

# **a *wen-wu* approach to male teenage Chinese sports fans' heteronormative interpretation of masculinity**

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## **abstract**

This article analyses how performatively heteronormative, male teenage Chinese fans consume sports games through the prism of masculinity, using secondary school students' engagement with the NBA (National Basketball Association) as a case study. Drawing on focus groups of twenty-three participants, we discover that male teenage sports fans constantly evoke elite NBA athletes as male ideals to define a desirable, heteronormative *wen-wu* masculinity specific to the post-reform era. In this process, they often engage in a double-standard practice, manifesting as their appropriation of the CP (coupling) rhetoric to 'ship' athletes and their problematisation of heterosexual women and LGBTQ fans' similar usage of it. This double-standard practice constitutes an attempt to monopolise the interpretation of masculinity both within and outside of the sporting context. It sheds light on the heteronormative male cohort's rejection of alternative masculinities, underscoring how aspects of gender politics unfolding in wider society are reflected in China's teenage sports fandom.

## **keywords**

basketball; China; CP; masculinity; NBA; slash imagination; sports fandom

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## introduction

Being dominated by male athletes, sports games offer spectators regular access to media representations of manhood (Veri and Liberti, 2013). As late-modern, self-reflexive fans, these spectators also actively use their sports consumption to justify their position of power in gender relations (Dickerson, 2016). Gendered readings of sport also exist in China's fandom, where the concept of masculinity is evoked by many male spectators to assess successes and failures, as well as gender hierarchy in sport and beyond (Gong, 2016; Peng, Wu and Chen, 2022). Yet, heterosexual women and gender minorities have somehow destabilised existing power relations in society (Bao, 2021; Zhao and Ng, 2022). Specific to sport, this is most tellingly revealed by their creation of slash imaginations, which involve 'shipping' two male athletes together in a homoerotic way (Gong, 2017).

Existing literature on China's sports fandom tends to focus on adult spectators (*ibid.*; Jiang and Bairner, 2020), offering limited attention to teenage fans. Yet, research suggests that teenagers' worldviews are still in-the-making, with young men's understandings of masculinity being shaped not only by institutionalised education but also by the media (Liu, 2019). Considering the popularity of sport amongst male teenagers (Zhou *et al.*, 2017), studies of how this group of fans self-reflexively interacts with notions of masculinity articulate the role that sports consumption plays in the construction of gender identities amongst the younger generation. This research trajectory challenges the overrepresentation of adult fans' experience in existing literature, offering a futuristic lens to foreground the evolution of China's sports fandom culture.

In this article, we present an original study, based on focus groups of male Chinese secondary school students who watch NBA (National Basketball Association) games regularly. We discover that these teenage sports fans constantly evoke elite athletes to rationalise their idealised, heteronormative version of masculinity, with Kam Louie's (2002) *wen-wu* paradigm offering an anchoring concept to decode their practice. Interestingly, these performatively heteronormative male teenage fans often attempt to monopolise the interpretation of masculinity. They contextually appropriate seemingly homosexual rhetoric, using the term 'CP' (coupling; Hu and Wang, 2021, p. 679) to 'ship' two elite athletes. This reflects their reception of slash imaginations created by heterosexual women and LGBTQ fans, shedding light on the post-reform diversification of masculinities in China. Yet, hollowing out the homosexual connotations of slash imaginations, these performatively heteronormative male teenagers categorically reject their out-group contemporaries' seemingly similar usage of the CP rhetoric. Such a double-standard practice reveals how they entrench the subjectivity of men in gender power relations, pointing towards the perpetuation of patriarchal norms at a transitional stage of young Chinese men's life journey.

## literature review

### masculinity, sport and China's sports fandom

As Cornel Sandvoss (2003) argues, sports consumption has long been appropriated by Euro-American fans to negotiate their socioeconomic positions and in-group/out-group identities. In particular, sport is largely a masculinist field (Lavelle, 2020). According to R.W. Connell (2005 [1995]), this exemplifies how men perform hegemonic masculinity to bolster their social domination. Contemporary consumerism has arguably facilitated the diversification of masculinities in sport, with non-hegemonic male ideals being promoted to cater to different spectators (Veri and Liberti, 2013). This, by extension, encourages

heteronormative male fans to contemplate such media representations, leading to their contestation of gender identities within the sporting context (Dickerson, 2016). However, existing sports fandom research is a Eurocentric field, and there is thus a need to account for non-Western audiences' experiences to decolonise the field.

In post-reform China, we have witnessed the increased consumption of international sports content (Billings *et al.*, 2019; Zhou *et al.*, 2017). This marketisation trend allows dynamic sports fandom culture to be forged, despite aspects of sporting nationalism remaining in China's policymaking (Cha and Lim, 2019; Guo *et al.*, 2020; Shen *et al.*, 2021). Specific to basketball, the NBA's market reach in China has benefited from the unprecedented success of Yao Ming at the Houston Rockets (Peng, Kuang and Hou, 2022). The NBA has now developed huge fanbases of all age groups in China, where elite athletes are idolised regardless of their nationalities (Zhou *et al.*, 2017). Certainly, we have observed how aspects of the power dynamics in China's sports fandom are destabilised by heterosexual women and LGBTQ fans' consumption of softened manhood (Gong, 2017). However, recent scholarship suggests that a masculinist axis remains the most salient feature of Chinese-language social-mediated sports communication (Gong, 2016; Peng, Wu and Chen, 2022). This masculinist axis reflects the overall male takeover of sports consumption, which explains how social-mediated sports communication offers a vehicle for the propagation of discriminatory discourses, such as racism and sexism, due to the dynamic interplay between sport and gender politics (Dickerson, 2016; Peng, Kuang and Hou, 2022).

### **wen-wu as an anchoring concept**

According to Louie (2002), traditional Chinese masculinity is constructed upon a *wen-wu* (文武) model, emphasising men's martial valour and cultural attainment. While *wu* reveals the compatibility between indigenous male ideals and their Western hegemonic counterparts, *wen* marks a unique dimension of East Asian gender norms, highlighting men's civilised characteristics (Louie, 2012). The *wen-wu* model is typically embodied by literary portrayals of Confucian generals, who are accomplished both militarily and literarily (Louie, 2002). Building on Louie's (*ibid.*) work, Geng Song (2005) defines talented scholars as a softened archetype illustrating how *wen* was prioritised outside of crisis times in ancient China. This argument underscores how the *wen-wu* model serves as a conceptual basis to analyse the constitution of differing masculinities concerning the past and the present of China.

Chinese masculinities underwent a process of drastic redefinition around the 1900s when Chinese men's 'quality' was called into question due to Western and Japanese invasions (Kang, 2009). In this process, sports games were appropriated by schoolboys to resist colonial powers, marking the rise of *wu* in their performance of masculinity (Zheng, 2007). An increased emphasis on martial valour continued throughout Mao's era when the *wen-wu* model was further disrupted because 'working-class men became central to the *de facto* master of the state as a status group' (Gong, 2016, p. 22). The Maoist phenomenon was informed by state-led propaganda campaigns, which urged men to serve China's modernisation project (Yang, 2010). The campaigns persisted into the early reform period, during which male athletes were packaged as macho heroes to energise nationalist sentiments amongst the population at sports mega-events (Lu and Fan, 2019). Such sporting nationalism is still relevant today, although its prime time has gradually faded away, giving rise to alternative athletic representations in China's sports media (Xu, Guo and Kim, 2022).

The post-reform diversification of gender representations mirrors changing global consumer trends (Chong, 2013; Liu and Lin, 2021). Amongst various representations, metrosexual men, who are characterised by their dedication to appearance management, embody a softened type of masculinity that is highly appreciated (Song and Hird, 2014). Metrosexual masculinity is, in part, introduced to the Chinese-speaking world through media celebrities (Louie, 2012). The desirability of metrosexual masculinity is evidently exploited by international brands, using elite Chinese athletes (e.g., Liu Xiang) to promote male fashion/skincare products (Chong, 2013). Against this backdrop, aspects of the *wen-wu* paradigm are perpetuated, although the softness of Chinese metrosexual masculinity is a hybrid construct, in which the fragility of traditional talent scholars is replaced with muscular bodies' sexual appeal.

Despite their softened semblance, metrosexual men are dramatically different from 'little fresh meats' capturing recent media attention (Yu and Sui, 2022). The term 'little fresh meats' (小鲜肉) describes young male idols with handsome appearances and suave manners (Wang, 2019). They are promoted by businesses to cater to an emerging cohort of audiences, who typically consist of heterosexual women and members of the LGBTQ community (Bao, 2021; Chen, 2022). The origin of the term 'little fresh meats' could trace back to Japanese boys' love (BL) literature, which tells romantic stories between feminised, beautiful male characters and facilitates the sexualised consumption of non-orthodox male ideals (Louie, 2012). The commercial logic of the 'little fresh meat' phenomenon is reflected in China's sports consumption, taking the form of softened, handsome male athletes being increasingly visible in market-oriented media coverage. This commercial logic coincides with the growth of heterosexual women and LGBTQ fans' consumer capacity, which emerges as a bargaining power that has reshaped 'mainstream' sports fandom culture (Gong, 2017).

On the contrary, metrosexual masculinity is associated with 'upward social mobility through consumption' (Song and Lee, 2012, p. 364). Performing metrosexual masculinity comprises an underlying prerequisite, which is entangled with men's advantaged socioeconomic status lying at the very heart of the patriarchal status quo. Its social acceptance showcases how middle-class Chinese men identify themselves with cosmopolitanism by 'transcend[ing] the specificities of place and identity [to ...] be part of the world' (Rofel, 2007, p. 118). As such, metrosexual masculinity is rather an indicator of the cultural attainment of heteronormative, economically advantaged men, who are capable of being caring of, but not submissive to, women (Louie, 2012). This alludes to an emphasis on the subjectivity of men, which is central to heteronormative men's negotiation of gender identities. It is the subjectivity of men being seemingly undermined by little fresh meats that has antagonised the heteronormative male cohort, rendering the staged homosexuality of young idols a key site of critique in China's recent gender-issue debates (Yu and Sui, 2022).

The backlash against little fresh meats cannot be oversimplified as female-vs-male/straight-vs-non-binary, but heteronormative men have indeed contributed the most vibrant voices (Song, 2021). Interestingly, a defining characteristic of the backlash refers to its state-sponsored nature, as reflected in state media outlets' condemnation of the 'negative impact [of little fresh meats] on adolescents' (*ibid.*, p. 79). The official campaign is a continuity of the early-reform 'masculinity crisis' when 'over-liberalised' women were problematised by propaganda apparatuses to restore the disrupted gender dynamics (Yang, 2011). Yet, it is also specific to the current administration, which has mobilised its full capacity to fuel domestic nationalist sentiments, aiming to legitimatise the Party-state polity at times

of social stratification being worsened both within China and through the intensification of Sino–Western frictions on the world stage (Zhang, 2022). In this process, macho, ‘Wolf Warrior’<sup>1</sup> male ideals are promoted as the most valued to overturn consumer trends that are deemed notes of discord in the nationalist campaign (Talmacs, 2020). Thus, China’s anti-effeminate backlash is different from Euro–American ‘sissophobia’, which mainly targets members of the LGBTQ community (Song, 2021). Instead, it marks the specifics of gender politics in China, where heteronormative values consistently guide the state’s policing of gender identities (Zhao and Ng, 2022).

### **teenage fandom as an understudied area**

Existing studies have offered enlightening findings on gender politics in China’s sports fandom (Gong, 2017; Shen *et al.*, 2021; Peng, Wu and Chen, 2022), but their emphasis on adult spectators’ experiences risks marginalising the voices of teenage fans, who are not only active but would also be future generation trend-makers in China’s sports fandom, despite them currently possessing limited consumer resources. In particular, Euro–American experiences show that media exposure has turned elite athletes into masculinity archetypes for male teenagers, informing how they enact gender identities at a transitional life stage when the role that fathers once played in their childhood is replaced by celebrities (Whannel, 2001). This phenomenon is also found in China, where male teenage students’ vision of desirable masculinity becomes conditioned by popular cultures and public debates to which they are exposed through the media (Yu and Sui, 2022). It is undeniable that male teenage fans’ experience cannot represent China’s entire sports fandom, but their self-reflective sports consumption through the scope of masculinity showcases the socio-political engineering of male teenagers’ gender identities outside of institutionalised education, shedding light on the future development of gender equality and progressive politics in China that urges intellectual intervention.

### **research questions and methods**

The current research is part of a larger project which explores the situation of sports consumption in China’s secondary education. The empirical research is underpinned by the following research questions:

- 1) How do performatively heteronormative male teenage fans appropriate the *wen-wu* paradigm of masculinity to rationalise their idolisation of elite athletes?
- 2) How do male teenage fans interact with alternative masculinities being created in China’s sports fandom due to heterosexual women and LGBTQ fans’ participation?

To answer the research questions, we conducted four focus groups with twenty-three male secondary school students between April and June 2021. China’s teenage sports fandom mostly consists of secondary school students. Well-known for the *gaokao* system, China’s secondary education primarily aims to prepare students for a nationwide examination, which determines what universities they attend

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<sup>1</sup> *Wolf Warrior* is a commercially successful film series (see *Wolf Warrior*, 2015; *Wolf Warrior 2*, 2017), with the storyline centring on a retired People’s Liberation Army officer fighting against international criminal organisations (Talmacs, 2020). The protagonist embodies a manly male ideal well aligned with the government’s promotion of sex essentialism in popular cultural production (Peng, 2022), rendering the film title a term widely used to describe macho men in Chinese society.

(Gao, 2016). Heavy academic pressures prevent these teenagers from investing time to develop a variety of personal hobbies (Liu, 2019). Under these circumstances, high-quality sports content provided by the NBA constitutes one of the few forms of daily entertainment to which they have access (Zhou *et al.*, 2017). For many male students, watching and discussing NBA games offers them a 'refuge', allowing them to release stress and manage friendships that define who they are outside of the institutionalised educational context.

In the present study, participants were recruited from two Chinese secondary schools located in Anyang (Tier 3) and Xiamen (Tier 2) cities.<sup>2</sup> Both accessibility and the overrepresentation of Tier 1 city-based young Chinese people's experiences in existing literature were considered in the participant recruitment. The recruited participants were aged between 16 and 18 years old, attending key institutes sponsored by their local government. They came from a variety of family backgrounds; yet, common to all is that they not only watch NBA games regularly but also actively participate in social-mediated discussions about elite athletes. In this way, they form an important part of the networks of sports fans of their generation in typical tier-2/3 cities, where indigenous cultural traditions are more influential compared with in cosmopolitan tier-1 cities.

Instead of using one-on-one interviews, we selected focus groups as the data collection method. This is because teenagers are proven to be more 'comfortable and familiar with the process of discussing matters in groups', meaning high-quality data can be collected during focus group discussions (Darbyshire, MacDougall and Schiller, 2005, p. 420). Additionally, focus groups 'shift the balance of power away from the researcher toward the participants', making them an ideal feminist method for researching sensitive topics (Wilkinson, 1999, p. 221). We sought ethical approval from the lead author's employer through a high-risk application route and requested the participants' teachers to act as gatekeepers to facilitate communication between the researchers and the participants prior to data collection. The research design was scrutinised and approved by the ethics committee of the lead author's employer. The disclosure of participants' sexual orientation was not requested, to avoid causing personal harm.

Before conducting the focus groups, we fully briefed the participants, both orally and in writing, about the purpose and procedure of the research, including the exit clause. We assured the participants that the research results would not be shared with their teachers, to ensure the voluntary nature of their participation. The focus groups were conducted in the Chinese language via video calls, with peers from the same class being allocated to the same group to offer them a strong sense of security. Each focus group was approximately two hours in length. During the focus groups, students were invited to comment on a variety of issues, ranging from their favourite NBA teams and players, and the influence of these athletes on their understanding of being a man, to their views on the friendships between these players and beyond, following a semi-structured pattern. Participants were encouraged to exchange their views within their groups, especially when disagreements between members emerged, to maximise the data collection opportunity. During the first focus group, which consisted of eleven participants, we discovered that conversations were dominated by a few. The second focus group was subsequently arranged with five students to offer all participants sufficient opportunities

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<sup>2</sup> In China, cities are ranked between Tier 1 to Tier 3, according to the size of their population and economy.

to voice their opinions. We repeated the procedure for the third (four students) and fourth (three students) focus groups until patterns emerged. These participants are provided with pseudonyms when quoted below. While translating the quotations, we trimmed the transcripts, focusing on specific answers that each participant provided to our questions, and omitted some incomplete sentences and part of in-group discussions when participants talked over each other, which did not address the focal point.

## **analytical discussion**

Through the focus groups, we noted that the student participants, who all self-identify as basketball fans, consider watching NBA games as a key part of their leisure activities. In the past ten years, we have witnessed top NBA players, such as Stephen Curry, Kevin Durant and LeBron James, at the peak of their professional careers. As expected, our participants are fans of these elite athletes, and their 'home' teams may switch with the athletes transferring from one city to another. This confirms previous research findings, which suggest that Chinese NBA fans tend to develop an attachment to a specific athlete, rather than to a particular team as their North American counterparts do (Li, Dittmore and Scott, 2017). Contextualised against this backdrop, elite athletes are always placed under the spotlight within China's teenage NBA fandom.

### **elite athletes and heteronormative *wen-wu* masculinity**

Elite NBA athletes are foreign nationals living thousands of miles away from China. Most of our participants relied on China's sports media (e.g., Tencent Sports) and social media channels (e.g., Weibo) to access up-to-date information about them. Many of the participants have developed personalised strategies to justify their idolisation of the athletes, who do not have any apparent link to their day-to-day lives. With both the athlete and the student being biologically men, the qualification of the former as a role model becomes intertwined with the definition of masculinity in the latter's eyes.

R: What does the name Kobe mean to you?

S7: He is kind of like a mentor [...]. I have not met him in person, but his 'mamba mentality' [...] and his spirit of never giving up make him a role model.

Previous research suggests that sports participation is often exploited by fathers as an opportunity to exercise parenting (Gottzen and Kremer-Sadlik, 2012). As the only-child generation (Liu, 2019), most of our participants noted their close relationships with their parents, with many, such as S7, suggesting that their father introduced them to basketball in their childhood. However, at a transitioning life stage from childhood to adulthood, these teenage students' idolisation of the father has gradually faded away and been replaced by that of NBA athletes, marking how sports consumption starts playing a more prominent role in their self-reflexive construction of gender identities.

S1: James has a very difficult early life, and this makes his success epic [...]. He came from the gutter and was raised by his mother alone [...], but he successfully rose to the top and became a life winner [人生赢家]. His story is so inspiring.

It is important to note that the popularity of elite NBA athletes is inseparable from their sporting successes, but teenage Chinese fans' idolisation of them involves a reinterpretation of their career achievements, which goes beyond the scope of sport *per se*. The commentary by S1, who not only considers James as his favourite NBA player but also sees the athlete as his role model, is indicative of the reinterpretation. Indeed, from a shantytown boy to a multimillionaire, James's personal struggle offers an uplifting story, which is repeatedly told by the global sports media. As one of the few students who moved from the countryside to the city, this story is particularly relatable to S1. Yet, his rationalisation of James as his role model, which highlights the notion of outstanding accomplishments, is illustrative of wider socio-cultural trends in post-reform China.

As Fengshu Liu (2019, p. 294) notes, an emphasis on outstanding accomplishments, namely '*chenggong*' in the Chinese language, is a key feature of desirable masculinities accepted by secondary school students today. The concept of *chenggong* is underpinned by the competitiveness of a man, which enables him to excel in contests with other men. It is symbolic of the individualistic turn in post-reform China (Rofel, 2007), where exacerbated social stratification has violated the communist nation-building project that the government promised (Yang, 2010). Against this backdrop, the Party has developed various official narratives of social development, by means of promoting self-entrepreneurship as essential moral probity to conceal structural, interclass struggles (Wu and Dong, 2019). In these narratives, successful business magnates, such as Wang Jianlin (Chairman of Wanda), who are typically men and hypermasculine in their media appearances, are branded as new masculinist role models for young Chinese people. Growing up in a popular media environment, where such gender ideals prevail, male Chinese secondary school students are cultivated with aspirations to *chenggong* in economic terms (Liu, 2019). A social milieu, in which desirable manhood is encoded with men's socioeconomic hegemony, is created, redefining the traditional notion of *wu* in economic terms.

R: Who do you think is the GOAT [greatest player of all time] in the NBA?

S1: LeBron James for sure.

R: Not Michael Jordan?

S5: He is from a different generation. They are both the greatest of their times, and James is the one in our times.

[...]

S7: He [James] knows not only how to win but also how to respect others [...]. For instance, once in a game, he accidentally knocked a lady over while trying to save a ball. He immediately stopped playing and helped her to get up [...]. Jordan only has an eye for winning. James has that too, but he also respects other people, including his opponents on the court.

Interestingly, while highlighting the notion of *chenggong*, which redefines *wu* in China's market economy, these students' admiration of elite athletes also contains a note on their aspiration to cultural attainment, alluding to the parallel evolution of *wen* in the post-reform era. Their appreciation of *wen* becomes most apparent when these students are asked the question of who the greatest player of all time (GOAT) is in the NBA. Comparing Michael Jordan and LeBron James, who

together are widely considered two contenders for the GOAT title, almost all students admitted that they favour the latter over the former, in part because they have personally witnessed his prime athletic performance. Interestingly, these students' justification of the choice does not completely distance them from personal biases. To these teenage students, the two elite athletes' respective successes are 'difficult to be measured quantitatively', despite Jordan having the upper hand in the number of trophies and MVP (most valuable player) awards. Instead of solely focusing on career accomplishments, they highlight James's ability to be caring for others as the quality they admire. To this end, they referenced numerous examples from media coverage about James's good-mannered behaviour to support their opinionated argument. This positive note on James's cultural attainment, juxtaposed with negative commentaries on Jordan's reported 'overly eager' reputation, turns the softened dimension of the former's personality into a leading admirable quality. This sheds light on how these male teenagers juggle two contrasting aspects of the traditional *wen-wu* model to define desirable masculinities, despite the original connotations of the model being modified against post-reform socioeconomic structures.

Our participants' attention to *wen* shows compatibility with the trending, softened male ideals promoted by the fashion and entertainment industries. According to Geng Song and Tracy K. Lee (2012), the male ideals portrayed in Chinese men's magazines are very similar to Western metrosexual men, who are characterised by their daily appearance management. These metrosexual male ideals are popular cultural icons, who are ready-made to embody an aspirational, elitist lifestyle, which encourages men's consumption of fashion/skincare products and beyond (*ibid.*). Beneath their traditionally considered 'feminine' consumer behaviours, it is the metrosexual men's symbolism which represents a new masculine model that polishes the rough appearance of hegemonic men to make them more civilised. This changing definition of ideal manhood suits China's neoliberal ethos, which no longer confines the competitiveness of men to physical terms (Liu, 2019).

R: What makes you think James is a life winner?

S15: Isn't it self-evident? He is a multi-millionaire. He has a beautiful wife and a happy family. What more do you want?

It should be noted that cultural attainment, which is represented by the stylised repetition of civilised acts, merely defines an ostensible feature of an ideal man. Such male ideals are always heterosexual and 'normative', with his *wu*-characterised outstanding accomplishments being prioritised. As S15 explains, their idolisation of athletes only goes to the elite ones, whose lives are 'complete' because of having 'a beautiful wife and a happy family'. This means the cultural attainment of male ideals has an implicit prerequisite, which is built upon their hegemony in heterosexual relationships (Liu, 2019). Taking into account the integrity of academic research, we did not request participants to disclose their sexual orientation. Yet, S15's explanation not only prompted his peers' reassuring smiles but also received their explicit endorsement across focus groups, indicating how their aspiration to *chenggong* is contextualised against existing patriarchal gender norms. Similarly to any other form of consumption, the criteria of being civilised are a privilege of the heterosexual, economically advantaged group of men, 'lending expression to the fantasies, desires and needs of "new rich" men in China' (Song and Lee, 2012, p. 345). In this way, these male teenage students' interpretation of desirable masculinities, established through their self-reflexive readings of elite athletes, contains important cultural

implications, which are entangled with their perception of appropriate sexual and gender power relations with women beyond the sporting context.

### **male hegemony and the CP rhetoric**

Considering the heteronormativity of *wen* being accepted by our participants, these male teenage students' appreciation of softened masculinity cannot be confused with the exponential popularity of little fresh meats in recent years. As previously mentioned, little fresh meats, often earning their fame by means of featuring in popular TV shows, are 'young male actors embodying a feminine beauty', who are entangled with staged homoerotic performance that attracts heterosexual women and non-binary audiences' consumption (Song, 2021, p. 2). In the extract below, our male teenage participants categorically denied the comparability between NBA athletes with softened personal traits and the 'little fresh meat' type, despite certain semblances they share.

R: Do you see any similarity between little fresh meats and NBA stars, such as Stephen Curry?

S11: They are completely different. Yes, [some] do call Curry 'little boy' [小弟弟] or 'little kuku' [小库库] [...]. These are often used by his female fans, and I really do not like that.

R: What makes Curry different?

S11: Curry is not feminine at all [...]. [NBA players] are real men. They play a men's game and fight on the court until the very last minute [...]. Have you seen how those little fresh meats act and behave on the stage? What they do is not like a man, and they do so simply to please female fans.

The conversation about little fresh meats occurred during the first group when we asked the students to discuss what kind of NBA athletes they like or dislike. Interestingly, while the degree varied according to the specific name being mentioned, all participants offered generally positive notes on elite athletes' manhood. Yet, S11 unexpectedly raised his criticism of little fresh meats, which was echoed by his peers. We repeated the same question throughout the subsequent focus groups, in which these teenagers' answers showed a clear, consistent pattern. Specifically, in their words, basketball is a type of sport that allows male athletes to perform 'authentic' manhood, which highlights the competition between men. As such, elite athletes who excel in the game have already fulfilled the *wu* criteria. These students acknowledge the socioeconomic status that little fresh meats have reached but suggest that they belong to an inferior, 'abnormal' subtype of men. Such a point is not only affirmative of the students' heteronormativity but also reveals their questioning of non-heteronormative masculinities. These teenagers' practices involve 'defending' the NBA from businesses that try to 'steal' their games by using non-gender-conforming idols as brand ambassadors, as well as from heterosexual women and non-binary fans, or whoever challenges a monopolistic and patriarchal interpretation of masculinity (Chen, 2022, p. 106), despite themselves having evidently absorbed aspects of their peers' practice at the same time.

R: Do you know that some male basketball fans also use the word 'CP' to describe friendships between NBA athletes on the Internet?

S4: Yes [...]. But what this word refers to here is the closeness between them. It has nothing to do with them being real couples.

CP, short for coupling, is a term originally used by Japanese readers of BL (boys' love) literature to describe the relationships between male characters, who 'relate to each other in loving rather than competitive ways' (Louie, 2012, p. 934). With BL culture exerting transnational influences outside of the original context, the term has gradually been accepted by fans to ship popular cultural icons across the East Asian region (Hu and Wang, 2021). Previous research has noted how heterosexual women and LGBTQ spectators use the term 'CP' to imagine the relationships between male European footballers (Gong, 2017). Amid these CP fans' practice, the term has persisted in China's sports fandom across the board, with the slash imaginations of elite athletes being evidently picked up by heteronormative, male teenage NBA fans as well. However, when being asked about the 'NBA athlete CPs', these teenagers' first instinct was often to deny their experience of using the rhetoric. It was not until the rapport between us was developed at a later stage of the research that these students felt encouraged to be more straightforward about their thoughts. Eventually, all students acknowledged that 'CP' was a buzzword with which they were familiar. Due to non-heteronormative sexuality being a sensitive cultural taboo in Chinese society (Chen, 2022), our participants seemed to have either intentionally or unintentionally overlooked LGBTQ members' participation. They tended to define their usage of the buzzword as an act of mimicking out-group fans' slash imaginations of elite athletes.

R: How would you describe the relationship between James and Wade?

S19: I think they are more like brothers [...], like that between Liu-Guan-Zhang.

It is important to note that the CP rhetoric adopted by these performatively heteronormative male teenage students is bolstered by masculinist narratives of male bonding. Such narratives are in line with the traditional discourse of brotherhood long-established in indigenous Chinese culture, and its Western counterpart, 'bromance', is widely used in the media (Lam and Raphael, 2018). In China, male bonding is always narrated through the eyes of men, and the 'oath of the peach garden' is symbolic of narratives of this kind (Louie, 2002). The 'oath of the peach garden' is a fictional event documented in the classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,<sup>3</sup> which describes how Liu Bei, a monarch, and his generals, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, became sworn brothers. As noted by these male teenage students, such as S19, the Liu-Guan-Zhang brotherhood is a metaphor that they would consider more 'authentic' to ship elite NBA athletes, as it captures how these players together fight on the basketball court in the same team. The masculinist bolster alongside the feminised, romanticised and even erotised CP rhetoric serve as a pair that allows these male students to generate both 'serious' and 'playful' imaginations of NBA athletes, reflecting a contextualised and enriched interpretation of masculinity in post-reform China.

### **gender politics and geopolitical commentary**

However, while using the term 'CP' to ship their favourite players, our participants always emphasise the desexualised nature of their lexical choice, despite its ostensible homoerotic reference. Without contemplating the BL fandom origin of the term, these male fans' acceptance of the CP rhetoric and their rejection of out-group members' usage of it emerge as a paradox. As documented in S7's

<sup>3</sup>A novel in classical Chinese literature, dating from the fourteenth century and attributed to Luo Guanzhong.

explanation, the subjectivity of men is at stake when these male teenagers decide whether the CP rhetoric is applicable, underscoring the heteronormativity of China's sports fandom at a teenage level, which reflects the recent revival of *wu*.

R: What is the difference between female and male fans' use of CP?

S7: We are men ourselves [...]. We know that has nothing to do with being real couples.

As previous literature suggests, authenticity is always a crucial concept that helps to explain power dynamics amongst popular cultural fans (Gao, 2016). As with S7's commentary, authenticity is repeatedly used by performatively heteronormative male teenagers to reject the fandom participation of women and, subtextually, LGBTQ fans, which is in line with the overall male takeover of sports fandom (Gong, 2017). Such a rejection is specific to the current anti-effeminate campaign, in which patriarchal norms are reiterated to dismantle the rise of heterosexual women and non-binary consumers' purchasing power, which is considered to have destabilised aspects of the existing gender hierarchy (Meng and Huang, 2017; Tan, Liu and Kong, 2022). The sexualised representation of men, despite their popularity with women and members of the LGBTQ community, is condemned by the heteronormative male cohort for undermining the qualities of men, an act motivated by these men's anxiety about their control over the definition of masculinity.

The anti-effeminate campaign is influenced by China's current political climate, but this nationalist axis is not completely new. Effeminate traits, which are often associated with homosexuality, appeared to be tolerated amongst nobles throughout China's ancient history (Song, 2005). It was not until the late 1800s and early 1900s that, as a consequence of Western and Japanese military invasions, which problematised the qualities of Chinese men in intellectual debates, the softened dimension of traditional Chinese masculinity was defined as the source of social problems (Kang, 2009). In this process, the homosexual connotation of romanticised relationships between men, such as the Liu-Guan-Zhang brotherhood, is suppressed in mainstream interpretations, despite the subtextual reference to it in the original text (Louie, 2002). An anti-effeminate thesis is, thus, established in Chinese intellectual discourses, with the recent rise of little fresh meats having once again turned it to the forefront of public debates (Yu and Sui, 2022). Amid the so-called 'negative influence' on teenagers being raised as a major concern, the government's tightened censorship over non-binary entertainment content, alongside the state media's condemnation of such consumer trends, has created a repressive environment for China's LGBTQ community, indicating the nation-state's anxiety about the future of its nation-state modernisation project (Song, 2021). In this sense, it emerges as a consistent pattern in the parental, authoritarian regime's social governance, which is informed by the Party-state's nationalist agenda (Zhang, 2022). To this end, our participants' acceptance of the official anti-effeminate campaigns marks how such socio-political engineering functions in China's sports fandom (Peng, Kuang and Hou, 2022).

R: What can you learn from NBA athletes?

S5: [This includes] the spirit to be ready to fight [...] when the country needs you [...]. Can you expect little fresh meats to join the army and fight in battles?

R: But we are in peacetime. Why do we need to fight in battles?

S5: We just had border disputes with India, and the US is also bashing China for the Covid-19 pandemic [...]. In difficult times, we need to be ready for foreign invasions, and we cannot count on effeminate men at all!

The male student's commentary appears to be out of the blue, but it is indicative of the social impact of political campaigns that have created a generation of young people who are used to an alignment of their own fate and national destiny in abstract discussions (Zhang, 2022). His interpretation of international geopolitics clearly underlines the male cohort of this younger generation's quest for the subjectivity of men at an infrastructural level, which is informed by official nationalist propaganda. As Cynthia Enloe (1989) argues, a nation-state is a masculinist concept which is constructed by repeatedly narrating male citizens' achievements. This is also the case in East Asia, where the modernisation of China is associated with the state government's search for macho male citizens (Liu, 2019). In particular, the current administration's repressive domestic governance and aggressive public diplomacy have amplified Sino-foreign geopolitical functions in an era when right-wing populism is on the rise in Euro-American nations as well (Zhang, 2022). Against this backdrop, a 'Wolf Warrior' style of hypermasculine male representations becomes increasingly valued in China's popular cultural production, reflecting an intersection of authoritarianism and consumerism in its nationalist politics (Talmacs, 2020). With S5's point being endorsed by almost all his peers across the focus groups, it becomes apparent that this political climate has cultivated these performatively heteronormative male teenagers' masculinist awareness that links control over their bodies to good citizenship. It encourages male teenagers to reject both the *consumption* of little fresh meats *and* the slash imaginations of male athletes created by heterosexual women and LGBTQ audiences, which are perceived to have undermined their control over both the definition of being a man and the future trajectory of China's nation-building project. These male teenagers' narration of male bonding and their justification of nationalist sentiments underscore an unreflective aspect of their self-reflexive sports consumption, which is guided by their attempt to echo the state-led nationalist politics through the prism of masculinity.

## conclusion

This article has analysed how performatively heteronormative, Chinese male teenage fans understand masculinities through sports consumption, using secondary school students' NBA fandom experiences as a case study. As previous literature reveals, cultural meanings are encoded in sport through audiences' self-reflexive consumption (Sandvoss, 2003). Through a critique of masculinist values, we have identified how male teenage Chinese fans establish elite NBA athletes as heteronormative male ideals at a transitional stage of their life journey. In particular, these teenagers' idealisation of elite NBA athletes often involves references to the *wen-wu* paradigm evolved in the post-reform era (Louie, 2002), showcasing how contemporary gender norms are configured in relation to the past and present of China. Interestingly, while establishing elite NBA athletes as male ideals, these performatively heteronormative male teenagers simultaneously mimic the sexualised slash imaginations of elite athletes developed by heterosexual women and LGBTQ audiences. Without self-reflexively contemplating the origin of the slash imaginations, these teenagers' rejection of out-group members' sports consumption illustrates their attempt to entrench gender hierarchy in sports fandom culture and beyond.

Throughout most of Chinese history, the right to decode masculinity and the relationships between men was reserved as a male privilege. It is the recent rise of heterosexual women and LGBTQ consumers' purchasing power that has led to the emergence of sexualised, homosocial male ideals (Chen, 2022). Such a destabilisation of existing gender dynamics largely takes place within the consumer market, posing no real threat to the patriarchal status quo (Meng and Huang, 2017; Tan, Liu and Kong, 2022). However, being projected through popular cultural content that has high visibility in society, such gender dynamics have antagonised the heteronormative male cohort, leading to their backlash against the cultural icons created to meet alternative consumer demands (Song, 2021). In this sense, our participants' fandom practice provides a gateway to the heteronormativity of China's public discourses, which is specific to a socio-political milieu in which male privileges are institutionally supported.

The current research contributes a meaningful extension to China's masculinity studies by showcasing the vitality of the *wen-wu* paradigm in the post-reform era. Amid globalisation being internalised in China, many studies have noted the compatibility between desirable Chinese masculinities and the Western hegemonic model (Liu, 2019; Liu and Lin, 2021). Yet, echoing Louie's (2012) scholarship, our research findings reveal that the *wen-wu* paradigm still offers an anchoring concept to decode desirable Chinese masculinities of the present day when references to *wen* remain ubiquitous in their construct. This *wen-wu* paradigm cannot be understood as a steady, unchanged model, considering the redefinition of *wen* in the context of global consumer culture (*ibid.*). Its importance has also been downgraded, due to the increased weighting of *wu* in the construction of heteronormative male ideals of the post-reform era. The rise of *wu* speaks of the socio-political engineering of the present time when the nationalist sentiments of the Chinese population are energised by intensified Sino-Western geopolitical frictions on the world stage (Zhang, 2022). It points towards the state's interference in China's post-socialist gender politics, taking the form of official propaganda calling for a 'Wolf Warrior' type of male citizen to shoulder the responsibility for the future of the nation-state (Song, 2021). On this note, the research findings reiterate the pivotal role that heteronormative gender norms play in a modern nation-state-building project (Enloe, 1989), elucidating their impacts on male teenagers' perceptions of both sport and citizenship. The research trajectory constitutes an intersectional quest, offering a conceptual basis to foreground other toxic aspects of global sports fandom culture, which often take the form of sexism (Peng, Wu and Chen, 2022; Xu *et al.*, 2022) or racism (Dickerson, 2016; Peng, Kuang and Hou, 2022), by accounting for their interconnectedness with the masculinist axis of sports spectatorship.

It is worth noting that the current research findings are based on a premise that assumes that the participants inhabit the heteronormative end of the gender spectrum. This is very likely to be the case, considering the focus group results, although the omission of explicit questions about their sexuality in the data collection might be deemed as a limitation of the research design. Despite this limitation, the research findings capture how a large cohort of Chinese male teenage fans rationalise their heteronormative understandings of masculinity through basketball, revealing the importance of sports consumption in their everyday negotiation of gender power relations. We encourage future studies to further explore teenagers' self-reflective sports consumption in China and beyond to account for the increased significance of sport in young people's leisure activities and its impact on their understanding of the self and the social milieu in which they are situated.

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