

# Homohysteric engagement and male bonding: Male Chinese sports fans and athletic bromances

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## Abstract

Based on interviews with male college students who watch sports games on a regular basis, this research examines how young Chinese men consume sports games through the lens of mediated bromance. The analysis foregrounds a seemingly paradoxical phenomenon, where male sports fans contextually appropriate and delegitimise the homoerotic undertone of mediated athletic bromances to navigate their sports consumption. This phenomenon is indicative of young people's everyday experiences in post-reform Chinese society, where the market economy and the paternal state simultaneously craft conflating gender norms and values. The findings shed light on the dialectical relations between consumerism and nationalism in China's post-socialist gender politics and their manifestations in the context of its orthodox sports fandom culture.

**Keywords:** bromance, China, heteronormativity, homosociality, masculinity, slash fandom, sports fandom

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The contemporary de-pathologisation of homosexuality has increased the visibility of non-heteronormative gender norms, turning mediated representations of bromance into a trending genre in China's popular cultural production (Hu and Wang, 2021). Mirroring this broader trend, the acceptance of mediated bromance is manifest in China's sports fandom, where fans self-identifying as heterosexual women and members of the LGBTQ+ community create slash imaginations, which juxtapose elite male athletes in imagined romantic relationships, to cater to their tastes and preferences (Gong, 2017). Yet, this popular cultural trend has not overturned the masculinist nature of orthodox sports culture, where hegemonic masculine norms and male dominance remain entrenched (Tsang, 2023). Contextualised against the increased visibility of non-heteronormative content in contemporary popular cultural production (Tan et al., 2022; Wang and Bao, 2023), homosociality and its dynamic intersection with a homoerotic imaginary of mediated bromance yield an often understudied dimension of the power matrix in orthodox sports fandom, concerning the constant tension and reconciliation between the masculinist vision of heteronormative men and the diversification of gender identities in the post-reform era.

Research into the interactions of young Chinese men with mediated bromances in the sporting context is derived from interviews with male Chinese college students, who self-identify as sports fans and watch football or basketball games regularly. The evidence is that imaginaries of athletic bromance with a homoerotic undertone have now been transformed into a form of semiotic resource, which are communicated between male sports fans, not only to facilitate identity repertoires within fandom but also to navigate their understanding of masculinity and male-male intimacy beyond the sporting context. However, these male fans' practices are implicated with a degree of autocracy, manifesting as them simultaneously delegitimising heterosexual women's consumption of such imaginaries. This seemingly paradoxical phenomenon is contingent on China's post-socialist gender politics, where the popular cultural sector promotes a degree of gender diversities on one hand (Sun and Han, 2020), and the state's official propaganda drives the revival of heteronormative values on the other (Liao, 2023). This phenomenon highlights the sociopolitical processes in post-reform China, where both the market economy and the state play a pivotal role in crafting gender norms.

### **A brief history of bromance**

Bromance, capturing non-sexual intimacies between heterosexual men, was once widely accepted across civilisations. As late as the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Western historical archives still documented how men 'posed for photographs in physically intimate ways' and 'wrote endearing letters to one another' (Robinson et al., 2019: 851). High-profile cases included former US president Abraham Lincoln, who shared a bed with a close male friend for a total of four years (Tripp, 2005), marking the vitality of male-male intimacy of his time. It was not until 'the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the 1970s and peaking in the 1980s,' during which the growing visibility of the LGBTQ+ community, alongside its associated moral panic, encouraged the policing of public displays of physical intimacy and emotional affection between men (Robinson, White, and Anderson, 2019: 851). Defined by Stefan Robinson and Eric Anderson

(2022) as homophobia, such policing of male bonding showcases how concerns over being homosexualised drive heterosexual men's everyday practices.

Amid progressive politics gaining momentum since the 1990s (Peng et al., 2024), an increased recognition of gender inclusivity has gradually delegitimised overt homophobia across Euro-American societies (Robinson et al., 2019). This social ethos shift underscores the fluidity of gender and sexuality in the late-modern period, during which one's self-reflexive capacity is amplified by a consumerist culture that promotes an individualistic lifestyle (Giddens, 1991). Against this backdrop, multiple masculinity archetypes are crafted by the media, challenging the once-monopolistic status of the hegemonic model in defining desirable manhood (Connell, 2005). Alternative representations, such as the metrosexual type, embodied by wealthy urban men dedicated to the daily management of physical appearance, have thus gained currency (Hall, 2015; Shugart, 2008). Although the prime time of metrosexual masculinity may have faded, its markers remain in the consumer market, paving the way for a post-homophobic era of popular cultural production to arrive (Erlichman and Pluretti, 2023).

Today, increasingly more films and television dramas, which drift away from conventional foci on heterosexual romantic relationships, are produced across genres. Centring around bromance stories, such popular cultural products highlight the notion of intimacy, rather than competition, offering alternative narratives of the relationships between men (Brook, 2015; Deangelis, 2014). In light of this post-homophobic trajectory, male celebrities have also begun to exploit staged bromance repertoires, repackaging their public-facing personas to engage younger-generation audiences with differing consumer preferences and tastes (Raphael and Lam, 2019). This brings mediated bromances to the forefront of 'mainstream' popular cultural consumption, helping to 'transition people's mindsets from assuming homosexuality based on certain traits' by blurring the boundary between homosociality and homosexuality (Lam and Raphael, 2022: 28).

### **Conflating messages from the market and the state**

Different from that in the post-homophobic Western consumer market, male Chinese sports fans' consumption of mediated athletic bromances is contextually reshaped by China's post-socialist gender politics, where a homophobic axis remains entrenched. It is worth noting that such homophobia is very much a more contemporary construct, rather than deeply held in earlier established Chinese culture. According to Kam Louie (2002), China's historical archives are largely anchored on the storytelling of male figures' heroic deeds, from which its indigenous *wen-wu* masculinity was derived. The archetypes of *wen-wu* masculinity were typically embodied by civil ministers and military generals, accomplished both culturally [*wen*] and militarily [*wu*], underscoring the salience of civilised acts and strong physiques in defining conventional Chinese manhood (Louie, 2002). While offering the conceptual grounds for male chauvinism, such *wen-wu* masculinity was, however, never entirely heteronormative, as keeping male favourites was once a widely shared practice amongst nobles (Chiang, 2012).

Diverging from ancient inclusive conventions, the rise of homophobia in contemporary China aligns with the nation's modernisation process, during which indigenous *wen-wu* masculinity is problematised, as a result of its asymmetric emphasis on cultural achievements [*wen*]. As Geng Song (2005) notes, cultural achievements were consistently held more prestigious in ancient China outside of war times, reflecting civil ministers' monopoly of mainstream narratives. *Wen*, often misinterpreted as feminine, has been implicitly associated with homosexuality, which is perceived to have undermined the masculine qualities of Chinese men. Such a misinterpretation marginalises critical scrutiny of the chauvinist essence of *wen* in classic literature, where *wen* archetypes, rather than their *wu* counterparts, are more likely to share competitive relationships (Louie, 2002). This is tellingly reflected in the history novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, where a substantial proportion of its plot revolves around the conflicts and animosities between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu, who both belong to the *wen* archetype, with the former serving as the prime minister of one regime and the latter as a general of another distinguished for his cultural attainments. In contrast, fellow feelings are more likely to be shared between generals of the *wu* archetype, such as Guan Yu and Zhang Liao who are generals serving in two separate regimes, despite their commitment to different masters on the battlefields.

In the process of China's modern nation-building, masculinity-crisis discourses are built upon the 'feminine' misinterpretation of *wen* (Yang, 2010). As early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, pioneer revolutionists started calling conventional Chinese manhood into question, reflecting a perceived correlation between foreign military invasions and its statesmen's inability to offer strong leadership (Schillinger, 2016). In the wake of the post-1970s economic reforms, similar discourses were also prescribed by the Communist Party of China's [CCP] propaganda campaigns to diagnose issues facing the nation, caused by mass unemployment after the termination of tenured positions at state-owned enterprises that weakened male workers' dominance both in the home and wider socioeconomic structures (Sun, 2023; Yang, 2010). Such masculinity-crisis discourses shift the responsibility for citizens' wellbeing away from the government onto individual members of the public, marking the neoliberal turn in China's social ethos in its post-socialist transition (Rofel, 2007; Wallis, 2018).

The neoliberal shift in China's gender politics is driven by a twofold process reshaped by both the market economy and the state (Zhang, 2022), leading to conflating messages being received by people in general. In terms of market-driven factors, the rise of middle-class urbanites' consumer power has led to softened masculinities being accepted by fractions of the male population, mirroring the metrosexual trend across the global market (Song and Hird, 2014). It should be noted that metrosexual masculinity, albeit with a softened veneer, still relies on 'upward social mobility through consumption,' which is intertwined with men's advantageous statuses within the patriarchal socioeconomic structure (Song and Lee, 2012: 364). The consumption of metrosexual masculinity is mainly practised by middle-class men, posing no substantial threats to their subjectivity and hegemony in gender power relations. It is dramatically different from other variants of softened masculinities, such as the model embodied by young idols with a 'little-fresh-meat' label, who are promoted by the consumer

market to cater to heterosexual women and LGBTQ+ audiences' tastes and preferences (Li, 2020).

The origin of 'little fresh meat' can be traced back to the Japanese boys' love [BL] youth culture (Yu and Sui, 2023). Converging with the K-pop trend, it has made a particular type of male ideal, characterised by possessing 'a young, healthy, and desirable body,' a trending consumer good across the East Asian region (Song, 2022: 70). In adapting to this trend, China's male young idols have started utilising male bonding with a homoerotic undertone to build their audience-facing personas, although their homoeroticism is often disguised as homosociality to reach a national audience (Hu and Wang, 2021; Ng and Li, 2023). Such marketing strategies have destabilised entrenched gender power relations in China's popular cultural production, legitimising homoerotic imaginaries of bromance that mainly speak of heterosexual women and certain LGBTQ+ audiences' desires, amid young male idols navigating staged male bonding to engage consumers (Chen et al., 2023; Hu and Wang, 2021; Zhao, 2024).

Operating within a party-state polity, China's market economy has always been dancing with the yoke of state politics. While gaining traction amongst non-heteronormative audiences, the rise of 'little fresh meats,' along with the homoerotic imaginaries of bromance associated with them, has been now targeted by official censorship (Lai and Liu, 2024; Song, 2022; Wang and Ge, 2022). Many 'little-fresh-meat'-labelled idols have even dramatically changed their public-facing personas after the government launched a fresh wave of anti-effeminate campaigns in late 2021 (Ng and Li, 2023). Behind the scenes, it is the state's promotion of a Wolf-Warrior type of masculinity, embodied by heteronormative, macho archetypes, to bolster its nationalist propaganda (Xiang and Wang, 2022). The nationalist propaganda is conditioned upon the CCP's post-reform identity crises, as its departure from Mao's Communist manifesto and the worsening of social stratification have undermined the legitimacy of the party-state polity (Schneider, 2018). It is also specific to the current administration's interventionist foreign policy, together with the revival of ring-wing populism in Euro-American nations, which has amplified Sino-foreign geopolitical frictions, energising nationalist sentiments to further build up in Chinese society at a grassroots level (Sullivan and Wang, 2023).

As a manifestation of the gendered nature of the nation-state, the Wolf-Warrior-bolstered nationalist propaganda tellingly reveals how China's state politics remain entangled with masculinist hopes and narratives (Huang, 2023; Wang and Chen, 2023). Playing out in the ongoing anti-effeminate campaign, it marks the relevance of homophobia in the Chinese context, where hostility towards softened masculinities is often associated with the 'anxiety over national virility,' which repeatedly appears in official and popular discourses (Song, 2022: 70). However, as part of a nationwide popular cultural phenomenon, 'little-fresh-meat' aesthetics have left their marks in China's popular cultural texts and continued to shape the younger generation's consumer preferences, especially that amongst women and members of the LGBTQ+ community (Lai and Liu, 2024; Wang and Ge, 2022). This process fosters a unique social milieu, enabling homophobia, homosociality, as well as homoerotic imaginaries of bromance, to weave a tangled web in Chinese people's everyday experience.

## **The sporting context**

To contextualise male Chinese sports fans' consumption of mediated athletic bromances, it is also necessary to account for the specifics of sports spectatorship. Bromances constitute a long-existing dimension of men's sports participation. In general, sports participation is encouraged in men's education (Gottzen and Kremer-Sadlik, 2012), in part, as a metamorphosis of homophobia, as it promotes physically intense activities to build up strong physiques, which differentiate men from women to alienate the former from feminine qualities (Connell, 2005). Yet, the gender-binary organisation of sports participation simultaneously offers opportunities for men to develop intimacy with peers of the same sex through constantly playing alongside each other (Robinson et al., 2019). Amid overt homophobia being increasingly problematised in mainstream Euro-American consumer culture, heterosexual men are left with limited incentives to police the display of such male-male intimacy, allowing repertoires of bromance to once again prevail in sports (Robinson and Anderson, 2022). In professional games, the revival of bromance is evident in how elite male athletes and their fans co-create stories of male-male intimacy for mediated spectatorship (Cohan, 2013).

Initially, the sporting infrastructure in China was established primarily to scaffold the state's political agenda (Lu and Fan, 2019). Aspects of state-led sports nationalism remain vital today (Guo et al., 2023). However, the post-1970s economic reforms have exposed members of the citizenry, especially a sizeable group of the urban middle-class population, to Western consumer experiences (Goodman, 2014: 58). As a result, their sports consumption has been shaped as a product of globalisation, often manifesting as fans' deterritorialised spectatorship, primarily based on high-quality media content offered by the National Basketball Association [NBA] and major European football leagues (Zhou et al., 2017). This allows dynamic, late-modern sports fandom culture to develop in society at a grassroots level (Gong, 2017).

Through the prism of gender, existing scholarship has examined how male athletes and fans co-construct desirable masculinities through sports communication (Gong, 2016; Tsang, 2023). This research trajectory is further supported by studies exploring how China's orthodox sports fandom is entrenched as a masculinist terrain (Xu et al., 2021). Women and members of the LGBTQ+ community's experiences have been continuously marginalised in such masculinist terrain, despite their participation, which has simultaneously contributed to the visibility of non-heteronormative representations and practices (Gong, 2017).

## **Interviews with male sports fans**

Interviews were undertaken with 25 male college students, who self-identified as loyal sports fans, who watch and play sports games on a regular basis. Academic staff members at three Chinese universities located in Chengdu, Shanghai, and Xi'an respectively, helped recruit participants from various family and socioeconomic backgrounds. These participants, between

the ages of 18 and 25, regularly watch football or basketball games and engage in social-mediated discussions about elite athletes. Ethical guidelines were followed, and the research design was approved by the ethics committee of the lead author's employer before research was conducted.

Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with detailed information about the research's purpose and procedure, including an exit option, through both oral communication and a participant information leaflet, to ensure their participation was voluntary. Participants were permitted to attend the interviews only after signing a consent form to indicate their agreement. The interviews were held via video calls in the Chinese language. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes in length, with students being asked to comment on a variety of topics in a semi-structured pattern. Questions asked ranged from their favourite male athletes, their opinions on their friendships with other athletes of the same sex, to their views on women and LGBTQ+ fans' imaginaries of such friendships. These participants were given pseudonyms when cited in the following analysis.

All the interviewees, who self-identify as sports enthusiasts, consider watching games an important way to spend their leisure time. Both football and basketball fans tend to watch their favourite teams' games on a weekly basis during sports seasons and follow sports news on social media to stay connected.

#### *From desirable male-male intimacies to ideal manhood: Constructing 'authentic' bromance*

Unlike many other types of athletic activity, football and basketball are team sports that require collective partnership. Talented players within a team are typically portrayed as a 'duo' or 'trio,' who are central to the competitiveness of the squad. This places the relationships between them under the media spotlight, turning the consumption of mediated athletic bromances into a notable dimension of contemporary spectatorship.

Interviewer: Talking about friendships in the NBA league, which pair [of athletes] do you like the most?

S24: The friendship between Curry and Iguodala left me with the strongest impression [...]. Back then, the Nuggets coach asked him to do the dirty on Curry to stop him from scoring. Instead of doing so, he warned Curry about it, telling him that 'our players might do bad things to you on the court.' After that incident, they became close friends [...]. By the end of the season, Iguodala accepted a lower-priced contract to join the Warriors and became Curry's teammate [...]. Curry even said in an interview without hesitation that he would bring Iguodala to a desert island if he got to choose only one person.

Being asked about male bonding within the NBA league, S24 refers to anecdotes shared by top basketball players themselves at televised media interviews. Indeed, contemporary audiences often emerge as 'consecrating agents' in the media industry (Bourdieu, 1993: 41), who have the bargaining power to 'define cultural objects as worthy of attention' (Williams, 2011: 218). Yet,

their particular interest in elite athletes' personal lives is also simultaneously engineered by the sports media's sensationalisation, where games are increasingly being covered in the same fashion as celebrity news (McEnnis, 2018). Amid fans actively consuming sports information beyond match-day events, elite athletes are transformed into television personalities, rendering their bromance stories newsworthy in the media business. Informed by the media's agenda-setting effect, athletic bromance stories, thus, become a valuable set of fandom knowledge, which is typically communicated between fans as they performatively enact fan identities, aligning their sports spectatorship ever more intimately with other subgenres of the broader fandom culture (Williams, 2011).

Interestingly, the participants often considered athletic bromances as a more 'authentic' version of male-male intimacy, compared with that between popular cultural celebrities. Acknowledging the mediated nature of athletic bromance, these male sports fans believed that the group-based organisation of team sports fosters tacit agreements among teammates, which facilitate the establishment of a more 'genuine,' unstaged version of male-media intimacy. Such an interpretation echoes a cross-genre thesis of fandom debates over male bonding, where its value for consumption relies on fans' acknowledgement of authenticity (Raphael and Lam, 2019).

Interviewer: Speaking of the intimate friendships between star players [...], we sometimes refer to them as 'bromances'. Would you mind letting me know what you make of such bromances?

S14: I can perhaps use my personal experience to explain. When I was in third grade at my junior high, we played a match against another junior high school [...]. Back then, I had a classmate who was very close to me [...]. He not only helped me with my studies but also coached me in training sessions [...]. We are not real athletes, but I imagine the intimacy between us is probably similar to that between athletes. It is about encouraging each other when one is in need [...]. He would offer you very kind help, no matter on the pitch or at an emotional level.

To establish the perceived authenticity of mediated athletic bromance, many participants voluntarily refer to their everyday experiences. Highlighting real-life examples of friendship development through their in-person sports participation, these male students voluntarily decode male bonding in a self-reflexive fashion. By repeatedly referring to the phrase 'emotional support,' S14, in particular, advocates that male-male intimacies involve an emotionally expressive level of communication between friends of the same sex. His interpretation is indicative of a late-modern paradigm shift in China's post-socialist transition. It showcases the cultivation of young Chinese men's neoliberal subjectivity in the restructured market economy, enabling them to subtly depart from their previous generations' more self-constraint approach to social interactions (Liu, 2020). This paradigm shift echoes scholarly observations of the necessity of an emotional level of communication in male bonding, although men's ability to deliver such affective labour remains constrained by patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, which pressurise them into displaying 'toughness and emotional stoicism' across social occasions (Way, 2011: 46). This self-reflexive process, thus, reiterates a



defining feature of contemporary fandom culture, where fan objects are reconstructed as a vessel of cultural meanings that feeds into fans' contemplation over their personal situations (Jenkins, 2006). In this process, male sports fans' understanding of mediated athletic bromance becomes entangled with their aspiration to ideal male-male intimacies, alluding to their vision of desirable social interactions with other men beyond a limited sporting context.

*Heteronormative male bonding with a hierarchical order: Only top stars deserve 'fellow feelings'*

Interestingly, male Chinese college students' self-reflexive interpretation of male bonding involves an implicit hierarchical order, evident in their repeated references to the concept of 'fellow feeling' when explaining the rationale behind athletic bromance development.

S23: Players from different teams could make [close friends]. When two teams often play against each other, rivals can be united by fellow feelings too [...]. This is because they all play in the NBA and are the most talented players [...]. You will learn to appreciate your opponents if they are able to perform extremely impressive skills on the court [...]. This is called a fellow feeling.

S23's analysis of athletic bromance development centres on the perceived 'fellow feelings' shared between top sports professionals. In Chinese, the phrase, fellow feeling, was originally used in classic literature to portray heterosexual romance (Wang, 2016). Amid the evolution of the language, the phrase is now typically used in the context of male-male intimacy, with contemporary lexical usage implicitly entailing a hierarchical order, as only two men, who share more or less equal status and are involved in some forms of competition, are considered to be capable of developing such feelings. Being reappropriated in his imaginaries of athletic bromance, S23's answer has evidently reiterated the hierarchical order, amid he repeatedly refer to 'fellow feelings' as the conceptual basis to limit the opportunity of developing fan-recognised male bonding to two elite athletes, who are worthy of being each other's opponents in terms of their sports talents and achievements. The unsaid hierarchy is further elaborated by S19, whose commentaries explicitly raise an objection to other imaginaries of athletic bromance that do not fulfil an elite-pairing pattern.

S19: Curry has formed pairs with many people. Like, Curry and Thompson are called the 'Splash Brothers'. When Durant was in the team, they were called 'Tsunami Brothers'. Such pairing reflects the tacit agreements between two top players [...]. It makes sense to me if you pair two excellent players together. I would disagree with pairing him with [an excellent player], if he were that kind [of athlete] who usually plays poorly in games. Sorry, [I do not mean to] disagree. I mean, I do not understand why people would do so.

It is evident that the elite-pairing pattern is first and foremost a result of the sports media's agenda-setting, as its coverage often disproportionally devotes attention to 'star' players. Yet, male fans' acceptance of the pattern is not entirely non-reflexive, as evident in these male students' answers that reject the legitimacy of pairing non-elite athletes in sports communication. The reiteration of the hierarchical order points towards a masculinist thesis

embedded in young Chinese men's sports consumption. Indeed, elite athletes are mostly idolised as a result of their athletic achievements, but fans' idolisation of them simultaneously qualifies them as role models beyond the sporting context. Such an idolisation is often entangled with these young men's aspirations to desirable masculinities, which often allude to the gravity of economic successes in China's restructured market economy.

Interviewer: What makes you think Cristiano Ronaldo is still a winner after all the drama at Manchester United?

S2: He has probably passed his prime time, but his four UEFA Player of the Year trophies would not lie [...].

R: But United fans criticise him a lot.

S2: Haters always hate him, but he is still a multimillionaire making a hundred million euros a year [...]. Keyboard warriors only make 3,000 [CNY].

In his comments about Cristiano Ronaldo, S2 does not shy away from admiration for the elite athlete's successes outside of the stadium. In particular, he dismisses social media critics' negative commentaries about the 'greatest of all time' footballer by highlighting the figures of the former's annual incomes in contrast to those of the latter. His responses have established a fundamental association between personal achievements and socioeconomic status. This is illustrative of the shifting foci upon individual successes in economic terms in the post-reform era, departing drastically from the emphasis on one's collective responsibility for the nation-state during Mao's tenure (Yan, 2010). The ethos shift behind the scenes highlights young people's present everyday-life experiences reshaped by the restructured market economy, where self-entrepreneurship and self-care are promoted as moral probity in people's everyday lives (Wallis and Shen, 2018). Conditioned upon intensified social stratification, this ethos shift plays into China's post-socialist gender politics, manifesting as a resumed call for male competitiveness in economic terms, due to the unequal distribution of financial responsibilities in the home under the patriarchal status quo (Liu, 2019). It uncovers the sociocultural implications of the CCP's economic reforms, underscoring how the masculinist axis of China's orthodox sports fandom is intimately linked to the construction of desirable masculinities at a time of heightened social stratification (Song and Hird, 2014).

*A contextualised assessment of the homoerotic imaginaries of bromance: Appropriating homoerotic lexical choices for heteronormative purposes*

Consuming sports games through the scope of athletic bromance, fans are inevitably exposed to differing imaginaries co-created by the media and fellow members of the fandom community, including those entailing a homoerotic undertone, which are mainly popular with heterosexual women and certain LGBTQ+ audiences.

Interviewer: What do you think of the Kobe-Gasol duo? I mean, how do you understand the friendships between top players?

S2: I kind of like the way in which the word 'CP' is used. CP is often used to describe romantic relationships. Talking about examples like James/Wade and Curry/Thompson,

the public give them the CP label, meaning that they are equals at a basketball-skill level. I help you, and you help me, so that we can create a successful team together. In addition to that, they are also best friends in their daily lives. This makes them CPs that are recognised by the public [...]. If they were not best friends, the public would not give them such a label. Personally speaking, I actually quite like people saying two celebrity players can make a CP. It is a recognition of both their bromance and their accomplishments.

CP is the abbreviation of coupling, a term originally invented by female readers of Japanese boy's love [BL] literature to describe the relationships between male characters, who are connected through emotional attachments instead of competition (Song, 2022). Amid the widespread spread of Japanese BL culture across the East Asian region, the term has become accepted by Chinese popular cultural consumers, allowing them to narrate homoerotic imaginaries of bromances between male celebrities (Zhang, 2016). Considering the masculinist axis of China's orthodox sports fandom, S2's enthusiasm about the BL-originated term was somewhat surprising. After that interview participants were invited to share their opinions about athletic CPs, rendering the collection of rich data that are illustrative of these male sports fans' sentiments towards the imaginaries of athletic bromance organised under the homoerotic banner. Repeating the same questions throughout interviews, it soon became clear that some male sports fans' acceptance of the term is not at all equivalent to the appreciation of heterosexual women and members of the LGBTQ+ community's participation in sports consumption.

Almost all participants came across the CP rhetoric prior to the current research, with most of them being aware of the BL origin of the term. Indeed, previous scholarship suggests that athletic CPs are also consumed in sports fandom, but the consumption is often led by heterosexual women or members of the LGBTQ+ community (Gong, 2017). Yet, such imaginaries of elite athletic male bonding have evidently transformed themselves into a symbolic communicative resource in orthodox sports fandom, where male fans have reappropriated them to recognise idealised male-male intimacies. The way in which the term is communicated between male fans entails a performative dimension, enabling them to enact fan identities by means of showcasing their familiarities with 'legendary' bromance stories between star players.

However, most participants did not show the same level of enthusiasm about mediated athletic CPs as S2. In fact, some of the participants even raised objections to the application of the CP rhetoric to male athletes, although they showed a relatively higher degree of tolerance towards their male peers' use of the term.

Interviewer: What do you think about sports fans' use of the term CP?

S7: My understanding is that the term originally came from fandom culture. It is used by women to describe celebrities [...], often the relationships between female and male celebrities, sometimes between male idols like Wang Yibo and Xiao Zhan in TV shows. I think it is a bit inappropriate to introduce that to sport [...]. I would take a fair-minded

approach [...]. I would not use it myself, but I have no problem with other people using it.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate a bit?

S7: [...] We [male fans] also use the word to make fun of each other. Like, we call our best friends 'good gay friends', but this has nothing to do with being gay [...]. It is alright to couple [CP] men for fun, but it would be wrong to assume straight men can be gay.

To a certain extent, S7's words reflect a stylised pattern of male fans' engagement with homoerotic imaginaries of athletic bromance. While appreciating the fact of the term being a female audiences' invention, male sports fans tend to consider CP as part of the lexical choices that are made available to them to generate playful narratives. In their usage, the homoerotic undertone of the CP rhetoric is acknowledged, but its sexualised connotation is hollowed out to align itself with a strictly heteronormative interpretation of male bonding. Categorically defining alternative, sexualised interpretations as 'misunderstandings,' the participant proclaimed his tolerance towards the term, only to distance himself from explicit insults to fans of other gender groups. Such actions did not conceal his condescending posture, effectively questioning the authenticity of non-heteronormative fans' participation in sports consumption.

Some participants followed S7 in appearing to show a higher degree of 'tolerance' towards the diversification of gender norms introduced to sports consumption by non-heteronormative fans. Yet, common to all, these male fans considered their heteronormative interpretation of male bonding as more legitimate than others, failing to recognise the fluidity of gender as an overarching range of socially conditioned identities and practices (Butler, 2006). A masculinist axis, thus, once again prevails in China's orthodox sports fandom as these male Chinese fans co-constructed it as a heteronormative terrain, where male hegemony remains entrenched, despite the increased visibility of non-heteronormative aesthetics therein informed by wider popular cultural trends (Meng and Huang, 2017; Wang and Bao, 2023).

The delegitimisation by male sports fans of peers' engagement with male bonding, along with their reinterpretation and appropriation of homoerotic lexical expressions, constitute covert forms of homophobia. These practices are perpetuated by other participants who express overt and explicit hatred of homosexuality, closely intertwined with their nationalistic sentiments.

*An entanglement between homophobia and nationalism: 'We need real men for this country'*

Seizing the opportunity to comment on athletic CPs, S15, out of the blue, admitted himself to being biased against gay men. Rationalising his bias as a result of his loyalty to Chinese culture, the participant's self-confession offers a nation-specific remark on the homophobic sentiments in China's orthodox sports fandom culture.

Interviewer: Why do you hate using CP to describe [athletic bromances]?

S15: This is perhaps because I grew up in my home country. It is that kind of 'feudal thinking' that has left a strong mark on me. I do not understand [how] a man can [love]

another man, and they can be involved in a relationship beyond the friend zone. This is not just about [using CP] to describe star players. I am naturally disgusted.

S15's claim-making involves a factual error, as he wrongly attributes the roots of contemporary homophobia to China's cultural traditions. Indeed, there has always been a split between homosexuality as a behaviour and an identity or social grouping widely observed across cultures (Smith et al., 2018). Yet, historical archives from the pre-modern periods suggested that homosexual behaviour was once well-accepted amongst the nobility in Chinese society when gay had not evolved into an established category of identity (Kang, 2009), challenging S15's assumption of China's homophobic past. Setting the factual error aside, S15 tries to seek a degree of reconciliation with members of the LGBTQ+ community by invoking a self-mocking tone to distance himself from overtly insulting gay men. Yet, the logic behind his claim implicitly categorises homosexuality as both an identity and a behaviour that have no place in his nation. Ending the claim with an emotionally energised expression, 'disgusted,' he has effectively raised serious questions over the very existence of this entire gay community in Chinese society, underscoring a highly toxic dimension of China's orthodox sports fandom culture that is overtly homophobic.

Most of our participants refrained from making such vehemently insulting commentaries as S15 did. However, their homohysterical views are on display in their opinions about 'little fresh meats,' which constitute another key thematic category repeatedly appearing in interview transcripts.

Interviewer: What do you make of 'little fresh meats?' Do you think athletes with soft personalities like Stephen Curry are different from them?

S1: They are absolutely different. 'Little fresh meats' are effeminate. You would see a six pack on Curry when he takes off his jersey! [...] 'Little fresh meats' are like 'sliced boiled chicken'.

Interviewer: You really hate them.

S1: Of course! ['Little fresh meats'] cannot represent men [...] but are often treated as idols by so many young people [...]. I remember the *People's Daily* criticised them years ago. This needs to stop.

S1 distinguishes between elite athletes and 'little fresh meats' based on a comparison between their differing body physiques. Describing a particular type of young male idols, 'little fresh meats' are characterised by their feminised media representations, often featuring a beautiful face, complacent manner, and slim physique (Song, 2022). A homoerotic undertone is frequently packaged in their mediated bromance stories, often as part of their marketing-facing personas targeting both heterosexual women and certain LGBTQ+ consumers (Wen, 2021; Zhao, 2024). The rising visibility of 'little fresh meats' in China's popular cultural production has energised pre-existing homophobia in its mainstream societal debates, leading to the heteronormative masses' fears of the masculine qualities of younger generation Chinese men being undermined (Yu and Sui, 2023). Interestingly, S1's rationalisation of public animosity towards 'little fresh meats' involves an explicit reference to the state media. The rationalisation

style, reiterating S15's nation-specific remark, has evidently reaffirmed the Chineseness of the homohysterical sentiments established in China's orthodox sports fandom. It alludes to the pivotal part the nation-state's propaganda plays in engineering gender power dynamics in Chinese society today.

Interviewer: Why do you have a problem with little fresh meats?

S3: Our birth rate hit a record low last year [...]. We need 'real men' for this country, and they are just bad examples for young people.

Interviewer: What has that to do with the birth rate?

[...]

S3: Can I say this? [...] Not all of them would become gay, but there is a possibility [...]. 'Little fresh meats' just make bad examples, and some teenagers may be influenced because they are not yet mentally mature enough and may misrecognise their own [sexual orientation].

Interviewer: Why do you think reproduction matters to us specifically? Is it not part of our personal choice?

S3: Yes, it surely is, but the situation is that our nation is at a crossroad. It is a critical moment. Think about the increased tensions between China and America [...]. We want peace, but can we defend our national interests if we do not have the manpower to fight in wars? You can see Japan is trying to increase their birth rate as well.

The political logic behind popular anti-effeminate sentiments becomes clearer when S3 refers to China's fertility rate to justify public animosity towards 'little fresh meats.' His homophobia is expressed to an extreme degree, manifesting as overt gender-based discrimination that singles out all members of the gay community, based on an imagination of the threat their very existence poses to the state's modern nation-building project. Indeed, overt discrimination against sexual minorities in China's popular discourses has recently been exacerbated by the CCP's censorship of non-heteronormative media content and crackdowns on LGBTQ+ rights (Bao, 2021; Song, 2022). The state's homophobic stance is ideology-driven, as it defines LGBTQ+ rights as part of Western-style, liberal-democratic values, which are incompatible with its official visions for the future of the nation (Ng and Li, 2023). In the meantime, the homophobic official stance is also prescribed on pragmatic grounds, since it also reflects the state leadership's concerns over the often-found association between the LGBTQ+ community and civil-liberty activism, which has the potential to pose long-term challenges to the Party-state polity (Bernot and Davies, 2023). On this note, the participant's voluntary justification of the state's homophobia appears to be far-fetched, but it is well-illustrative of the specifics of China's nationalist politics, where young people have been educated to align their fate with national destiny in hypothetical discussions, despite an increased emphasis on individual accomplishments informed by the restructuring of the economy (Wang, 2022). The underlying political rationale points towards the relations between masculinist worldviews and nationalist ideologies, pointing towards the necessity to foreground male sports fans' acceptance and rejection of the homoerotic interpretations of mediated athletic bromance through the scope of state politics.

Interviewer: Why do you think the popularity of ‘little fresh meats’ would have an impact on the nation’s future?

S25: They are definitely interconnected. The United States was behind the promotion of ‘little fresh meats’ when [such aesthetics] were introduced to Korea in the last century [...]. This led to [Korean] people’s changing aesthetics [...]. Generally speaking, a nation would be in trouble if its people did not appreciate its prowess. This is the situation that Korea is facing today. The popularity of ‘little fresh meats’ has undermined its military power.

S25 rationalises his overt homohysteric with respect to a far-fetched conspiracy theory. Attributing the rise of ‘little fresh meats’ to the Americanisation of global popular cultural production, his commentaries involve a clear factual error, failing to recognise the East Asian origin of such aesthetics in the first place (Song, 2022). His rationalisation was ideologically informed, underscoring a salient axis of China’s current nationalist sentiments, which are energised by the state’s anti-US rhetoric.

Today, the revival of Cold War mentalities and right-wing populism is observed across the Global North (Flew, 2020). This situation is paired with China assuming an increasingly more aggressive diplomatic posture on the world stage, leading to the intensification of Sino-Western geopolitical tensions (Sullivan and Wang, 2023). In its wake, disinformation campaigns, which blame the USA for an overarching range of issues without any evidential basis, are widely orchestrated by state apparatuses to advance the leadership’s propaganda agendas (Fan et al., 2024). This turns US-bashing rhetoric, often self-voluntarily promoted and fabricated by nationalist frictions of the citizenry, to the forefront of conspiracy theories spreading on the Chinese-language Internet (Schneider, 2018). Against this backdrop, it is of little surprise to observe nationalist voices, taking patriotism as a veneer, being echoed by male Chinese sports fans who subscribe to a pro-regime view. More specific is S25’s projection of nationalistic-characterised homoerotic sentiments. The gender-state entanglement embedded in his rhetoric reiterates the nature of modern nation-state building as a masculine project, which is bolstered by the storytelling of its male citizens’ achievements (Enloe, 1989; McClintock, 1993; Peng, 2024). It also tellingly reveals the specifics of the sociopolitical infrastructure upon which the homohysteric sentiments are crafted, reflecting how the government’s orchestrated political propaganda is most well-echoed amongst heteronormative men, which allows them to both pledge loyal support for the nation-state and rationalise their consistent marginalisation of female and LGBTQ+ audiences from ‘authentic’ sports consumption. The perceived state-backed nature of the homohysteric sentiments defines a core axis of China’s orthodox sports fandom, shaping how male fans navigate gender norms along patriarchal lines, despite conflating messages circulating within the market sphere that seemingly point towards a more diversified future within the popular cultural realm.

### **State, market, and the limits of non-heteronormativity**

Male Chinese sports fans consumption of mediated athletic bromances adds to the complexity of gender politics in sports fandom generally (Anderson and Raney, 2018; Cohan, 2013;

Sandvoss, 2003). Chinese male sports fans often idolise elite athletes as the embodiment of desirable masculinities, with an implicit hierarchical order being invoked to shape their vision of an ideal athletic bromance. Amid an increased number of female and LGBTQ+ fans participating in sports consumption (Gong, 2017), the rhetoric these male fans appropriate to narrate male bonding is no longer strictly constructed through a heteronormative prism. Interestingly, without categorically rejecting the homoerotic imaginaries of athletic bromance co-created by female and LGBTQ+ fans, many of the male participants in this research pragmatically reappropriated the CP rhetoric to generate playful narratives of male-male intimacy. Their practices have turned athletic bromance stories into a form of fandom knowledge, typically invoked in sports communication, as these male fans performatively enact fan identities. However, while evidently being influenced by the diversification of gender representations in post-reform consumer culture, these male sports fans simultaneously show a tendency to delegitimising homoerotic imaginaries of male bonding insofar as to call the authenticity of female and LGBTQ+ audiences' fan identities into question. Their seemingly self-contradictory actions not only indicate the underlying homophobia of China's orthodox sports fandom culture but also dialectically relate to the masculinist axis of nationalist politics established in wider Chinese society, as evidenced by how these sports fans invoke nationalist rhetoric to rationalise their control over both the fandom and the nation-state.

In recent years, homoerotic imaginaries of bromance have gained currency in China's popular cultural production, reflecting the increased purchasing power of women and LGBTQ+ fans (Wen, 2021). The popularity of non-heteronormative aesthetics is very much limited within the context of popular cultural production and consumption, posing no substantial threats to the sociopolitical and economic infrastructure (Meng and Huang, 2017). Nevertheless, non-heteronormative consumer cultural trends are considered at odds with the government's official ideologies, where male ownership over the nation-state is consistently reiterated through the promotion of masculinist values (Sun and Chalupnik, 2022; Wang and Chen, 2023). In this process, members of the male cohort, who are often chauvinist in their worldviews, have orchestrated a backlash against non-heteronormative consumer trends in order to counter any destabilisation of the patriarchal status quo (Huang, 2023; Luqiu and Liao, 2021). As in this research, sports consumption has largely formed a proxy venue for such a trajectory of gender politics, allowing male sports fans to achieve a dual rationalisation of their masculinist agendas and nationalist hopes. This phenomenon speaks of the specifics of Chinese society, where state politics, in addition to the market economy, play a pivotal role in shaping how people conduct their everyday lives.

Today, an emerging body of literature has investigated how a gender-state entanglement defines aspects of popular cultural production and consumption in China (Liao, 2023; Ng and Li, 2023). Continuing this line of inquiry, this study explores a unique societal dimension that highlights the role of homophobia in male fans' sports consumption to shed light on the sociocultural and political construction of male hegemony in Chinese society. Yet, the current version does not fully account for the intersection of sports consumption and nationalist politics at an infrastructural level; neither does it focus on how this intersection shapes in-person sociality beyond the fandom context. We advise future research to further foreground



the dialectical relations between gender and nationalist politics insofar as to integrate the dynamic interplays amongst gender power relations, political struggles, and lived experience of individuals in Chinese society today.

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