

China's government is targeting 'sissy' men, with devastating consequences

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A culture war being waged on 'abnormal gender aesthetics' is punishing young men who stray beyond rigid gender norms.

Reaching for his foundation and beauty blender, Pan Ning tells *gal-dem* that men like him are not welcomed in his country. "Society expects men to be warriors and accuses effeminate boys of being 'perverts,'" says the 23 year old college graduate, speaking via Zoom from Shanghai, China.

In recent years, the Chinese government has been fighting to eradicate what it deems "[abnormal gender aesthetics](#)" - such as an 'androgynous' wardrobe and boys wearing heavy makeup - in schools and the entertainment industry. But recently, their campaign has stepped up a notch, following the [rise in popularity and style of 'effeminate' male idols](#).

Aiming to develop a "[healthy](#)" cultural environment for the next generation and to succeed in the [national rejuvenation](#) - President Xi Jinping's plan for the country to enter a new era - the Chinese government has introduced a raft of legislation across popular culture and society, waging a war against what it deems to be unorthodox masculine expressions and calling to "save our boys" from the so-called '[masculinity crisis](#)'. The latest example came in early January, when the state's National Radio and Television Administration banned love dramas and talent shows centring boys, following last [September](#)'s ban on 'sissy' male celebrity idols.

China's masculinity crisis stems from [long-standing](#) reinforced stereotypes of genders and homophobia, according to Lü Pin, a leading Chinese feminist activist who has been fighting gender-based discrimination since the late 1990s. "Women are considered inferior, obedient, and are not able to retain power in the office," Lü tells *gal-dem* via phone from New Jersey, where she now lives. "That's why when boys don't conform to gender norms as a masculine tough guy, the government gets worried. They are afraid that men will lose their dominant power in everything."

'Training boys to be 'real men'

The proclamations have come from across different layers of the Chinese government, largely aimed at male teenagers. State media too has played a role, reinforcing this messaging by arguing that a [lack of exercise](#) has spoiled many young men and made them too 'soft' for the military. In 2018, several [military training programs](#) emerged all over the country, designed to "train boys to be real men". The '[Real Boys Club](#)', founded in 2012 in Beijing, teaches boys to play golf, go sailing, and American football.

In January 2021, China's Education Ministry [responded](#) to a proposal on preventing the "feminization" of male teenagers, saying that the country should recruit more gym instructors to improve male students' "masculinity power".

And in May 2021, top politician Si Zefu [argued](#) that Chinese male teenagers are "soft, self-abased,

and timid” and these ‘sissy’ boys may be “a threat to the development and survival of the nation”. Si further claimed that the country’s loss of masculinity lies in the “feminine environment” that most children were raised in.

The “save our boys” slogan has been taking root in schools across the nation for four years. An elementary school principal working in Hangzhou, who gave her name as ‘Zhou’, told *gal-dem* that her institution had started hiring more male teachers and implementing more physical training activities since 2018, in response to state pressure.

“The policies make us worried that if we have too many female teachers, then we may be in trouble,” says Zhou. “We are taking the gender ratio into account more seriously these days.”

Targeting ‘abnormal aesthetics’

It’s not only in schools that traditional, heteronormative notions of ‘masculinity’ are being enforced. The ‘boy crisis’ campaign has turned a harsh spotlight towards male celebrities since 2019. Many male celebrities’ tattoos, earrings, and ponytails have been [blurred out](#) in online appearances, in accordance with the country’s campaign to put an end to ‘girly’ appearances. The September 2021 regulations made the government’s stance clear in its language, boycotting the appearances of ‘girly’ male idols by using the Chinese sexual slur “niang pao”, or “sissy”. The regulation further claimed that these “abnormal aesthetics” would corrupt the next generation.

“Regulations have shaped the culture,” says Lü with a dry laugh. “It should be the other way around.”

‘Little fresh meat’, or ‘Xiao Xianrou’, meaning male idols associated with soft masculinity, are becoming the targets for government officials in 2021. As ‘idol’ talent shows like *Youth with You*, *Chuang* (the Chinese version of Japan’s *Produce101*), where audiences vote for their favorite contestants to form a pop girl or boy group, have gone viral in China, many male celebrities have been adopting make-up looks worn by K-pop stars, as well as sporting glamorous jewelry.

Cultural influences from across the East Asia region have helped shape different expressions of gender in China. “Many of China’s biggest young male stars in recent years have challenged traditional masculine ideals, thanks in large part to the influence of Korean pop,” said Dr. Wang Shuaishuai, a digital culture lecturer at University of Amsterdam, in an [interview](#) with the BBC last December.

However, these well-groomed male celebrities have sparked the ire of the Chinese government’s ire. In turn, high-profile idols are taking note: China’s leading pop singer, Cai Xukun, notably altered his style immediately following the government’s September decree, swapping lace shirts for sports vests.

“These regulations shouldn’t control what we want to see on TV,” says Pan. “We are hoping to see diverse gender representations.”

‘I guess only tough, straight guys are allowed to breathe’

Despite government efforts, millennial’ gender identities have become more fluid in the past few years. On social media platforms like Weibo and Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), hundreds of [male influencers](#) are sharing beauty tips online as more young men have become more appearance-conscious. In addition, [drag influencers](#) are also taking up the space to educate netizens on diverse gender roles.

According to [QuestMobile's 2021 Male Consumption Insight Report](#), the number of active followers of Chinese male beauty influencers reached 185 million last April, and between 2019 and 2021, the annual online spending power of male consumers in beauty and cosmetics increased from 104 million RMB (£12m) to 122 million (£14m).

And while different expressions of gender and sexuality have gained representation and visibility in recent years, many believe that the regulations targeting 'sissy men' pose a threat to LGBTQ+ communities in China.

For some, the regulations seem to be already having a deadly impact. In November 2021, the body of 26 year-old blogger Zhou Peng was [discovered in Zhoushan, Zhejiang Province](#). Zhou had died by suicide; in a note uploaded to his Sina Weibo account on 28 November, the influencer had spoken of his distress at childhood bullying for "looking like a girl" and being called "sissy". Although Zhou stressed that his death "has nothing to do with anyone", in the wake of the tragedy, Chinese netizens are debating the impact of the state's 'masculinity' campaign on the mental health of young men.

The crisis has brought both women and men pain. As a person who is actively exploring his gender identity, Pan says that it is nearly impossible to live as a man with effeminate character. "Society looks down upon women and LGBTQ+ communities," he comments. "I guess only tough straight guys are allowed to breathe in the country."

Chao Xiaomi, a non-binary blogger who has 13,000 followers on Weibo, told *gal-dem* that "the society expects men to be competitive, to be the sole breadwinner in the house. However, there are many people like me who do not fit into the mainstream gender stereotypes. Women can be tough and competitive as well."

Some experts have highlighted that the tightened control over gender roles and stereotypes has intentionally coincided with a time of rising nationalism, led by Xi Jinping's "[wolf warrior diplomacy](#)", which has emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lü is worried the raft of regulations may choke off diverse gender representations in the country. "China's rising nationalism is often associated with the ableism of masculinity," says Lü. "If you do not conform to the government rules to achieve national rejuvenation, then you are not patriotic. The government first erased people with different political beliefs out of the country, and now it comes to people with different ways of living."

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