

# Gender Fluidity Versus Homophobia: How Young Chinese Male Fans Consume Athletic Bromance

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## Abstract

This article investigates how young Chinese male fans interpret and engage with mediated athletic bromances, drawing from interviews with university students who follow sports games closely. The research uncovers complex dynamics wherein these fans contextually embrace and delegitimise the homoerotic aspects of mediated athletic bromances as they navigate their sports consumption. This phenomenon reflects the multifaceted experiences of young men in contemporary China, where the market and the party-state co-create a tapestry of overlapping, yet conflicting gender expectations. The findings illuminate the intricate relations between consumer culture and nationalist politics crafted in present-day China, as well as their specific manifestations within sports fandom.

## Keywords

bromance, China, heteronormativity, homosociality, masculinity, male fan, sports fandom

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## Introduction

The de-pathologisation of non-heteronormative sexual orientations has transformed depictions of male bonding into a popular theme in global media production (Brook 2015; Lam and Raphael 2022). This trend is also evident in China's sports spectatorship, where fans are observed creating fictional narratives pairing male athletes in imagined romantic relationships to address their desires (Gong 2017). Despite the growing visibility of non-heteronormative representations of bromances, China's orthodox sports fandom remains a terrain of male hegemony (Tsang 2023). Against the rising popularity of queer media content in Chinese society (Tan 2023; Wang and Bao 2023; Zhao 2024), the reception of alternative narratives of athletic bromances amongst male fans, which highlights the negotiation between the diversification of gender identities and the revitalisation of patriarchal doctrines, warrants academic investigation but remains underexplored in Chinese sports fandom studies.

Over the recent four decades, the landscape of China's gender politics has changed drastically as a ramification of broader societal transformations. Following the late-1970s economic reforms, the market has sanctioned significant influence on everyday life, allowing the diversification of gender representations to unfold in the popular cultural sector as a by-product of social liberations driven by economic marketisation and prosperity (Rofel 2007). Yet, in the absence of concurrent political reforms, the government continues to operate under a party-state rubric (Schneider 2018). The current administration, in particular, has further steered policymaking towards stagnating economic reforms and imposing stricter regulations on the private sector to counter social liberations that are beyond its control (Wang and Chen 2023). Amid the policing of gender being executed to bolster the party-state's modern nation-building project (Zhang 2014), non-heteronormative cultural content has become targeted by propaganda apparatuses (Tan 2023). This yields an increased influx of conflicting messages regarding non-heteronormative values disseminated to the public by the state and the market, respectively.

In the context of the interplay between market forces and political interventions, which jointly influence gender dynamics and state politics, this article foregrounds how young Chinese male sports fans consume athletic bromances. The inquiry focuses on the following inquiries: (1) How do male fans interpret athletic bromances in relation to desirable masculinities? (2) How do male fans negotiate their sports consumption through homoerotic imaginaries of athletic bromances? (3) How do male fans hinge on the political climate to navigate their encounter with homoerotic imaginaries of athletic bromances?

## Methodology

The empirical research draws on interviews conducted with 25 sports enthusiasts who regularly watch basketball or football games. These two sports are spotlighted due to their popularity and commercial success in China (Gong 2017; Guo et al. 2023). In

particular, both sports are known for their team-based, single-gender organisation, providing the contextual grounds for the visibility of athletic bromance and, by extension, the feasibility of undertaking the current inquiry through observations of their fandom culture.

Participant recruitment was facilitated by academic staff at three universities located in Chengdu, Shanghai, and Xi'an. The selection of these cities was strategic, balancing accessibility with the goal of obtaining a diverse sample at minimal cost. Shanghai, being China's eastern financial hub, and Chengdu and Xi'an, as regional economic powerhouses in southern and northern inland provinces, always attract students from across the nation, ranging from the most-developed to the least-developed areas. While the qualitative research made no attempt to present overgeneralised findings, this sampling technique enabled us to effectively engage prospective informants from eleven provinces with differing socioeconomic backgrounds, thus, capturing shared characteristics of young Chinese male sports fans nationwide.

The research design adhered to ethical guidelines and obtained approval from the principal author's institutional ethics committee. Prior to the interviews, detailed information regarding the research's purposes and procedures, alongside an option to withdraw, was provided to the informants through both oral communication and an information sheet, to ensure their participation was voluntary. Informants were permitted to partake in the interviews only after indicating their agreement in writing. All informants were aged between 18 and 25 years during the interview period from March to September 2023. Amongst these interviewees, twelve identified themselves as devoted basketball fans, while ten expressed their passion for football. An additional three reported watching both games on a weekly basis. They also regularly partook in social-mediated discussions about professional athletes as an essential part of their recreational pursuits. For details about the informants, please consult [Table 1](#) in the appendix.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Chinese via video calls, with each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. The interview questions encompassed various topics, including three major thematic categories. First, we invited informants to narrate stories about their favourite male athletes and their friendships with other sports professionals. These generic questions aimed to identify general trends in these students' sports consumption and establish rapport to prime more in-depth conversations. We subsequently asked these informants to share their interpretations of the bonds between athletes of the same sex to gain insights into their perceptions of athletic bromances. This was followed by a third set of questions that encouraged these informants to reflect on such athletic bromances in the everyday-life context, prompting them to evaluate women and LGBTQ+ fans' narratives of athletic bromances in relation to traditional gender norms and official discourse.

The remainder of the article proceeds with a retrospective analysis of the historical evolution of bromance, succeeded by a contextualised discussion of China's gender politics and its shaping of sports fandom culture. We thereafter detail our analysis of the interview data and conclude by discussing the implications of the findings.

## Literature Review

### *A Brief History of Bromance*

Bromance, which depicts non-sexual intimacy between straight men, was widely accepted across civilisations. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, Western historical records documented men “posing for photographs in physically intimate ways” and “writing endearing letters to one another” (Robinson et al. 2019: 851). In the US, it was not until the mid-1900s that the increasing social awareness of the LGBTQ+ community, accompanied by a moral panic, led to the policing of public displays of intimacy and affection between men (Kimmel 2011). During the same period, a parallel surge of homophobia was also noted in other major Western countries, such as Australia and European nations (Connell 2020; McCormack 2012). Anderson (2009) defines this phenomenon as homophobia, where fears of being misrecognised as homosexual dictate straight men’s understanding and enactment of masculinity to a notable extent.

Since the 1990s, progressive movements have fostered the social acceptance of gender diversity, delegitimising overt forms of discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community in Western nations (Robinson et al. 2019). This shift reflects the fluidity of gender expressions cultivated in consumer culture, stemming from its promotion of individualism and self-reflexivity (Barber 2016; Nelson, Colledge, and Wallace 2015). It challenges the criticality of homophobia to masculinity, altering how men navigate their everyday lives by turning softened variants to the foreground (Anderson 2009). Although the degrees to which young men participate in same-sex kissing or cuddling vary across major Euro-American societies, the prevailing tendency is that public displays of same-sex affection are no longer considered taboos, nor are they strictly linked to homosexuality or queerness today (Drummond et al. 2015). Catering to such evolving values and tastes, media production has progressively moved away from conventional heterosexual narratives to explore themes of male bonding (Brook 2015). This trend has brought alternative depictions of bromances into mainstream media consumption, challenging assumptions about sexuality based on behavioural traits by blurring the boundary between homosexuality and homosociality (Raphael and Lam 2019).

Notions of bromance have long been an integral aspect of men’s sports participation. Historically, physical exercise was encouraged in male education settings partly as a means to reinforce traditional gender roles, as it helped to cultivate men’s masculine physiques that physically differentiate them from women (Connell 2020). Paradoxically, the gender-segregated organisation of sports, especially team-based games, also created opportunities for men to form close bonds through shared experiences (Robinson and Anderson 2022). As overt homophobia becomes socially unacceptable (Diefendorf and Bridges 2020), straight men face reduced pressure to police their expressions of intimacy and affection with one another, allowing for open repertoires of male bonding, which would otherwise be perceived sexual outside of contemporary Euro-American culture, to emerge in the sporting context (Drummond et al. 2015). This

trend is reflected in how sports professionals and the media collaboratively create narratives around athletic bromances for marketing purposes (Cohan 2013; Magrath 2017; Murray et al. 2016). It sanctions the greater visibility of male bonds with homoerotic undertones in contemporary sports spectatorship, rendering their reception amongst male fans a noteworthy prism to explore the evolution of masculine norms.

### *Conflicting Gender Doctrines Crafted by the State and the Market in Present-day China*

In contrast to their counterparts in post-homohysterical Euro-American societies, contemporary young Chinese male sports fans' perceptions of athletic bromances are shaped by the party-state's nationalistic politics, where homophobia remains a pivotal point of public contention, as well as the market-driven consumer culture, which allows for diverse gender expressions. The homophobic aspect of Chinese society is not inherently rooted in its traditional culture but is rather a metamorphosis of globalisation, influenced by its exposure to Western cultures (Lin and Mac an Ghail 2019). Historically, desirable Chinese masculinities were defined upon a wen-wu dyad model, emphasising the scholarly and martial prowess of an ideal man (Louie 2002). While upholding a rigid system of male hegemony throughout China's ancient history, the wen-wu model did not strictly adhere to heteronormativity in the modern sense, as it never prohibited male nobles' exploration of same-sex intimacy (Chiang 2012).

China's shift towards homophobia marks a departure from its ancient inclusive traditions, coinciding with the nation's modern nation-building process. During this process, the traditional wen-wu model was called into question due to its asymmetric emphasis on wen qualities. As Song (2005) observes, wen characteristics were considered more prestigious in ancient China during peacetime, reflecting Confucian scholars' domination of mainstream narratives. However, with China's modernisation gradually linking wen with femininity and homosexuality, it is considered feudal dross that has eroded men's martial prowess. This misinterpretation, according to Louie (2002), obscures scrutiny of the chauvinistic essence of wen in classical literature, where wen archetypes typically exhibit more competitive dynamics than their wu counterparts (e.g., Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu versus Guan Yu and Zhang Liao). This misunderstanding has paved the way for contemporary narratives surrounding a masculinity crisis to take root within Chinese society (Lin and Mac an Ghail 2019).

Towards the end of the Qing dynasty, revolutionary intellectuals began to problematise traditional Chinese masculinities, drawing connections between the nation's vulnerability to foreign invasions and the perceived inadequacies in the leadership of its statesmen (Schillinger 2016). Subsequent to the late-1970s economic reforms, the government deployed similar propaganda rhetoric, attributing a complex range of societal issues, such as male labour workers' diminishing social status caused by the market-led restructuring of state enterprises that resulted in widespread unemployment, to their perceived lack of masculine qualities (Yang 2010). The discourse of the masculinity crisis effectively shifts responsibility for social welfare from the state to

individuals, signalling a neoliberal paradigm shift in the party-state's governance that has forever reshaped China's gender power dynamics (Rofel 2007).

This neoliberal trajectory of China's public culture is crafted by a combination of market forces and state influence (Zhang 2022), resulting in mixed messages being conveyed to the public. Echoing global popular culture being restructured upon the West's departure from homophobia (Robinson and Anderson 2022), China's evolving fashion trends, derived from the augmented consumer capacity of the urban middle-class population, have led to greater acceptance of softened, metrosexual masculinity amongst certain male groups (Song and Hird 2014). However, this manifestation of masculinity, despite its softer appearance, still aligns with men's privileged access to socioeconomic resources (Song and Hird 2014). In the Chinese context, it is primarily adopted by middle-class men without compromising the longevity of the patriarchal status quo (Chen and Gong 2024). This contrasts sharply with such forms as the model built upon a "little-fresh-meat" aesthetic promoted by the entertainment industry to cater to non-heteronormative consumer preferences.

The phenomenal rise of the "little-fresh-meat" aesthetic has its roots in the penetration of Japanese boys' love (BL) literature across East Asia (Yu and Sui 2023). Further popularised by Korean popular culture, this aesthetic has established a male imaginary, often embodied by youthful, innocent, and physically attractive idols (Song 2022). Adhering to such an aesthetic, China's little-fresh-meat idols have incorporated homoerotic elements into their public personas, although such homoerotic elements have often been disguised as homosociality for broader market reach (Ng and Li 2023). Amid the increasing number of young male idols appropriating the "little-fresh-meat" aesthetic to engage audiences on stage, their repertoires of homoerotic bromances have notably disrupted existing gender asymmetry in China's popular cultural production, trading off male hegemony to appeal to female and LGBTQ+ audiences (Chen 2022; Hu and Wang 2021; Wang and Bao 2023).

Yet, China's market economy operates under the watchful eye of the authorities, who view gender as an area requiring state intervention. While branding itself as a progressive force by highlighting the legacy of its flawed state feminism under Mao's leadership, the party-state's policing of gender has taken a sharp reactionary turn, seeking recourse to traditional Chinese values to marginalise critical scrutiny of gender injustices caused by the market-led economic reforms (Wallis and Shen 2018). In this process, the party-state has targeted LGBTQ+ movements as a hazard to regime stability, considering their potential to cultivate marginalised members of the citizenry's political participation (Liao 2019). This situation has further deteriorated under the current leadership, which has orchestrated ideological campaigns, prescribing a "Wolf-Warrior" masculinity archetype, embodied by a heteronormative, macho male ideal, to bolster China's nationalist politics (Xiang and Wang 2022). Such nationalist politics stems from identity challenges facing the party-state in the wake of market-led economic reforms when the worsening of wealth concentration and social stratification has eroded its public trust (Schneider 2018). Yet, the "Wolf-Warrior" campaign is closely associated with the current administration, which attempts to address the legitimacy

crisis through a masculinised governing doctrine, depicting the nation-state as a powerful, manly figure (Wang and Chen 2023) and the president himself as father of the entire population (Zhang 2022). Informed by the leadership's prioritisation of national security, it exhibits an interconnectedness with China's hardline foreign policy stance, underlining how the party-state seizes the opportunity of intensified geopolitical tensions incited by the global revival of right-wing populism to consolidate its domestic base (Sullivan and Wang 2023).

It is, thus, not surprising to observe an ongoing anti-effeminate propaganda campaign under the current administration (Lai and Liu 2024; Wang and Ge 2023). Since late 2021, many young idols once embracing an aesthetic of soft masculinity have drastically altered their public personas following a fresh wave of crackdown on LGBTQ+ culture (Ng and Li 2023). Building upon a correlation between aversion to softened masculinities and concerns about "national virility" (Song 2022: 70), the anti-effeminate campaign showcases the perpetuation of homophobia in Chinese society beyond the government's nation-building project. Nevertheless, the "little-fresh-meat" aesthetic, as well as its associated homoerotic representations of bromances, continues to attract a sizable group of young female and LGBTQ+ consumers (Lai and Liu 2024; Wang and Ge 2023). Contextualised against the omnipresent residue of such an aesthetic in popular cultural production and its ideological incompatibility with official rhetoric, the reception of homoerotic narratives of bromances in such manosphere as orthodox sports fandom constitutes an intriguing scope to explore China's changing gender dynamics.

### *Sports Fandom Through the Scope of a Gender-State Entanglement*

China's sports infrastructure was initially developed to scaffold the party-state's political agendas (Lu and Fan 2019). The market-led economic reforms have exposed urban middle-class citizens to global sports media, particularly through premium content provided by prominent European football leagues and the National Basketball Association (NBA). Although such consumer trends have never sidelined lingering state interference, they have fostered the development of dynamic, late-modern sports fandom culture in China, where sports nationalism is no longer the sole theme (Gong 2017; Guo et al. 2023).

Through the lens of gender, existing research has explored how athletes and fans jointly construct differing representations and practices of masculinities in the sporting context (Gong 2016; Tsang 2023). Scholarship further illustrates how female and LGBTQ+ spectators' experiences are downgraded as unauthentic in orthodox sports fandom dominated by masculinist discourses (Gong 2017). Yielding insightful observations of gender power dynamics deeply held in sports consumption, this line of inquiry, however, pays limited attention to their intersection with nationalist politics, which constitutes another pivotal pillar of sports fandom culture.

Sponsoring state-led nationalist campaigns, China's media discourse tends to masculinise sports professionals. Long before the recent decades, we have witnessed

elite athletes being dubbed “People’s Hero” and “China’s Glory” to celebrate their gold medal awards at international tournaments (Lu and Fan 2019: 751). In the early 2000s, the phenomenal rise of Liu Xiang, arguably the most successful Chinese track-and-field athlete ever, allowed the state to craft a hyper-masculine ideal that energised nationalist sentiments amongst the masses before his high-flying career ultimately ended in disappointment due to two consecutive withdrawals from the Olympics (Zhang 2014). The symbolism of Liu’s imaginary during his primetime, according to Zhang (2014: 32), is predicated upon his confident, flamboyant persona akin to the Western hegemonic model, vindicating “China’s timely transition to the market economy” on one hand, whilst protesting against Euro-American hegemony beyond the stadium on the other. The latter trajectory has become paramount in the latest development of China’s sports nationalism, amid the leadership shifting towards a hardline approach to geopolitics, which has resulted in the deterioration of Sino-Western relations (Li and Feng 2022).

Considering the tangled web weaved between gender and nationalist politics, the current study examines how young Chinese male fans navigate their sports consumption through the prism of athletic bromance. Accounting for gender power struggles dually energised by popular cultural production and state policymaking, it decodes the manifestation of homophobia in China’s orthodox sports fandom within the wider sociopolitical climate.

## Findings

Interview results reveal that depictions of athletic bromances have evolved into a form of cultural currency, exchanged amongst male sports fans to facilitate their fan identity repertoires. Interestingly, these male fans’ practices are characterised by a level of autocracy, as they simultaneously mobilise nationalist discourse to dismiss homoerotic interpretations of bromances. Our detailed accounts of the findings are presented below, with informants quoted under pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

### *“It is About Providing Emotional Support”: Constructing Bromance as “Authentic” Friendship Upon Self-reflection*

As team sports, basketball and football rely on collective efforts, but media coverage tends to solely highlight partnerships between a handful of star players. These tandems or trinities, commonly known as “duos” or “trios,” are depicted as crucial to team success, thereby, turning the consumption of athletic bromances into part of today’s sports spectatorship.

Researcher: Regarding friendships in the NBA, which pair of players stands out to you the most?



Informant-24: The friendship between Curry and Iguodala caught my attention [...]. At one point, the Nuggets' coach instructed him to do the dirty on Curry to hinder his scoring. Instead, Iguodala tipped Curry off, warning him that "our team might do bad things to you on the court." This incident sparked their friendship [...]. After that season, Iguodala took a pay cut to join the Warriors and became Curry's teammate [...]. Curry even mentioned in an interview that if he could only choose one person to accompany him to a deserted island, it would undoubtedly be Iguodala.

The anecdotes Informant-24 mentioned refer to two all-star NBA players, Stephen Curry and Andre Iguodala, who teamed up for the Golden State Warriors and achieved four championships together. While Curry remains a popular celebrity basketball player, Iguodala, prior to his tenure with the Warriors, served on the Denver Nuggets squad, where he played against them in the playoffs. Informant-24's detailed recounts of the two's stories appear to be the epitome of the mediated nature of sports fans' consumption of athletic bromances. Bourdieu (1993: 41), conceptualises audiences as "consecrating agents" capable of determining the worth of cultural objects in media business. Nevertheless, audiences' particular interest in elite athletes' personal lives is also cultivated by contemporary media culture, where sports news is increasingly being covered in a sensationalised celebrity format (McEnnis 2018). As fans engage with sports beyond match-day coverage, athletes are transformed into media personalities, with stories of their male bonds gaining increased news value in the industry. These athletic bromance stories, in turn, become valuable fandom knowledge, frequently shared amongst fans as they articulate their fan identities. This practice aligns their sports-viewing experience ever more intimately with other subgenres of contemporary fandom culture (Williams 2011).

Notably, informants often perceived athletic bromances as more "authentic" compared to those amongst actors, musicians, and television personalities, believing that the team-based structure of basketball and football fostered unstaged, genuine bonds between players. Their analysis holds a degree of accuracy, as literature suggests that the formation of "men's same-sex friendships" historically relies on "doing things' together and sharing activities," with gender-segregated sports constituting a crucial arena for its social construction (Robinson and Anderson 2022: 35). Interestingly, with the authenticity of athletic bromances being repeatedly highlighted, their perspective also aligns with scholarly debates about male bonding in the fan economy, where perceived genuineness is vital to its market appeal (Lam and Raphael 2022).

Researcher: When discussing close friendships between celebrity athletes [...], we sometimes refer to them as "bromances" [兄弟情]. What are your thoughts on these bromances?

Informant-14: I can perhaps draw from my own experience. In my third year of middle school, we competed against another school [...]. I had a classmate who was very close to me at the time [...]. While we were not athletes, I imagine the closeness we shared is

comparable to that between sports professionals. It is about providing emotional support when someone is struggling [...]. He offered genuine assistance, whether it was during competition or on a personal level.

To validate their perceived authenticity of athletic bromances, informants drew parallels with their own experiences. As seen above, Informant-14 repeatedly referred to the necessity of offering “emotional support” in friendship maintenance. His words signify a paradigm shift, highlighting how young Chinese men’s subjectivity is cultivated by the evolving market economy, leading to their increased engagement in emotional labour in same-sex friendships. This shift represents a departure from previous generations’ restrained approach to social interactions, as traditional norms usually pressurise men into stylised repertoires of “toughness and emotional stoicism” (Way 2011: 46). It underscores the functionality of the sharing of emotions in today’s male bonding, challenging past doctrines that consider the involvement of emotional labour as a defining perimeter distinguishing between women’s and men’s same-sex friendships (Robinson and Anderson 2022).

The informants’ emphasis on the bromances between sports stars, and mundane male bonds inspired by it, as the most “authentic” form of friendship corresponds with their rejection of erotic interpretations of bromances in sports fandom, as will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections of this article.

### *“I Would Object to Pairing Them if They Were Not That Good”: Decoding Heteronormative Bromance Through a Hierarchical System of Male Ideal*

By constantly referencing personal examples of friendships formed through sports participation, these male students tended to interpret the process of male bonding through self-reflection. Their practice demonstrates a key characteristic of late-modern fandom culture, where fan objects typically serve as vessels for cultural meaning-making (Jenkins 2013). Consequently, male sports fans’ self-reflective analysis of athletic bromances becomes intricate with their vision for male bonding beyond the sporting context. In this process, an implicit elite-pairing system surfaced, amid these informants rationalising their perceived vitality of men’s social status in priming male bonding.

Informant-23: Athletes from rival teams can develop [close friendships]. When squads frequently compete, opponents may form a bond because of sharing fellow feelings [惺惺相惜] as well [...]. This occurs because they all play in the league and are the most gifted sportsmen [...]. You come to admire your rivals when they demonstrate exceptional skills during games [...]. This is what we refer to as a fellow feeling.

Informant-23’s analysis of athletic male bonding focuses on the concept of “fellow feelings” shared amongst elite athletes. In the Chinese language, this phrase initially described heterosexual romances. Yet, its modern usage tends to refer to non-sexual

intimacy between men, alluding to equal status between them, as only those involved in some forms of competition are considered capable of developing such feelings. When applied to athletic bromances, the informant's interpretation reiterates an accomplishment-based system of masculinity construction by limiting male bonds recognised in sports fandom to those between elite athletes, who are deemed worthy of being each other's rivals in the professional context.

Another informant further emphasises the elite-pairing pattern by rejecting imaginaries of athletic bromances that deviate from this pattern.

Informant-19: Curry has been paired with numerous players. For instance, he and Thompson are nicknamed the "Splash Brothers" [水花兄弟]. When Durant was on the squad, they were dubbed the "Tsunami Brothers" [海啸兄弟]. These pairings indicate the tacit agreements between top players [...]. It is logical to pair outstanding athletes, but I would object to pairing them if they were not that good.

As depicted above, Informant-19 only validated the bonds between celebrity players, such as Stephen Curry, Kevin Durant, and Klay Thompson, as exemplary athletic bromances in the NBA. Amongst the mentioned athletes, Curry and Thompson are considered a duo for being excellent partners in the guard position. Together with Durant, they are also considered a trio because of their shared excellence in shooting precision. Despite the fact of only playing together on the same squad for 3 years, the referenced athletes captured two NBA trophies as core members of the team, exemplifying their prestige in the profession. This elite-pairing system stems partly from the sports media's disproportional foci on celebrity players (McEnnis 2018). However, the informants' endorsement of such a system is also rooted in their lived experiences of China's neoliberal economic framework, which prioritises men's accomplishments in an increasingly competitive and unequal society, fuelled by sex essentialism (Gong 2016). It intricates with young men's aspirations towards outstanding achievements, frequently alluding to the importance of economic success established as part of contemporary China's social fabric (Liu 2020).

The following exchange best exemplifies the economic dimension of young Chinese male fans' self-reflections on athletic bromances.

Researcher: Why do you believe Cristiano Ronaldo remains a winner despite recent controversies at Manchester United?

Informant-2: He may be past his peak, but his four UEFA Player of the Year awards speak for themselves [...].

Researcher: However, United fans have been quite critical of him.

Informant-2: Haters will always hate, but he is still a multimillionaire earning a hundred million euros a year [...]. "Keyboard warriors" [键盘侠] barely make 3,000.

Cristiano Ronaldo is considered one of the greatest-of-all-time football players and played for Manchester United twice. However, his last season at the club ended in disappointment in November 2022 due to his subpar performance on the pitch and tensions with the manager and supporters. Despite these challenges, as a Ronaldo fan, Informant-2 openly defended his idol. What is intriguing about his commentary is that his administration of the athlete clearly hinges on the athlete's off-field success, pointing towards an underlying association between personal achievement and socioeconomic status in male ideal construction. This reflects a shift towards valuing individual economic success, diverging from the Mao-era emphasis on collective responsibility to the state (Yan 2010). This shift highlights young people's experiences in the wake of the market-led economic reforms, where self-reliance and personal care are promoted as moral virtues, amid neoliberal tenets being incorporated into the state's governance of the population (Wallis and Shen 2018). Amid social stratification worsening over the recent decade, this ethos shift influences China's gender power dynamics, yielding renewed pressure for men to sustain their economic competitiveness being established as part of revived patriarchal expectations. It reveals how the masculinist dimension of Chinese sports fandom culture mirrors changing notions of desirable masculinity being crafted in an increasingly stratified society (Gong 2016).

***“It is Alright to Pair Male Stars for Fun, But it is Wrong to Assume That Straight Men are Gay”: Navigating Bromances with Homoerotic Undertones Through a Heteronormative Lens***

Viewing sports through the lens of athletic bromance, young Chinese male fans are exposed to various imaginaries of male bonding, including those with homoerotic undertones, which are popularised by non-orthodox fans.

Researcher: What are your thoughts on the Kobe-Gasol duo? More broadly, how do you interpret the friendships between top-tier athletes?

Informant-2: I appreciate how the term “CP” is used. CP typically describes romantic relationships. When discussing pairs like James and Wade [...], fans often apply the label, indicating they are on par in terms of basketball skills [...]. Moreover, they are close friends off-court. The public's recognition of such CPs [...] would not happen if they were not genuinely close.

As captured in the above exchange, the referenced basketball superstars include two duos: Kobe Bryant (deceased) and Pau Gasol, as well as LeBron James and Dwyane Wade. During their prime, Bryant and Gasol played together for the Los Angeles Lakers, while James and Wade teamed up for the Miami Heat. Both duos won a total of two NBA Finals trophies, rendering them contenders for the most-dynamic tandems in the league. Interestingly, Informant-2 inadvertently introduced the term “CP” to

describe these two tandems. His lexical choice is indicative of the cross-border impact of non-heteronormative popular culture on orthodox sports fandom.

Originally coined by Japanese boy's love (BL) literature enthusiasts to describe emotional bonds between male characters in homoerotic stories (Song 2022), the notion of CP has gained traction amongst East Asian audiences, as female and LGBTQ+ audiences reappropriate it to navigate discussions of mediated bromances between male television personalities (Hu and Wang 2021). In light of such popular cultural trends, previous literature has explored the consumption of same-sex athletic CPs in China's sports fandom, but its foci are mainly placed upon female and LGBTQ+ fans (Gong 2017). Given the masculinist nature of orthodox sports fandom, Informant-2's positive reception of this BL-derived concept was unexpected. As such, we explored informants' views on the concept in subsequent interviews, revealing insights into young Chinese male sports fans' attitudes towards homoerotic imaginaries of athlete relationships.

As we proceeded with the interviews, we gradually realised that many informants are familiar with the CP concept and its BL origins, but their appropriation of it does not translate to an embrace of non-heteronormativity. On this note, Informant-7's response is exemplary of the common pattern shared amongst young Chinese male sports fans.

Researcher: What is your view on the usage of the word CP amongst sports fans?

Informant-7: My understanding is that the term originally came from fandom culture [饭圈文化]. It is used by women to describe celebrities [...], often the relationships between male and female idols, sometimes between male idols like Wang Yibo and Xiao Zhan in TV shows. I think it is a bit inappropriate to introduce that to sports.

Researcher: Could you expand on that?

Informant-7: [...] We [male fans] also use the word to make fun of each other. Like, we call our best friends "good gay friends" [好基友], but this has nothing to do with being gay [...]. It is alright to pair male stars for fun, but it is wrong to assume that straight men are gay.

Indeed, the CP concept has evolved into a communicative resource within the fandom, with male fans repurposing it to deliver playful narratives of male bonding. Its usage amongst these young men serves to demonstrate their familiarity with "legendary" stories of camaraderie between star athletes. Such a practice exhibits a degree of semblance with changing patterns of homosocial encounters in Euro-American societies, where the displays of same-sex affection and intimacy through kissing and cuddling being once considered homosexual become increasingly prevalent amongst heterosexual young men (Robinson et al. 2019). Notably, what is vernacular about these young Chinese male fans' practice is their endeavour to strip off the sexual connotations of the CP concept, in an attempt to align its usage with heteronormative narratives of male bonding, despite being clearly aware of the queer connotations of the term. This alludes to a backlash against LGBTQ+ culture, as well as a broader exclusion of female consumers, being staged to sideline non-heteronormativity in orthodox sports fandom.

Similar to Informant-7, some informants displayed a surface-level acknowledgment of gender diversities introduced by female and LGBTQ+ fans to sports consumption. However, they consistently prioritised heteronormative interpretations of male bonding, failing to accept gender as a fluid spectrum of socially informed identities and practices (Butler 2004). This reinforces masculinist values in Chinese sports fandom culture, entrenching it as a male-dominant terrain, despite the increased visibility of non-heteronormative aesthetics influenced by external popular culture trends. The appropriation of homoerotic language by male sports fans, coupled with their delegitimisation of non-heteronormative perspectives, represents a subtle manifestation of homophobia specific to the Chinese context. These practices coexist with more aggressive expressions of homophobia, often intertwined with nationalistic sentiments, a topic that will be further explored in the subsequent analysis.

### *“Our Country Needs Manly Guys”: Distinguishing Elite Athletes from “Little Fresh Meats” Through a Nationalist Lens*

In discussions about athletic bromances, such informants as Informant-15 revealed deep-seated homophobic biases, framing their assessments of non-heteronormativity through a superficial self-reflection on their national identity.

Researcher: What is your objection to using CP [for male bonding]?

Informant-15: I suppose it has to do with my upbringing in my homeland. That traditional mindset has deeply influenced me. I struggle to figure out [how] two men can [have romantic feelings] and engage in a [sexual] relationship. This is not just about [applying CP] to top-tier players. I find it instinctively repulsive.

The statement made by Informant-15 contains historical inaccuracies concerning homosexuality, as it fails to recognise that same-sex sexual relationships were socially acceptable in ancient China, especially amongst the nobles (Kang 2009). Despite this factual error, Informant-15 attempts to reconcile with members of the LGBTQ+ community by adopting a tone of self-mockery to distance himself from excessive derogatory commentaries. However, his words, turning his national identity to the forefront of the rhetoric, ultimately reiterate a homophobic thesis, in the form of denying gay men the right to exist and live free from discrimination in his country. By concluding his statement with the emotionally charged word “repulsive,” the informant effectively casts serious doubt on the legitimacy of gay men’s existence in Chinese society. This exemplifies a troubling trend in the current social milieu, where toxic, homophobic sentiments are frequently expressed through a gender-state entanglement.

Though not all informants expressed such overt hostility towards gay men, many harboured nationalistic and homophobic attitudes, which were evident in their opinions on “little fresh meats.”

Researcher: What is your view on little fresh meats [小鲜肉]? In your opinion, are athletes with gentler personalities like Stephen Curry different from them?

Informant-1: They are completely different. Little fresh meats are effeminate! Curry has got a six-pack when he is topless [...]. Little fresh meats are like “Cantonese poached chicken” [白斩鸡].

Researcher: You seem to hate them

Informant-1: Absolutely! [Little fresh meats] are not men [...], yet they are idolised by many young people [...]. I recall the *People’s Daily* criticised them a while back. This trend needs to end.

Informant-1 differentiates between basketball players and male idols of the little-fresh-meat type by contrasting their body physiques. As previously discussed, the term “little fresh meat” refers to a specific cluster of young male celebrities characterised by their attractive facial features, complacent demeanours, and slender physiques (Song 2022). Media portrayals of the bromances between little fresh meats frequently carry homoerotic undertones, which are strategically crafted by entertainment businesses to appeal to female and LGBTQ+ audiences (Wen 2021). The increasing presence of “little-fresh-meat” idols in the media has amplified existing homophobia in mainstream discourse, provoking fears amongst heteronormative members of the public that the masculine traits of young Chinese men are being eroded (Yu and Sui 2023). Notably, Informant-1 justifies public animosity towards these young idols by explicitly citing state media coverage. His remarks underscore the distinct engineering of homophobia within China’s sports fandom, testifying to the significant role official propaganda plays behind the scenes in politicising the public’s homophobia.

Researcher: What is your issue with little fresh meats?

Informant-3: Our birth rate reached an all-time low last year [...]. Our country needs manly guys, but they [little fresh meats] set a poor example for youth.

Researcher: How does this relate to the birth rate [...]?

Informant-3: [...] Little fresh meats set a bad precedent, and adolescents might be swayed as they are not emotionally mature and could be easily misled.

Researcher: Why do you think procreation is particularly important for us? Is not it a personal decision?

Informant-3: It is, but our nation is at a crucial juncture. It is a difficult time, considering the tensions between the US and China [...]. We desire peace, but how can we protect our interests without sufficient manpower for potential conflicts?

Behind public support for the state-led anti-effeminate campaign, the political rationale becomes evident when Informant-3 cites the nation’s low procreation rate to

justify his hostility towards “little-fresh-meat” idols. His expression of extreme homophobia translates into overt discrimination against homosexuality, driven by the perceived threat that homosexuality poses to the party-state’s modern nation-building project.

Certainly, homophobia is not at all a novel phenomenon within China’s popular cultural landscape, but its severity has been significantly exacerbated over the recent decade (Tan 2023). This situation is crafted through a twofold process. On the one hand, the popularity of queer media has exposed the masses to representations of diverse gender identities (Wang and Bao 2023). Reiterating Robinson and Anderson’s (2022) observations of past Euro-American experiences, such exposures sanction greater public awareness of non-heteronormative sexual orientations, thereby, energising the penetration of homophobia in Chinese society, where homophobia remains an axis of its mainstream opinion. On the other hand, the deterioration of the situation for China’s LGBTQ+ community can also be attributed to the leadership’s sifting governing doctrines, which mobilise traditionalist values as an ideological instrument for societal control (Wang and Chen 2023). By portraying LGBTQ+ culture as part of Western liberal-democratic values that are incompatible with official visions for the nation’s future, China has staged a series of crackdowns on LGBTQ+ rights and censorship campaigns against queer media to redress the “overly liberated” popular cultural sector (Bao 2021). With LGBTQ+ rights activists being antagonised in the process, the party-state’s homophobic stance is further fuelled by pragmatic fears, deriving from concerns about their grassroots mobilisations that threaten the political status quo (Liao 2019). While seemingly far-fetched, the informant’s self-voluntary rationalisation of state homophobia highlights the specificities of China’s current political climate. It alludes to the efficacy of the party-state’s long-term nationalist propaganda and “patriotic” education, which has resulted in the younger generation’s acceptance of official grand narratives that align national destiny with individuals’ fate (Schneider 2018).

Researcher: Why do you believe the popularity of little fresh meats could affect the nation’s future?

Informant-25: They are undoubtedly linked. The US orchestrated the promotion of little fresh meats when [this aesthetic] was introduced to Korea in the previous century [...]. This altered [Korean] people’s beauty standards [...]. Generally, a country faces problems if its citizens do not value prowess. This is Korea’s current predicament. Little-fresh-meat idols have weakened its military capabilities.

Certain informants’ expressions of nationalist sentiments even escalate to an extreme degree. As illustrated in the above conversation, this axis manifests as Informant-25’s self-voluntary orchestration of conspiracy theories, attributing the popularisation of the little-fresh-meat aesthetic to US state agents’ plotting, which serves to culturally castrate Korean men insofar as to consolidate its hegemony in East Asia. Such a



commentary is problematic at all levels, as it not only misattributes the origins of the little-fresh-meat aesthetic but also conflates masculinity with national ownership. Beneath such apparent factual inaccuracies and logical fallacies, its underlying anti-US rhetoric underscores a strain of China's nationalist politics fuelled by intensified geopolitical frictions.

In the current global landscape, there has been a notable resurgence of Cold War-like tensions, alongside the revival of right-wing populism in Euro-American nations. This development coincides with China's turn to a hostile diplomatic stance under its current leadership, leading to heightened Sino-Western conflicts on communicative fronts (Sullivan and Wang 2023). As one of the ramifications, the regime has actively participated in orchestrating propaganda against the US-led coalition, leading to the proliferation of grassroots-organised dis/misinformation campaigns targeting the West, which turns US bashing to the forefront of conspiracy theories penetrating the Chinese-language Internet (de Kloet, Lin, and Hu 2021). Given this backdrop, it is unsurprising to observe nationalist sentiments echoed by young Chinese male sports fans who align with pro-regime perspectives. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is these young men's overt projection of nationalistic-tinged homophobic attitudes. The intertwining of gender and state narratives not only reinforces the notion of nation-building as a masculine endeavour (Wang and Chen 2023) but also elucidates the sociopolitical underpinnings of homophobia upon the political infrastructure (Liao 2019), unfolding as how government-orchestrated nationalist propaganda resonates most profoundly with heteronormative men across the board. Such dynamics prime these individuals to express support for the party-state, whilst justifying the marginalisation of female and LGBTQ+ audiences in what they consider "authentic" fandom. This situation necessitates a thorough examination of how nationalist ideologies and masculinist values are infused through the prism of sports consumption.

## Conclusion

Amid the increased presence of female and LGBTQ+ spectators (Gong 2017), the language employed by male sports fans to depict bromances between elite athletes is no longer strictly heteronormative. Interestingly, the findings of this research reveal that many male informants have pragmatically adopted such terms as "CP" to construct playful narratives of male bonding, thereby, turning stories of athletic bromances into a form of fandom knowledge that is frequently mobilised by male fans to articulate their fan identities. However, despite being influenced by the market-driven diversification of gender representations, these young men simultaneously delegitimise homoerotic imaginaries of male bonding, casting doubt on the authenticity of female and LGBTQ+ sports fans. This seemingly contradictory behaviour not only vividly indicates the homophobic essence of China's orthodox sports fandom but also dialectically relates to the homohysterical dimensions of nationalist politics in Chinese society, as evidenced by how these sports fans mobilise the party-state's propaganda rhetoric to justify their dominance in both the sports fandom and the nation-state.

In recent years, there has seen a rise in homoerotic themes in China's popular cultural production, which reflects the increased purchasing power of female and LGBTQ+ consumers in the market economy (Hu and Wang 2021; Ng and Li 2023; Wen 2021). Albeit being driven by commercial interests, such popular cultural trends have potentially laid the groundwork for future progressive momentum by exposing the younger generation to diverse gender representations and practices. However, differing from post-homohysterical Western societies (Anderson 2009), China's current socio-political milieu remains excessively homohysterical. This situation is informed by the party-state's masculinist nation-building endeavours, wherein the official rhetoric under the current administration has effectively legitimised homophobia to bolster heteronormative men's quests for their "divine" hegemony within the patriarchal socioeconomic structure. Against this backdrop, young Chinese men's worldviews are very much reshaped by conflicting gender values propagated by both the market and the state, resulting in their creative engagement with and paradoxical rejection of alternative imaginaries of male bonding being simultaneously observed in sports fandom. As demonstrated in the current case study, sports consumption has emerged as a surrogate arena for such a gender-state entanglement to specially play out in the Chinese context, enabling male sports enthusiasts to achieve a twofold justification for their masculinist goals and nationalist aspirations.

Resonating with an emerging body of literature (Ng and Li 2023; Song 2022), this study contributes to a critical examination of the nuanced dynamics between gender and state politics in Chinese popular culture and their manifestations in orthodox sports fandom. By focusing on the homohysterical dimension of young male fans' sports consumption, it explores the socioeconomic and political co-construction of male hegemony in China's societal processes. This research underscores a much-needed trajectory of intellectual intervention, advocating a comprehensive examination of gender and political power struggles through the scope of everyday life.

## Appendix

**Table I.** A Summary of the Informants.

Codename	Age	Sports	Place of Origin
Informant-1	18	Basketball	Jiangsu
Informant-2	25	Football	Heilongjiang/Shanghai
Informant-3	22	Football	Shanghai
Informant-4	19	Football	Henan
Informant-5	22	Both	Henan
Informant-6	21	Basketball	Zhejiang/Shanghai

(continued)

**Table I.** (continued)

Codename	Age	Sports	Place of Origin
Informant-7	20	Football	Xinjiang
Informant-8	20	Basketball	Sichuan
Informant-9	19	Basketball	Sichuan
Informant-10	18	Basketball	Sichuan
Informant-11	19	Both	Sichuan
Informant-12	21	Football	Shaanxi
Informant-13	19	Basketball	Shaanxi
Informant-14	19	Football	Shaanxi
Informant-15	22	Basketball	Shaanxi
Informant-16	22	Football	Shaanxi
Informant-17	22	Football	Shaanxi
Informant-18	22	Both	Shanxi
Informant-19	21	Basketball	Henan
Informant-20	20	Basketball	Shaanxi
Informant-21	19	Basketball	Shaanxi
Informant-22	22	Basketball	Shandong
Informant-23	22	Football	Shandong
Informant-24	23	Basketball	Jiangxi
Informant-25	23	Football	Shandong

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