

MARKETING

Are China's "Little Fresh Meat" idols losing their luster?

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Major platforms such as iQiyi and Tencent are recruiting diverse faces for their competition shows. Does this mean China's idol aesthetic is changing? Image credit: Produce Panda's Weibo

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Among 100 idol hopefuls, five boys stand out.

Well, "boys" may not be the right word to describe them. "Men" is perhaps more appropriate, considering the oldest of the quintet is 31, and even the youngest looks more mature than his doll-faced peers.

Sporting facial hair and tracksuits in the opening episode of *Youth With You 3*, the third season of [iQiyi's hit reality show](#), the Produce Pandas seem more like misplaced staff members than competitors at first glance.

Dubbed China's "XXL boyband," the singing and dancing group certainly does not fit the usual mold of male celebrities.

Yet, with the prevalence of China's "Little Fresh Meat" aesthetic over the years thin, dainty boys decked out in extravagant outfits many of the show's viewers found them to be a breath of fresh air.

Others, however, complained that they were [lowering the standard](#) for idols with their heavier, scruffier appearances.

Since 2018, survival shows like *Youth With You 3* have become incubators for the country's next KOLs, helping multi-hyphenated talents amass large followings and gain the attention of global brands.

At the same time, fashion and luxury names have also been eager to collaborate with these youths, as their [dedicated fans](#) are often willing to shell out millions to show them their support.

So, with idols playing a starring role in brand marketing strategies, what does it mean when mainstream programs such as *Youth With You 3* and Tencent's *Chuang 2021* start showcasing contestants that go against beauty conventions? Here, *Jing Daily* examines whether China's idol scene is becoming more diverse and what opportunities a change could offer luxury brands.

Female idols blaze the trail for diverse beauty

While subverting beauty standards has been a growing trend in China, it is mostly reaching women, observed Laurence Lim Dally, founder of [Cherry Blossom Intercultural Branding](#).

From Li Yuchun, a tomboyish pop star who won the singing contest *Super Girl* in 2005, to the "handsome youths" of Fanxy Red, more female idols are steering clear of the cookie-cutter, "cutesy girl group" image and carving out space for aesthetic diversity.

This trend was amplified last year when two members of Fanxy Red, along with the androgynous singer Liu Yuxin, competed in *Youth With You 2*. With their shorts, swagger, and perfectly coiffed hair, the popular trio helped bring the show's theme of "not defining a girl group" ("") to the forefront and sparked conversations about challenging stereotypes.

As Liu Yuxin, the season's contestant to receive the most votes, said in a [Harper's Bazaar](#) video, "They say girls should not be too handsome. I say mistaking a girl's coolness for being handsome is too shallow."

According to Mr. Dally, androgynous women express their individuality in a context of historically standardized beauty codes and censorship. As such, these gender-neutral stars are seen as role models who help brands not only spice up their image but also resonate with [luxury's largest driving force](#).

"With these idols, brands can make being a trailblazer' and breaking the standards' a part of their storytelling," said Allison Malmsten, a market analyst at [Daxue Consulting](#).

"Many brands aim to target empowered young Chinese women not only for their consumption power but for their [market influence](#)," she said.

Brands such as Dior, G-SHOCK and Sofy have already taken note, tapping Liu Yuxin to front their campaigns touting individuality and girl power.

"Little Fresh Meat" still takes the cake

In contrast, when it comes to representing masculinity among idols, China's effeminate Little Fresh Meat look still dominates. But this is no surprise since the term itself is such a money-maker.

"[Little Fresh Meat] is a title people [marketers, media, brands] know will attract fans and consumers," said Yishu Wang, a director at the marketing agency [Half A World](#), to *Jing Daily*. "So it gets used on a wide range of male idols who are young and good-looking."

Luxury brands have also jumped on this craze.

Last month, Tiffany & Co. promoted the TFBoys' [Jackson Yee from regional ambassador to its global face](#).

Meanwhile, Prada and Givenchy have joined hands with iQiyi darlings [Cai Xukun](#) and [Fan Chengcheng](#), respectively.

As to why luxury continues to tap these idols, Ms. Wang said, "The majority of the fans of Little Fresh Meat idols are Gen Zers and young millennials, who are also the target consumers for luxury brands in China."

But as Little Fresh Meat becomes the norm, ironically, what is common has become the exception.

Over the last few months, the [Produce Pandas](#) have made global headlines for their humble looks and down-to-earth personalities, hoping to show the world "ordinary people can achieve ordinary dreams on stage."

Although spoiler the members were eventually voted off the show, it is interesting to note that their fans are largely based overseas or [in the gay community](#) a reminder that unconventional KOLs can be used to target niche demographics.

Despite their super fans, foreign idols are a gamble

While Little Fresh Meat idols reign supreme, one thing has started to change: their passports.

Although few global talents have competed, much less debuted, on Chinese programs, Tencent's *Chuang 2021* chugged ahead with its ambitions to form an "international boyband" even comically roping in [one unwilling Russian](#) translator to fill its quota for foreign participants.

These efforts culminated in the launch of the group [INTO1](#), with seven of the 11 members being non-Chinese citizens from the United States, Japan and Thailand.

So far, this soft power push is paying off.

Compared to *Chuang 2020*, this season saw a significant interest spike abroad, with the term "Chuang 2021" becoming most-searched in Thailand and Singapore, followed by Russia, Western Europe and North America, Malmsten said. In fact, the final episode alone garnered **4.77 billion views** while fan donations for the season exceeded **\$22 million**, emphasizing the cross-cultural appeal of these fresh faces.

Of course, current political tensions can make teaming up with foreign idols tricky.

"Not only is there a risk that the idol themselves could do something wrong, but there is also an issue of the agency they are tied to," Ms. Malmsten said.

In March, several popular Japanese contestants on *Chuang 2021* were **embroiled in controversy** when the Chinese Communist Youth League revealed on Weibo that their representative agency, RBW, had listed Taiwan as a separate country on its site.

And recently, just days ahead of what was supposed to be *Youth With You 3's* finale, Chinese frontrunner **Tony Yu was forced to withdraw** after a clip of him claiming to be Canadian on another variety show resurfaced, stirring online debate over his nationality.

The message to brands here is clear: Tread carefully, as netizens will be the first to call them out if they cross the line.

Sameness prevails for now

It is hard to say that China's idol aesthetic has changed drastically. Ultimately, those voted to win these survival shows still tend to fit within China's narrow definition of beauty.

Moreover, due to **diverging ideas of inclusion**, the racial, LGBTQ+ and body diversity that Western consumers have increasingly come to expect from brands are not necessarily what local counterparts want to see.

Nonetheless, the tide is slowly turning.

Older female idols are making waves. Brands such as **Neiwai** are proudly promoting "normal" bodies. Netizens are shutting down **skinny fads**. And idol hopefuls who are curvy, androgynous, bald or even non-Chinese have embraced their individuality and entered the ring.

So, while Little Fresh Meat is not going anywhere, perhaps brands should be expanding their lineup of idols to stand out and steer meaningful conversations rather than risk going stale.

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