Chinese dish with expensive materials consumed as a delicacy.
- ⁹ Originates from "The Classic of Filiality" (*Xiaojing*, also translated as "Classic of Filial Piety") was written during the Former or Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE).
- ¹⁰ Originates from "Three Obedience and Four Virtues" (*SanCongSiDe*).
- ¹¹ A specific sphere which helps individuals build peculiar qualities other than those from normal settings.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Yuchen Han is Lecturer of School of Humanities and Social Science, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, PRC. Her research interests include gender, migration, contemporary China, alternative development, qualitative inquiry, and pedagogies. Email Address: hanyuchen@cuhk.edu.cn

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