

NATIONAL YOUTH ROLE MODELS AND THE NEGOTIATION OF MASCULINITY: THE PATHWAYS TO THE CULTURAL CULTIVATION OF THE FOSTERED IDOLS- A CASE STUDY OF TEENS IN TIMES

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Abstract: Amidst China's Qing Lang movement, characterized by stringent regulations within the entertainment industry, the fostered idols who embrace the philosophy of "fans witnessing idol growth" confront dual crises: immature artworks and female masculinity. The study takes Teens In Times, one of the most successful male idol groups in contemporary Chinese mainland, as the central case. Through a combined methodology of textual analysis of media content and participatory observations within the online fan community, we analyze the legitimate pathways to the cultural cultivation of the fostered idols in the Chinese context. The study finds that through the repositioning of Teens In Times, its identity is legitimized as a youth role model in China. This process facilitates the dissemination and internalization of dominant ideologies among the younger generation, while simultaneously fostering the positive energy within the idol fandom culture. And through portraying of "shonen" and "brotherhood", Teens In Times has demonstrated a hybrid masculinity that intertwines puppy love, chinoiserie, and nationalism. This approach not only addresses the alternative desires of young female fans transcending traditional masculinity norms, but also aligns with the nation's expectations for youth development in the new era, echoing patriotic education and cultural confidence. The study concludes that as a distinctive cultural phenomenon, the fostered idols are the dynamic objects shaped by the forces of the fandom, the capital and the state. These pop idols function as vital junctures, bridging the national mainstream ideological compass with the ever-evolving societal consumption patterns. Furthermore, their celebrity images undergo a process of reconfiguration, negotiation, and cultivation within the intricate landscape of commercial markets and state-orchestrated cultural regulation and governance.

Keywords: Fostered idols; Youth subculture; Masculinity; Entertainment industry; Mainstream culture

1 INTRODUCTION

Teens In Times is a 7-member male idol group launched on November 23, 2019 by Chinese mainland agency Time Fengjun Entertainment, with members aged 14-17 years old at the time of their debut, continuing the concept of "Witnessing an idol grow from an unknown teenager to a shining star" of the company's predecessor, TF Boys. It is worth noting that in the Chinese mainland context, there are two understandings of the concept of "fostering", the first of which is because the talent shows are also called idol fostering programs in the mainland, and "fostering" refers to all the talent show stars who debut as amateurs and rely on their fans to vote for them to debut. The second understanding of the term is closer to the meaning of gradually growing from an "immature state," and refers specifically to groups or individuals who debut from companies that specialize in training trainees and fostered idols, such as Time Fengjun Entertainment. In this article, we focus on the latter. Teens In Times is one of the most successful male idol groups in Chinese mainland in recent years, whose latest digital album, Utopia Boys, released in 2023, sold more than 100 million copies in less than five minutes. From TF Boys to Teens In Times, the three typical features of Times Fengjun's fostering system model are underage males, long-term group and a high degree of fan companionship. Instead of highlighting the production of high-quality media content, Times Fengjun focuses on presenting the idols' true colors and growth processes, such as the cuteness of young boys and the intimate interactions between group members, etc. Heterosexual female fans' love for fostered idols is attributed to "soft masculinity" and "queering stars"[1-3].

However, since 2020, under the Qing Lang movement to regulate the entertainment industry, Chinese mainland has cracked down on idol-fostering variety shows, effeminate cultural aesthetics, and homoerotic media texts, raising the bar at the national level for a complete idol industry model centered on high-quality output from the celebrities, and increasing sensitivity to masculinity, and to normalize the governance of the traffic stars. As mentioned above, the first model has been completely outlawed in Chinese mainland in recent years, and can be considered a landmark event in the strict governance of the traffic stars, including the "Notice on Further Strengthening the Management of Literary and Artistic Programs and Their Personnel" and the "Notice on the Implementation of Comprehensive Governance Work in the Field of Culture and Entertainment" issued by the General Administration of Radio and Television and the Central Propaganda Department, respectively, have meant that tolerance for non-mainstream male aesthetics has been

greatly reduced. The male fostered idols bear the brunt of the sharp contradictions, and the Teens In Times have to deal with the immature idol industry chain where the development of idol culture is lagging behind that of fan culture [4], the ambiguity of masculinity, and the intimate relationships between the members, as well as the continuous negotiation with the fandom and the state forces in order to manufacture the legitimate and charismatic idols in the socialist context. This also leads to the central question of this paper: what makes the fostered idols represented by Teens In Times “negotiable” and therefore “sustainable”?

Most scholars in Chinese mainland study the “fostered idols” from the perspectives of para-intimacy [5], the use of new media technology [6-7], emotional consumption by fans [8], and irrational actions in the fan circle [9], highlighting the decisive role of new media technology in the change of cultural and economic models, but in the end, they often end up only in and return to the critical logic of the political economy of communication linked to the development of digital technology and the monopolization of platforms and the disorderly expansion of capital. International academic research on the fostering system in Chinese mainland is even more lacking, either directly applying the framework of Japanese idol culture to analyze the girl group SNH48 [10], or failing to make a careful distinction among the fostered idols, the talent show stars and traffic stars [11]. Previous studies have paid less attention to the socio-cultural backgrounds of Chinese mainland, especially the impact of changing policies on the entertainment industry on the shaping of idols, which directly influences the mediated presentation of idols and the participation of fans. In addition, the gender factor needs to be specifically discussed, given that women are still a central component of idol fan culture. The researcher argues that Teens In Times is a product of the reconciliation of the female consumer market and the socialist state, and that its commercial success reflects a balance between fan demand and mainstream discourse.

This paper integrates the research methods of textual analysis and participant observation, by interpreting the publicly released works and media texts of the Teens In Times (TNT hereafter) from their debut variety show in 2019 to the present day and observing the fan community on the Sina Weibo platform. The researcher first tries to reposition its identity, secondly goes on to analyze how TNT negotiates masculinity and queerness, and finally summarizes the complex relationship between the state, the idol industry, and fans in the Chinese mainland context. The researcher has closely followed the online fan communities of the group as well as the individual members since January 2020, witnessing the evolution of this cultural commodity, and possessing the accumulation of empirical materials over a long period of time, which helps to enrich the findings of the study. When using the online corpus of unofficial commercial texts in the following article, the researcher follows two different ways of presentation: for the publicly released texts on the Sina Weibo platform, the researcher chooses to quote them directly with quotation marks; for the non-publicly discussed texts within the fan community, the researcher will paraphrase and summarize them without violating the original intention of the fans or hurting the feelings of the community, so as to balance the clarity of the case study and the ethics of the academic research. It should be noted that the original texts used were all written in Chinese and translated into English by the researcher whose native language is Chinese.

2 NATIONAL YOUTH ROLE MODEL: THE IDENTITY OF TEENS IN TIMES

Previous studies have suggested that Chinese mainland’s fostered idols were inspired by AKB48 and other sister groups founded by Yasushi Akimoto and the Johnny&Associates. The Japanese fostered idols do not necessarily have to have excellent vocal and dance abilities like Korean professional idols, but rather they win fans’ love by witnessing growth and affinity [10]. However, TNT cannot be seen entirely as a mainland version of Japanese idol culture. Compared to Japanese idols, the relationship between TNT and their fans is different, and as a fostered group, they have not fully realized the “accessible and growing idol” after their debut [10], although there is an official Fan club - a mobile app to keep up with the idol’s information and to build the online fan community, but the debut is almost synchronized with the COVID-19, there are not many opportunities for activities after 2019. However, there is no need to use the COVID-19 as a reason for the lack of idol professionalism. As early as December 7, 2022, China’s State Council has issued the “10 New Measures” for the COVID-19, entering the regular epidemic prevention and control period, and all social activities will no longer be significantly affected by the epidemic. Entertainment programs have also resumed one after another, reactivating the performance market, but TNT’s concerts have taken a different route by choosing to be held in more remote coastal cities such as Haikou and Macau, and only twice a year, which seems to make it difficult to satisfy the fans’ need for intimacy with their idols. In fact, in observing the online fan community, the researcher found that although new media technology was very conducive to the construction of “para-social relationships”, in recent years, due to the conflicting schedules of members’ university coursework and their acting careers, as well as the stark contrast in the amount of exposure they receive with other Chinese stars, many fans are no longer satisfied with the limited amount of time available for them to meet their idols. Some even create huge psychological gaps compared to the rich content updates when they “just became fans”: “There are fewer stages, no materials, and in addition to some endorsements, I haven’t seen any media exposure during the whole summer vacation.” “There was no concert last year, shouldn’t we step up our planning this year? It’s the middle of June and I haven’t heard anything new.” The chronological description of fans’ emotional changes reminds us that using only “para intimacy” and “fans’ emotional attachment” as a unique explanation for the TNT’s sustainable development model may be too simplistic and unconvincing.

Another explanation for the frequent emergence of mainland idol groups in recent years is the borrowing of South Korean idol talent shows. In 2016, South Korean music channel Mnet launched the first season of Produce 101, the program was a big hit, not only South Korea's other domestic TV channels follow suit to produce similar idol talent shows, but also remade in China as "Idol Producer" "Youth with You", etc. and harvested a large number of "idol fans" [12]. In fact, TNT is indeed a first aid product launched in a timely manner by its agency under the popularity of the Korean talent shows in the mainland, in order to compete for the mainland market that has been seized by the fostered idol groups. To a certain extent, TNT and talent show stars have the same origin. Its debut variety show draws on the common in-house talent show model in South Korea. It was originally expected to select the top 5 from the company's 7 trainees to debut, but in the end it was decided by fan voting. All 7 people debut and form a long-term group with ranking. However, there is also a big difference between the TNT and Korean idols, because the latter are produced as national cultural products by entertainment companies through the "trainee system" and require years of training to become all-round artists by the time of their debut, thus achieving success in both the local and global markets [12]. This is contrary to the core concept of the fostering system, and in an environment where the physical record industry is in decline, overseas streaming channels are closed, but the domestic consumer market is vast and the pressure of competition is weak, it is also unlikely that the soil for fostering high-quality idols will be able to realize the manufacture of idols like those large-scale South Korean companies. This is also evidenced by analyzing the albums and songs of TNT since their debut. Most of the songs of them were never intended for the international market. Taking the chinoiserie song "Vermilion Bird" as an example, the theme of the song is based on the ancient Chinese myth. The lyrics are difficult, and there is no rich story line and plot setting in the music video, leaving a serious cultural discount. By the standards of the two widely successful operation models in the idol industry in Japan and South Korea, TNT is not mature, neither the "the work of emotion" that subverts the unequal relationship between idols and fans in Japanese idol culture [13], nor the "entertainment industrial system" in South Korea [14]. Although there are different degrees of imitation to both, they have not reproduced a consistent path in the process of global localization, nor have they explored a universally convincing career path for idols. Their agency, Times Fengjun, has admitted in an apology announcement to fans that "there is a big gap between us and the mature markets of Japan and Korea." This sentence actually reveals rich information from the side about the asynchrony between domestic idol culture and the fan culture in Chinese mainland [4]. And this is the reason why many studies have followed the theory of political economy of communication to interpret the relationship between idols and fans in China's pan-fostering system: the digital technology and social media platforms empowering fans to selectively manufacture idols, although seemingly holding the initiative, the search for subjective identity is the result of fan labor being exploited by industry capital that emphasizes economic interests over social benefits and cultural responsibility.

However, the above concerns have come to an abrupt end, ignoring further discussion: firstly, idols created by fans that do not match the mature industry model will always be caught in the controversy of "traffic stars", which is not conducive to the long-term healthy development of the media and culture industry, and in recent years has become a typical target of national governance. Secondly, fans can naturally distinguish between "traffic stars" benefiting from the fan economy and well-known singers and actors born from the traditional star-making system. The latter's success is considered to be the return of artistic talent [14], fans do not have much qualification to blame, the former highlights the fan consumption power in the cultural and entertainment industry [15]. However, previous studies have focused more on the unconditional love from the fans, but in fact, the strong controversy encountered by the former will also negatively affect the fans' persistent identity. And the fans have the possibility of self-stigmatization and reduced sense of belonging. There are also opportunities for fans to imagine the possibility of resisting capital and regaining power through the identity boundary work and relationship reversal of "breaking up with the idols" or even "canceling the celebrities" [16]. This is precisely the awkward situation faced by TNT, in which two questions need to be answered: first, can idols dependent on the fan economy have the opportunity to seek the legitimacy of a larger circle to survive, and how does the TNT differentiate themselves from the traffic stars and talent show stars that have been explicitly rectified in recent years? Secondly, as the primary supporters, how do fans maintain the psychological needs and identities that are centered on the highly stigmatized idols? Therefore, it is necessary to reposition the identity of TNT, which is a Chinese sample formed after hybridizing Japanese and Korean idol cultures, and is not only fan-based and culture industry-based, but also nation-based.

On the surface, TNT's representation of Chinese pop culture is in a state of ambivalence, although their work actually lacks international competitiveness, or more accurately, a temporary lack of cross-cultural communication ability, and has not achieved the effect of exporting Chinese culture to the outside world. However, this does not prevent them from becoming national idols and appearing on important occasions, such as the 2021 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, just one year after their debut. In terms of the usual standards of judgment, the traffic stars are "not worthy of their position". However, the definition of the "national" value of pop idols should be viewed from a different perspective, as their cultural value is not only to let the international community and the general public understand the voice of China, but also to let the youth netizens accept the mainstream culture. As scholars have said, "mainstream media + traffic stars" is a typical mainstream value dissemination model [17]. And the publicity value of the mainstream discourse bridges the immaturity of idol works, because this is the youth pop culture that should be mainstreamed in China. The Chinese government needs pop idols that do not transgress the boundaries of the national discourse, and will give media

exposure to youth idols with a large fan base and the potential to positively influence [18]. As in the case of the TNT, they have sung songs to promote the spirit of the 19th Fifth Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and songs celebrating the spirit of the manned space program. Obviously, these are not market-oriented pop music, but softens the seriousness of national mainstream ideological guidance and dissemination [17], which not only helps to promote the formation and internalization of concepts among youth groups, but also indirectly enhances the recognition and reputation of TNT in the entertainment industry.

Therefore, as a group that has to maintain recognition at the national level, both TNT and its fans need to actively support national policies. Firstly, fans would readily embrace the national regard and praise for youth idols. The endorsement by mainstream media rationalizes the idol's identity, and they would collectively participate in this national pop culture project with a heightened sense of collective honor towards the nation [19]. Even though the identity of the fans varies within the fandom, there is a consensus on the title "China's No. 1 Boys' Group" and the status is maintained through material and emotional support. Fans emphasize the differences between TNT and other talent show stars. One of the most important points is that although they debuted at a young age, they are "part-time", have not neglected their studies, are unlikely to ruin their reputation. They are role models who are good at both skills and education. Taking the college entrance exams and going to college is a necessary part of the fostered idols, and it is more important to be a Chinese teenager with communist background and a good socialist art worker than to be a professional idol.

Secondly, the Qing Lang movement launched by the State in May 2020 cracks down on "worshiping the idols without ethical boundary", including the banning of offline fan support and gatherings. In order not to hinder the development of their idols in Chinese mainland, fans will consciously support the state's regulations and accept the control of irrational behaviors. For example, when the fan community discussed why they chose to hold concerts in more remote coastal cities such as Haikou and Macao, some fans concluded that holding concerts in mega-cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou might cause large-scale crowd gatherings and disruption of social order, while others self-analyzed that the negative online public opinion events in the past led to the local administrations having to tighten up the approval of TNT concerts: "Don't mess around, so we can meet more often, or it will directly affect the approval process, and we won't be approved anywhere. Don't gather off-site, don't support them irrationally!!!" "Calm down, don't be impulsive, the public order is definitely one of the considerations. If we perform well this time, there will be more and more offline activities in the future." They believe that the huge number of fans, which is difficult to manage in a unified manner, makes it necessary for TNT to be more careful in planning their schedules. The barbaric growth and rapid development of the irrational fan circle makes the smooth and orderly development of idols full of uncertainty. Under the support of national arrangement and idol's career development, the moderate compromise and sacrifice of fans' experience and the constraints on behaviors have evolved into: under the positive influence of youth idols, fans follow them to practice "positive energy" [20], which will ultimately return positively to the idols themselves.

From the above observations, we can see that the state seeks youthful expressions of mainstream values by means of "articulation". Pop idols and their fans, on the other hand, cooperate with the national discourse by means of "attachment" and "self-discipline". "Attachment" legitimizes the idol's professional identity, while self-discipline transfers and undertakes the contradictions of the idol's identity by recognizing and correcting irrational fan behavior. At the national level, macro-policies on the entertainment industry transformed into more practical ways of managing the anomie of the fandom. Pop idols become an intermediate link between mainstream culture and youth subculture, achieving a more pronounced cultural governance effect. Fans also do not weaken their emotional identification with the idol and gain a higher level of value recognition. Finally, as a male idol group, the following section discusses the gender dimension, another focus of governance in the entertainment industry in recent years. The researcher will focus on how TNT negotiated masculinity in the face of the crackdown on effeminate cultural aesthetics and queer media texts.

3 NATION AND YOUTH: THE HYBRID MASCULINITY OF TEENS IN TIMES

As a group of beautiful teenagers, the most criticized thing about TNT, apart from the lack of quality works, is the lack of masculinity. Feminine young male stars are labeled as "sissies" by the official media in Chinese mainland [2]. Therefore, born under the socialist state system and responsible for leading the mainstream values, TNT must perform appropriate masculinity to avoid direct conflict with the mainstream discourse.

However, because the young fans of TNT are basically biological female, they are not destined to perform the hyper-masculinity. Scholars have pointed out that, under the influence of transnational cultural flows between Japan and South Korea, "Pan-East Asian soft masculinity" has become popular in Chinese mainland's fan culture since 2010, referring to young, good-looking, handsome, and feminine male idols [2]. It has evolved into the term "little fresh meat" in China. Female fans project their emotional pleasure on the consumerist culture of male beauty [21], which not only reflects young Chinese women's fantasies about new masculinity, but also reflects the changing gender power relations in Chinese society. In a sense, the aesthetic appeal and "selling point" of fostered idols is the presentation of soft masculinity. And if the national discourse is not adapted to the cultural context, then the idols will lose the flourishing female-oriented market. For example, fans were once disgusted and skeptical when they first heard the title

of TNT new song, “Men’s Song,” before they even saw the stage performance. They felt that the word “men” was too masculine and straightforward, and did not take into account the audience psychology of female fans and diverse gender demands: “While I was still trying to change the outrageous views of those around me about how men with long hair aren’t masculine, my idol came out with a song to pander to so-called national policy. It was really ironic.” They are also not allowed to perform overly sexy masculinity, underage means that they have to be desexualized [22], and the presentation of sexy masculinity often means that there has to be a female partner. Although it is easy to establish the dominant gender image in gender relations, it is less acceptable to fans who see male idols as “lovers” [23-24]. At the Macau concert held in November 2023, even though the TNT were all adults at this point, some fans expressed extreme dissatisfaction on social media platforms after the three members and three female backup dancers completed their collaborative stage in close proximity to each other: “Honestly I am okay with male idols having close interactions with girls at work. But I don’t understand, knowing that most people can’t accept the presence of girls, why they added girls in the performance?”

So how does the TNT perform appropriate masculinity and negotiate it with the state and their fans? The researcher used songs and performance videos from the TNT’s two digital albums as texts to analyze their performances of masculinity, and found that they display a hybrid masculinity that mixes puppy love, chinoiserie, and nationalism.

“Desexualized” does not mean that love is shunned. Since their debut there has been no shortage of songs with love as the main theme, but the expressions of love are simple and naive, and can be interpreted as romantic fantasies of those who have not really experienced an intimate relationship. The referent objects of all the lyrics are generalized heterosexuals, weaving sweet dreams belonging to the fans. TNT also connect masculinity to the discourses of teenager and the nation. TNT likes to emphasize the concept of “shonen”: “I often wonder if the emergence of TNT will redefine the connotation of shonen, full of tension and courage, with the unique appeal of the transition between boy and man. Being in the flood of the entertainment industry has never dulled their curiosity and innocence about the world.” There is no clear academic definition of “shonen”, but combining the discourse in the fan community and Wikipedia’s definition, teenager means a human being aged between 12-17, it can be seen that shonen refers to a stage in life where secondary sexual characteristics are not yet fully revealed. As a group that promotes itself as shonen, TNT has avoided the strong controversy over “sissy” and the strict scrutiny of “masculinity”. The “teenager” and “man” are not subject to the same set of judgment standards, and “shonen” does not emphasize the importance of gender in the Chinese context [25], they only need to display a healthy, positive and innocent youthful image. As females, fans like biological males who are “not yet a man”, not only not escaping the heteronormative presuppositions, but also compensating for the disappointment of older mature males in real life. From the perspective of consumer value perception, the discourse rhetoric of “shonen” also masks the commodity nature of the group and lowers the threshold of cultural practice, packaging the group as brave teenage dreamers rather than capitalist profit-making puppets and perfect but impersonal media persona symbols.

The fusion of national styles and ethnic cultures in the songs also allows for a presentation of masculinity that is not limited to physical masculinity and toughness. The Chinese ideal of masculinity is conceptualized as “wen-wu”, meaning that men should couple strength and gentleness, and shoulder the responsibility for the future of the nation-state [2]. This challenges the monopoly of hegemonic masculinity and provides a negotiable space. For example, on the stage of the performance of the national style song “Enchanted”, the members of the TNT wore orthodox hanboks and casual pants, and their clothes were all in pink and white. They interpreted the elements of the new Chinese national trend, which embodied the “new national romance” of the integration of national classics and modern popularity, and the inheritance of the national cultures made it possible for the “male beauty” to be allowed under the hegemonic gender politics that highlights binary gender temperament. Through the hybrid masculinity performance mentioned above, not only does it cater to the country’s expectations for the growth of young people in the new era, but it also recites patriotic education and national cultural confidence. And it does not make fans feel uncomfortable in any way. The close overlap of masculinity and nationalism, and the consistent unity of the group’s persona and song styles, on the contrary, differentiates the group from other idols that blindly follow Japanese and Korean fashions, and strengthens the emotional cohesion of the fans towards the “domestic idols”.

4 THE AMBIGUOUS IMAGINATION OF QUEERNESS IN THE NARRATIVE OF “BROTHERHOOD”

The subversion of male aesthetic hegemony by female fans is reflected both in the preference for young, handsome boys and in the outlining of romantic narratives between men [2]. Fans of TNT not only pay attention to the single members, but are also attracted to the “CP”. Queer fans are important contributors to contemporary pop culture, and the commercialization of same-sex intimacy is common [26-27]. However, with increasing sensitivity to queer media texts, there is also a need to negotiate the controversy of “queer-baiting” [28]. The TNT exemplify how the same-sex intimate relationship can be integrated into the narrative of “brotherhood”.

Brotherhood is a big part of what Time Boys present through the medium, and the friendly interactions between the members are a big focus of the group. Since there are 7 members in the group, when there is a need for group activities, the group is also divided into 2, 2 and 3 members to ensure that no one is left behind and that there are shots of multiple people interacting with each other. From the debut of the group’s slogan is “TNT go forward side by side”, each debut

anniversary will emphasize that the focus on team development, which is also the core essence of the fostered idols. Through the company and the fans recording the growth of the young people, they are more like good brothers growing up together rather than colleagues. The seven members joined the company in 2013-2017, and the long hours spent together not only accumulated a deep sense of brotherhood, but also provided fans with the “realistic background” for writing fan fictions with the uninterrupted material before their debut. The popular CPs of TNT have a large number of fans, and many of their homoerotic stories are based on how they met in reality. Therefore, although the company has even specifically induced fans to pay money to vote for a duo that they want to have a collaboration stage, there is no explicit hint that there is same-sex love in the group, but only continues to prove and make fans believe that the whole group is “very lovely”, that any two people have a good relationship, and that the group is worthy of being loved [29]. Using “brotherhood” as a cornerstone of male idol groups is a wise choice, not only opening up a hidden space in the queer narrative, but also because brotherhood and teamwork are, in turn, symbols of masculinity, weakening the association of femininity with queer stereotypes [30]. In addition, the Qing Lang movement has expressed the need to rectify “fan conflicts”, “blind consumption”, and so on, in the Chinese mainland fan circle. At this time, there are two additional benefits of emphasizing “brotherhood”: first, under the frequent discourse conflicts among only fans, CP fans, and group fans, it at least reflects the company’s positive guidance to the fans, with no intention to exacerbate the conflicts between the fans, and expresses its support for the national policy. Secondly, “brotherhood” symbolizes the material or spiritual existence of the group. The survival of the group determines the basis of the idol’s professional identity. This expresses the symbolic importance that the company places on the idol’s professional development.

The interactions of the TNT aren’t typical queer narrative either. In other words, when they do interact, they don’t really cross any lines with each other. Take for example the “Xianglin CP” (Yan Haoxiang and He Junlin, both are members of TNT), who have performed together many times. When preparing for their collaborative stage performance, He Junlin had trouble grasping the emotion of the song, and Yan Haoxiang told him, “We’re singing to our fans, but I’m singing to you.” The highlights video released by the official account did not subtitle the latter line, though it did not delete the sound. Fans can accomplish the imagining of queer intimacy under the framework of friendship, or they can chalk it up to the fact that it is just imagination rather than reality, and does not really affect the idol’s sexual orientation. Queer fans are looking for evidence and seeking pleasure in media texts where same-sex desires and romantic interactions actually don’t exist under the dominant ideology [30]. Yan Haoxiang and He Junlin went to the hospital to experience labor pains under the arrangement of the company. When He was nervous, he extended his hand and Yan saw it and held it back, showing He’s dependence on Yan and Yan’s concern for him. In this relationship, He is portrayed by fans as an “androgyny” and Yan as a doting husband. But the context of the story is this: a man goes to experience a woman’s labor pains. The subtle ambiguity has been successfully transformed into the excellent qualities and caring masculinity of a male idol who is willing to persevere even if he is afraid of pain, and who is considerate to women. The same-sex physical and emotional intimacy generated between idols was eventually resolved by transforming into heterosexual relationships without violating media supervision. Thus, for the CP fans of TNT, they enjoy not only the romantic queer story, but also the female gaze of two males. This avoids a potential crisis in a social context where same-sex real intimacy is strictly prohibited. The plausible queer plot strikes a harmonious balance between fans and capital. Capital does not need to risk too much to break through state constraints, and fans have ample room for free play.

5 CONCLUSIONS

As a boy group that promotes the idea of “fans witnessing the growth of idols”, TNT has encountered a double crisis of an imperfect idol industry model and blurred masculinity under the Qing Lang movement that strictly regulates the entertainment industry. Through the repositioning of TNT, the group’s identity has been legitimized as a youth role model in Chinese pop culture, and its endorsement of mainstream discourse has bridged the immaturity of the idol industry, and has called upon the fans’ sense of national pride and fostered a positive fan culture. Through their performances of “shonen” and “brotherhood”, the TNT have demonstrated the hybrid masculinity of puppy love, chinoiserie, and nationalism. By integrating same-sex intimate relationships into friendships and romantic narratives of the opposite sex, they not only compensates for fans’ dissatisfaction with hegemony masculinity and reserves space for fans’ creative practices, but also does not deviate from the constraints of the heteronormativity, and realizes a balance of masculinity and queerness between fans’ needs and national requirements.

The research endeavors to uncover the cultural connotations of the term “fostering”, aiming to transcend the “empowerment-exploitation” dichotomy that has dominated Chinese idol fan studies during the post talent shows era, which is heavily influenced by theories of the political economy of communication. This study emphasizes the temporal context and the multiplicity of power dynamics. By considering fostered idols as unique cultural phenomenon, it complements the existing cultural studies approach by offering a more nuanced examination of these practices within the broader landscape of popular culture. The study concludes that the fostered idols are the dynamic objects shaped by the forces of the fandom, the capital and the state. Male celebrities themselves are typical micro texts in Chinese entertainment industry. These pop idols serve as the meeting points that bridge the national mainstream ideological

direction with the evolving societal consumption trends. Furthermore, the images of the celebrities are reconfigured, negotiated, and fostered within the realm of commercial markets and state-driven cultural regulation and governance.

COMPETING INTEREST

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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