

The New York Times

'Little Fresh Meat' and the Changing Face of Masculinity in China

The embrace of a more fluid form of masculinity shows that many Chinese are frustrated with the traditional ideas pushed by the establishment.

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June 12, 2019

BEIJING — In late April, The Beijing News, a popular daily, ran a collection of profiles on Chinese millennials in celebration of the May Fourth youth holiday commemorating a 1919 student movement. Alongside a best-selling writer, an amateur architecture historian and a producer of popular science videos there was Cai Xukun, a 20-something male pop singer with such a huge following that a recent social media post of his was viewed more than 800 million times.

Mr. Cai belongs to the tribe of “little fresh meat,” a nickname, coined by fans, for young, delicate-featured, makeup-clad male entertainers. These well-groomed celebrities star in blockbuster movies, and advertise for cosmetic brands and top music charts. Their rise has been one of the biggest cultural trends of the past decade. Their image — antithetical to the patriarchal and stoic qualities traditionally associated with Chinese men — is changing the face of masculinity in China.

Innocent as they may seem, the little fresh meat have powerful critics. The state news agency Xinhua denounces what it calls “niangpao,” or “sissy pants,” culture as “pathological” and said in an editorial last September that

its popularity is eroding social order. The Beijing newspaper's decision to include Mr. Cai in its profiles apparently prompted the Communist Youth League to release its own list of young icons: patriotic athletes and scientists, whom it called the "true embodiment" of the spirit of Communist youth.

The government attacks on this evolving idea of masculinity have triggered a strong counter-backlash from fans of the celebrities. And in online essays and posts, defenders of the young men make clear that their preference is more than a youthful countercultural fad. At its heart, the embrace of a more modern, less rigid form of masculinity represents frustration with traditional ideas of manhood.

"The ridiculous condemnation of 'sissy pants' men shows the gender ideology of a patriarchal society that equates toughness with men and fragility with women," a journalist who goes by the name Wusi wrote in an online essay in September, voicing a widely shared opinion.

The official push of traditional masculinity — including reinvented school curriculums and the sponsorship of boys-only clubs — is motivated in part by worries that the decades-long one-child policy produced a generation of timid and self-centered male youth ill equipped to fulfill their social responsibilities.

And in the context of China's increasing power, the establishment's preoccupation with promoting old-fashioned, Hollywood-style manliness also has a political message. Just as patriotic intellectuals a century ago argued that national strength derives from the virile energy of the youth, present-day Chinese nationalists see their ambitions take the shape of a macho willingness to fight for righteous causes.

This vision is on display in the 2017 action thriller "Wolf Warrior 2." The movie, featuring a former People's Liberation Army soldier caught in an African civil war, showed him putting the lives of local civilians above his own while single-handedly beating American-led mercenaries. The goal of the

story, said Wu Jing, its director and lead actor, in media interviews, is to “inspire men to be real men.” The movie went on to become China’s top-grossing film in history.

There is little question about who in real life is meant to best personify the masculine chauvinism characterizing the official line today: Take a stroll down a city street or switch on the television at news hour — and you are greeted by the face of President Xi Jinping with a perennial look of self-assurance and determination.

The fans of the little fresh meat are much like their global peers in having the world at their fingertips. The Great Fire Wall has done a good job of keeping overtly politically sensitive information out of China but has had the effect of directing young people’s attention to the realm of culture. With an appreciation for everything from Japanese cosplay to American art-house films, many young Chinese people, like their counterparts around the world, see gender norms as intrinsically fluid and the insistence on prizing traditional masculine traits hopelessly out of date.

Chinese feminists have joined in supporting the shifting ideal of masculinity. Many of these feminists are successful women with large disposable incomes; their tastes and purchasing power have contributed to the rise of the young idols. In their eyes, the appeal of those idols is defined primarily in the negative, by their lack of the attitudes and behaviors symptomatic of entrenched male privilege.

Both the cultural hipsters and feminists appear united in their conviction that gender expression is unequivocally a matter of individual choice. And this flies in the face of the refrain from state media that holds that traditional masculinity is the bedrock of national strength and that this masculinity “crisis” bodes ill for the country’s future. An article posted on the WeChat account of a major Communist Party committee last fall argued that at a time

when China is bedeviled by nuclear threats at its border and a trade war from across the Pacific, the country does not want to see its men “shrieking while refreshing their makeup.”

In the past few weeks, with state media awash in patriotic rhetoric urging China to “man up” in the face of the escalating trade war, the little fresh meat fever has continued unabated.

The Konka Group, a Chinese maker of home electronics, an industry embroiled in the trade dispute with President Trump, released a commercial last month starring Lu Han, one of the best-known idols. Zhou Bin, the company’s chief executive, said in media interviews that the decision was prompted by Mr. Lu’s enormous popularity among millennials, who have become its core consumer group.

The commercial was widely applauded on social media. Fans quipped that the popularity of little fresh meat, rather than a sign of national weakness, may signal the foundation of its strength. “Youthful, modern and fashionable,” one user summed up the idols’ appeal in a post on Weibo. “That is what we love.”

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