The spectre of the sissy: heteromasculine anxieties in Chinese beauty vlogging for men

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Abstract

Male beauty vlogging is flourishing in China despite fears of a masculinity 'crisis', sissyphobia and LGBT crackdowns. Key questions arise: To what extent does male beauty vlogging challenge the notion of a crisis of masculinity and offer new, positive gender expressions for men? To what extent does it reinforce hierarchical and oppressive formations of gender and sexuality? This article analyses three male beauty vloggers' promotion of a 'fake-natural look for straight men' involving non-visible makeup, to allay straight-identifying men's fear of being called 'sissy'. A further discussion examines a male beauty vlogger's critique of the feminization of visible makeup-wearing men. The analysis is informed by an understanding of how the heterosexual matrix shapes emerging hybrid, 'inclusive' masculinities that reflect cosmopolitan desires and anxieties. The vloggers extend the boundaries of 'straight masculinity' with a new aesthetic for straight men: a fresh, clean, refined, elegant, confident and energized look that seeks to replace stereotypical twentieth-century models of 'tough guy' masculinity and to shift gender stereotypes that associate makeup and skincare solely with women. Yet, the vloggers also reinforce existing gender and sexual inequalities through explicit rejection of male femininity and use of sissyphobic language.

Keywords: Chinese male beauty vlogging, makeup, sissyphobia, straight men, hybrid masculinities, heterosexual matrix, social media, platform economy, China

On China's Singles' Day in 2018, 26-year-old Li Jiaqi (also known as Austin Li) challenged Alibaba co-founder Ma Yun (Jack Ma) to a lipstick sales competition on Taobao, one of Alibaba's online shopping websites.[1] After two hours of livestreaming, Li had reached 1000 sales, whereas Ma had only achieved ten sales. This came as no surprise: Li is China's most well-known male beauty influencer and he specialises in selling lipstick. Regularly placed in top ten lists of internet celebrities, Li has been named as one of Forbes China's top twenty celebrities under 30. His boy-next-door manner and slick sales routines have won him a huge customer base among young people, including 29.2 million fans on Weibo, China's premier social media platform, and almost 40 million fans on Douyin, China's most popular video sharing website. In 2019, Li earned US$29 million (Huang, 2020). Nevertheless, Li's adept performance of 'hybrid masculinity,' mobilises postfeminist consumer discourse without disturbing symbolic male authority (Chen, 2025).

Li's nationwide success as an online purveyor of cosmetics shows the appeal of male beauty influencers: their customers include not just women but also rapidly increasing numbers of young men. The flourishing of the male beauty sector is premised on key socioeconomic developments in 21st century China: accelerated growth in the consumer economy, social media, the creative industries, the beauty business, and pluralising modes of gender expression. Young male pop pin-ups, termed *xiaoxianrou* (lit. 'little fresh meat'), wear and promote makeup, even serving as ambassadors for famous cosmetics brands. Idolised for their beautiful looks, gentle demeanours, and toned physiques, *xiaoxianrou* have encouraged young men to bring makeup into their personal grooming routines. Legions of male beauty vloggers hype the benefits of

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[1] Held on 11 November, China's Singles' Day originated in the 1990s as an unofficial celebration for single university students. It has since morphed into the world's largest shopping day, targeting young single consumers.

cosmetics use as a newly respectable means for young urban men to sharpen their appearance and improve their career competitiveness.

Men's grooming and especially the application of makeup nevertheless poses tensions for many men who want to make themselves look attractive but not at the expense of their masculinity. In her ethnography of men's beauty salons in Southern California, Kristen Barber (2016) explores how the salons seek to assuage men's anxieties by cultivating a 'heteromasculine' environment. Male beauty vloggers are inevitably involved in negotiating these tensions. Little research has been carried out on how Chinese male beauty vloggers seek to allay the gender anxieties of their audiences and their potential impact on gender transformations in China. Hird (2024) contextualises contemporary Chinese male beauty vlogging in the broader history of men's aesthetics in China, national cultural identity, and past and present efforts by Chinese men to maintain a balanced air of refinement and masculinity. Li and Wu (2025) focus on Chinese male beauty vloggers' creative attempts to resist masculine stereotypes, professional discrimination and heteronormativity.

Male beauty vlogging is flourishing in China despite nationwide fears of a masculinity 'crisis,' state and societal sissyphobia and LGBT crackdowns (Song, 2022; Song and Liu, 2024); the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns further increased the volume and impact of male beauty vlogging due to people spending more time online (Li and Wu, 2025). Some key questions therefore arise. How socially progressive is male beauty vlogging? To what extent does male beauty vlogging challenge the notion of a crisis of masculinity and offer new, positive gender expressions for men? To what extent does it reinforce hierarchical and oppressive formations of gender and sexuality? Is male beauty vlogging irreconcilable with a conservative gender order, or can it coexist with it and even serve its purposes?

To explore these questions, this article adopts a case study approach (Yin, 2018) through analysis of three instances of male beauty vloggers who promote a 'fake-natural look

for straight men' (*zhinan weisuyan zhuang*) in which makeup is not visible, to allay straight-identifying men's fear of being called 'sissy' (*niang*). A further account of a male beauty vlogger who criticizes the feminization of visible makeup-wearing men provides a rare example of a vlogger in this study willing to confront discrimination against non-normative masculinities, although recent research on pandemic-era male beauty vloggers in China describes other carefully gauged efforts to resist heteronormative masculine aesthetic norms (Li and Wu, 2025). The case study analysis is informed by an understanding of how the heterosexual matrix shapes emerging hybrid, 'inclusive' masculinities that reflect cosmopolitan desires and anxieties.

This study has found that mainstream male vloggers enthusiastically promote a new aesthetic for straight men, a fresh, clean, refined, elegant, confident and energized look that seeks to replace stereotypical twentieth-century models of 'tough guy' masculinity and shift gender stereotypes that associate makeup and skincare solely with women. However, they also reinforce existing gender and sexual inequalities through explicit rejection of male femininity and their use of sissyphobic language. Through careful attention to masculine boundaries with their 'fake-natural look,' they have contributed to a makeup revolution for men, but at the expense of reinforcing heteronormative and unequal gender identities and relations. As such, they form part of a gendered platform capitalism that largely reconfigures and rarely challenges conventional male authority (Chen, 2025).

Male beauty vlogging as a global phenomenon

The global emergence of vlogging in the 2010s gave rise to a new breed of social media entrepreneurs. Anglophone male beauty vlogging celebrities such as James Charles, Jeffree Star and Manny Mua have amassed millions of YouTube subscribers, which has led cosmetics

companies to sign them up as brand ambassadors (Marshall, 2019). At the same time, distinctive and rapidly growing male beauty vlogging content in South Korea, influenced by K-pop and TV dramas, has played a significant role in the beauty economy boom in East Asia and beyond (Asher, 2018; White, 2019, pp. 124–5). The techniques and practices of Western, South Korean and other vlogging celebrities have helped shape the development of male beauty vlogging in China (Yan and Jin, 2019).

Beauty vlogging circulates and embeds 'postmodern' ideals and practices of body aesthetics that encourage individuals to work on their bodies and identities in ways that both challenge and reaffirm discursive norms. Writing about female bloggers, Michele White (2017, p. 4) argues that beauty vloggers 'reform beauty culture around participants' interests rather than male heterosexual expectations.' Nevertheless, potentially subversive practices and subcultural critiques are also commodified into products where their edginess becomes sellable in mainstream fashion (McRobbie, 2016). In this self-oriented context of 'reflexive individualisation' (Beck et al., 1994), collective political action plays second fiddle to 'celebrating choice, femininity, independence, and the individual construction of modern identity' (Kennedy, 2016). As Michelle Lazar puts it, 'self-focused "me-feminism" of this sort shifts attention away from the collective "we-feminism" needed for a transformational political program' (2007, p. 154).

While the media paints a picture of beauty vloggers fearlessly living their passions on social media platforms, in effect they turn themselves into brands in a fierce and risky competition for the custom of fan-consumers (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Vloggers fit de Peuter's (2011, p. 420) definition of 'precogs'—prestigious cognitive workers—in that they are victims as well as 'model subject[s]' of the creative social media economy (Duffy & Wissinger (2017, p. 4655). Beauty vlogging is a prominent example of precarious digital labour in both Western post-Fordist economies and China's postsocialist context.

Reproducing or challenging heteronormative masculinities?

By rendering heterosexualities visible as standpoints that serve particular interests, critical heterosexuality studies offers useful perspectives on the current moment of rapid change in gender discourses, practices and identities (Dean & Fischer, 2020, pp. 1-2). A central question is the social production of straightness, which is always being remade in ways that reflect and shape gendered and sexual hierarchies. This approach sees heterosexuality 'as a social construct that invokes particular gendered and sexual power relations between men and women, and between heterosexuals and sexual minorities' (Fischer 2013, p. 501) and the social production of heterosexual relations as key to the reproduction of gender divisions (Jackson, 2006, p. 105).

Judith Butler's concept of the 'heterosexual matrix', the often hidden yet hegemonic 'grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized' (Butler, 2006, p. 194, n. 6), helps explain the reproduction of views about gender and sexuality. Although critiqued for not being sufficiently sociological, it offers a means of unravelling assumptions about gender as an unchanging and key determinant of identity (Brickell 2005). The heterosexual matrix is predicated on the belief that gender expression derives from a stable sex identity, i.e. 'masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female' and is produced 'oppositionally and hierarchically' through compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 2006, p. 194, n. 6). The matrix leads to heteronormative assumptions about sexuality when the sex and gender of a person are known or presupposed. From another angle, it produces assumptions about gender when sex and sexuality are the known or presupposed categories, such as a lesbian constantly being described as masculine (Tredway, 2014). From this latter perspective, the heterosexual matrix forces a 'natural' gender expression upon bodies with known sexualities, regardless of the actual gender expression of individual bodies. Mainstream discourse thus

'naturally' posits straight men and lesbians as masculine, and straight women and gay men as feminine.

The concept of the heterosexual matrix reveals tensions between gender and sexuality: a gay man who presents as masculine may be incorrectly presumed to be straight by those unaware of his sexuality, due to the way the heterosexual matrix connects conventional masculine behaviour with straight masculinity. A straight man who acts in a conventionally feminine manner may be incorrectly presumed to be gay, given the way that the heterosexual matrix associates male femininity with homosexuality. According to the logic of the heterosexual matrix, men who fear being stigmatised as gay, regardless of their sexuality, are likely to choose to act in stereotypically masculine ways and to reject or even disparage feminine behaviour in men, as a means of affirming their heterosexuality.

A relevant example of the tenacity of the heterosexual matrix can be found in Kristen Barber's (2016) ethnography of men's beauty salons in southern California, which explores how the booming men's beauty sector is helping construct a new masculine aesthetic that rejects the 'prehistoric yeti' look for an 'elegant', well-coiffured image, designed to symbolise professional status and success. Given the anxieties that many men still harbour about being associated with femininity, the salons deliberately cultivate a 'heteromasculine' environment, by employing conventionally feminine female salon workers to act as foils for their clients' masculinity, and by ensuring that male workers present as straight, regardless of their sexuality. These measures are designed to remove the 'specter of the fag' and the potential for clients to feel emasculated. The elegant, clean-cut, professional look is often associated with a more progressive middle-class masculinity; however, the underlying homophobic and femphobic context shows the continuing reproduction of gender and sexual inequalities. As West and Zimmerman (1987, pp. 135–7) argue, 'doing gender' is interactional, and men are always at

risk of being held accountable for not living up to expected standards of masculinity (as are women regarding femininity).

The concept of hybrid masculinities, as taken up in critical heterosexuality studies (see e.g. Dean & Fischer, 2020, pp. 10–11), offers a useful means of understanding the significance of seemingly progressive masculinities on gender relations. Hybrid masculinities are created through 'the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and—at times—femininities into privileged men's gender performances and identities' (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 246). A key question in the literature on hybrid masculinities—and in this paper—is whether hybrid masculinities reinforce or challenge existing gender and sexual inequalities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 247). Many scholars of hybrid masculinities conclude that hybrid masculinities utilise new ways of blurring gender boundaries yet at the same time do not significantly shift embedded gendered and sexual hierarchies, e.g. Demetriou, 2001, and Messner, 1993, 2007 (Bridges and Pascoe (2014, p. 249). Some forms of hybrid masculinities produce 'hollow femininities': neoliberal subjectivities that serve commercial and patriarchal interests (Wolfman et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, other scholars contend that hybrid masculinities are significantly more progressive than they are given credit for. Eric Anderson (2009) and Mark McCormack (2012) argue that increasing numbers of men are performing 'inclusive masculinities' that distance themselves from the hyper-heteronormativity, 'homohysteria' and misogyny associated with dominant twentieth-century models of masculinity. According to Anderson, because young men are increasingly embracing 'heterofemininity', relations between orthodox and inclusive masculinities are becoming 'horizontal', undifferentiated by power relations (2009, pp. 155-156)

However, studies such as C. J Pascoe's (2007) ethnography of high school masculinity, show that homophobic discourses about 'fags' work not just to regulate heterosexuality and

homosexuality, but also to police gender norms, demonstrating that the intertwining relationship between gender and sexualities in the heterosexual matrix continues to shape behaviours and identities. Young men's endless efforts to repudiate the 'specter of the fag' serve to reproduce a normative form of adolescent masculinity (Pascoe, 2007, p. 113). Anderson concedes that even inclusive masculinities continue to reproduce gendered and sexual inequalities through sexual objectification of women and homophobic discourse, although 'without intent to wound' (2011, p. 154). The evidence suggests that hybrid and inclusive masculinities are still circumscribed by and reinscribe the heterosexual matrix, "producing new forms of inequality, or reproducing existing ones, while concealing them, demonstrating thus the flexibility of these systems of inequality" (Christofidou, 2021, p. 89).

Analysis of the changing configuration of masculinity and heterosexual matrix in the Chinese context also needs to consider how masculinity is shaped by and informs the understanding of Chineseness. In their cultural adaptations of global trends, Chinese men show conflicted aspirations, on the one hand, embracing globally circulating ideals that include progressive gender attitudes, and, on the other hand, reinforcing notions and practices of masculinity that reflect and perpetuate national and male chauvinisms (De Kloet, 2007; Hird 2020). Chinese localizations of globally circulating notions and practices of masculinities are thus characterized by ambivalence and contradiction. Lisa Rofel (2007, 111) conceptualises this general phenomenon as 'domestication of cosmopolitanism by way of renegotiating China's place in the world.'

Changing male beauty aesthetics

Since the 1980s, new models of masculinity have diversified Mao-era ideals of worker-peasant-soldier manhood. The fresh-faced youthful male pop icon has been prominent among them, yet

his emergence caused anxiety about feminization of the nation's men (Song, 2004, p. vii). In the 2010s, *xiaoxianrou*, marketable young male stars with "soft" masculinities, found success in the rapidly growing mass entertainment sector. The term *xiaoxianrou* first emerged in 2014 among Chinese fans of Korean popstars ('Xiaoxianrou'). Their gentle, boyish personas reflect a model of "pan-East Asian soft masculinity" (Jung, 2011), that has been spreading across increasingly sexualised regional media cultures (Liong & Chan, 2020). *Xiaoxianrou* possess youth, looks, toned physiques and career ambitions (Luo, 2017; Song, 2022). Offering a new rendering of the historical *wen-wu* (cultured/martial) dyad of masculinity (Louie, 2014), *xiaoxianrou* combine postmodernity's sexual objectification of the toned male body with a 'gentle yet manly' (Wen, 2021) demeanour in response to contemporary consumer market demands (Luo, 2017, pp. 199–200). The powerful appeal of gentle young male celebrities has prompted cosmetics companies to appoint them as spokespeople for makeup products in Japan, Korea, and latterly China (Li, 2020, 59). This additional 'feminization' of *xiaoxianrou* has occurred in a rapidly expanding digital realm of shifting beauty ideals and technologies (Dippner, 2018, p. 39).

It is in this new digital realm that the consummate good looks of *wanghong* ('internet influencers'), have given rise to the term *wanghong lian* ('internet celebrity face'), suggestive of a facial perfection achieved through cosmetic surgery and makeup techniques (Dippner, 2018, pp. 41–2, 47). While an 'internet celebrity face' is usually associated with female *wanghong*, it includes male *wanghong* who aspire to reach the same facial ideals (Dippner, 2018, p. 41). Usually resolutely apolitical, successful *wanghong* prosper through endorsing and selling products to millions of digital followers. The economic and social returns achievable through high 'facial capital' (Dippner, 2018, p. 54) are captured in the terms *yanzhi* and *lianzhi* ('face value'). Popular entertainment television programs evaluate celebrities as 'high face value' (*yanzhi gao*) or 'low face value' (*yanzhi di*) ('Yanzhi'). Achieving high facial capital

through cosmetic surgery and skilful application of makeup has become a career necessity for internet celebrities, including the young men who promote beauty products as a means to professional and social success (Wen, 2021).

Male beauty vlogging has flourished in contemporary China, despite ongoing anxieties about the feminization of the nation's men expressed through 'sissyphobic' discourses that disparage and agonize over male effeminacy (Song, 2022). Sissyphobia has been amplified and encouraged through calls for physically tough 'masculinity education' (*yanggang jiaoyu*) and state bans on men's earrings, gay themes, and 'effeminate' men in television shows, online drama series, and internet games (Ellis-Petersen, 2016; Li, 2019; McDonald, 2021; Seow, 2021; Zhao, 2021). In this national context of anxieties about the erosion of manliness, the 'liminal masculinity' of Korean male celebrity idols, stigmatised as effeminate and 'gay' in the West (Lee et al., 2020), is increasingly being called out as too effeminate and unsuitable for men in China too, demonstrating that "the ascendant discourse of cosmopolitan masculinities is entangled with the state's ambition to redefine China's global position" (Guo, 2018, 93). Nevertheless, the authorities recognise the importance of the beauty and entertainment economies for consumer-led economic growth: the beauty economy is China's fifth largest consumer market, promoted and shaped by government economic goals and aesthetic expectations (Yang, 2011, 2017). Beauty salons, *yangsheng* ('nurturing life') centres, and now beauty vlogging have become important vehicles for stimulating aesthetics-related consumption.

Beauty vlogging, gender, and the platform economy

Beauty vlogging fans access their favourite vlogs through social media platforms and video-sharing websites. In Chinese cyberspace, Weibo, a 'virtual playground for youth' (Li, 2017),

is the dominant social media platform; Bilibili, with its viewers' 'bullet comments' overlaid on videos, is one of the most popular video-sharing websites. With 450 million and 100 million users respectively, mostly under 30 years old, these platforms' financial model is built on sharing diverse and creative dimensions of popular culture. both platforms have captured the imagination of young people (Zhang & Cassany, 2020). Through these and other social media applications, male beauty masculinities are constructed and purveyed.

The platform economy in China, which in addition to Bilibili and Weibo includes major players such as Douyin, Weixin, Kuaishou, Xiaohongshu and QQ, has some notably gendered dimensions. In videos and livestreans, platform participants take the opportunity to challenge and reaffirm gender and sexual stereotypes and hierarchies, including through drag and image manipulation (Zhang & Hjorth, 2019). Nevertheless, the platforms can be 'homophobic' (Zhang & Hjorth, 2019) and contribute to the current 'patriarchal revival' in China (Han, 2022). The platforms are owned by companies dominated by men in senior leadership positions, despite women constituting a major part of their labour force and platform users, and are often coded masculine: e.g., Douyin is informally known as *Dou baba* ('Daddy Dou'), which positions the platform as paternal provider and regulator of opportunities (Han, 2022). While women vloggers are sometimes celebrated as entrepreneurial subjects, they are often sexualised across the platforms (Han, 2022).

Methodology

Critically reflecting on authorial positionality draws attention to questions such as personal bias and complicity in reproducing power hierarchies (Gani & Khan, 2024). From the vantage point of a Western academic environment yet working extensively with Chinese sources, this study occupies a space between cultural contexts due to its author being a non-native researcher

navigating a dynamic "insider-outsider" positioning to Chinese society; this positionality informs the selection of materials and interpretive lens (Webster & John, 2010). The research choices serve the priorities of international scholarly debates, which require both attention to cultural specificity and conceptual frames that render discussions intelligible to a wider scholarly audience (Giroux, 1992).

This study draws on publicly available video content produced by prominent professional male beauty vloggers on major social media channels. All vloggers included in the analysis maintained very large followings, operated under publicly known vlogging names, and engaged in commercial practices, particularly the promotion and sale of men's cosmetics. Utilising Nissenbaum's (2010) principle of contextual integrity, it follows that these vloggers published with the clear expectation of visibility, reach, and commercial recognition. In such contexts, anonymisation would risk obscuring the public and professional identities that the vloggers themselves deliberately cultivate (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Scholars of digital ethnography have noted that for public figures and influencers, attributing material to its source respects both authorship and the performative nature of online content, and is justified where the risk of harm is low and the data is not sensitive (Kozinets, 2019). For these reasons, this study cites vloggers by the names under which they publicly vlog and market products. This decision aligns with ethical guidelines that recommend balancing the principle of respect for persons with the recognition of public authorship in media contexts (British Psychological Society, 2021).

Case study research brings attention to how and why contemporary phenomena occur within real-world contexts and is well-suited to fulfilling an explanatory function (Yin, 2018, 38–44).The case study methodology for this study focused on the identification of the vloggers' views on gender identities, aesthetics, relations and associated behavioural characteristics, with the aim of explaining how, why and to what extent the vloggers reinforced or challenged

conventional discourses on gender. This research surveyed all videos produced by 40 of the most prominent male beauty vloggers on Weibo from December 2018 to August 2019. The vloggers were selected on the basis of their high frequency posting during the period of the study and their popularity: all possessed significant numbers of fans, ranging from 215,000 to 4.3 million. All the selected vloggers possess verified Weibo accounts, holding either the more common 'Orange V' status, or 'Golden V' status, which indicates the vlogger is a 'key opinion leader' (KOL). Most of the vloggers were born in or after 1995, positioning them as members of 'Generation Z', a mobile, sophisticated and relatively well-off cohort renowned for their high level of engagement with social media and desire for 'authentic' and 'passionate' advice on brands from social media peers ('6 Things'). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, the topics of discussion in the videos that involved gender identity were noted and then grouped into themes. Upon completion of this process, one theme stood out as most significant: the promotion of men's non-visible makeup that is designed to avoid disrupting conventional gender aesthetics and to preserve a heteronormative masculine identity. The following section explores videos by male beauty vloggers belonging to this category.

Straight man fake-natural makeup

As discussed above, some scholars take the view that beauty vlogging empowers the expression of personal tastes, rather than catering to the heteronormative male gaze. However, many of the videos surveyed for this research catered explicitly to conventional 'straight male' desires, especially those advocating 'straight man fake-natural look makeup' (*zhinan weisuyan huazhuang*), which sought to assuage the fears of 'straight men' that they would be stigmatized as feminine if seen to be wearing makeup. As such, they can be seen as products of the state's 'sophisticated technologies of governance that encourage compliance and self-censorship' (Song and Liu, 2024, p. 330). The vloggers argued that straight men should wear fake-natural

makeup to look more attractive, feel more confident, and perform better in social and business interactions. This approach clearly prioritises conventional 'male heterosexual expectations.' By associating non-visible makeup with straight sexuality, the vloggers reinforced the heterosexual matrix assumption that straight-identifying men should enact a 'masculine' identity. The analysis below covers three videos advocating fake-natural makeup vloggers and one video that challenges the association of femininity with men's visible make-up wearing.

'Straight or not? Fake or not?'

Male beauty vlogger Zeng Xuening was born in 1997 and is based in Hangzhou, near Shanghai. He is a graduate of Zhejiang University of Media and Communications in Hangzhou, which is renowned for producing talented media professionals. Zeng has 1.8 million fans on his Weibo account, which he established in 2012. His video entitled 'Straight man fake-natural look makeup (*zhinan weisuyan zhuang*) has garnered over 269,000 views, 1,100 likes and over 230 comments on Weibo, making it one of his most popular. On Bilibili, where the video has been viewed over 26,000 times, it includes the sub-heading '10-minute super-simple everyday makeup for going out; reject thick and heavy makeup' (*shi fenzhong jianjiandan richang chumen zhuang, jujue houzhong nongzhuang*).[2] Zeng writes in the short text accompanying the video that 'it's very embarrassing when guys go out without concealing their [facial] blemishes', but that they should reject thick and heavy makeup and a 'flirtatious' (*yaoyan*) style. For Zeng, a young straight man's makeup should be quick to apply and should accentuate vitality: 'what's most fitting is makeup that enables you to become a vigorous lad (*jingshen xiaohuo*) in a flash.' Delineating a 'heteromasculine' environment, Zeng reassures his viewers that while wearing fake-natural makeup they can play basketball, undertake military training,

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[2] The videos were accessed on Weibo at http://t.cn/AilTkf8q?m=4396824972654409&u=2819165581 and on Bilibili at https://www.bilibili.com/video/av60239468?from=search&seid=12846891125075728997.

and date girls. He thus constructs a makeup wearing masculinity in line with the popular entertainment emphasis on 'face value' and the assumptions of the heterosexual matrix. According to this logic, showing facial blemishes lowers facial capital and damages life chances; while appearing 'flirtatious' is feminine-coded and to be avoided. Zeng plays on the fears of young men that an imperfect and/or feminine look will detract from the full expression of their masculinity. His solution is a fake-natural look achieved by applying the makeup products that he sells.

However, Zeng's viewers do not always agree with Zeng on the boundaries of straight masculinity, with eyebrows proving an interesting flashpoint. As with many other male beauty vloggers, Zeng argues that men's eyebrows should look defined but not feminine. Evoking fullness, strength and masculinity, Zeng wields an eyebrow pencil to create eyebrows that he claims look 'extremely three-dimensional, handsome, strong and defined' (*zei you litigan, zei shuaiqi, zei yinglang*). However, some viewers' bullet comments castigate Zeng for transgressing the norms of straight masculinity. One viewer asks: 'Which straight guy has this kind of eyebrow?' Another viewer laments: 'There are so many steps to this—straight guys are already exhausted by now.' Casting aspersions on Zeng's own sexuality, one viewer queries: 'Do straight guys study broadcasting?' Towards the end of the video, another viewer critiques Zeng for applying too much eyebrow pencil: 'Your eyebrows are painted a little too heavily, but as long as you like them that's fine.' Zeng seeks to address such criticisms by acknowledging that 'for men, painting one's eyebrows every day is really tiring.' Nevertheless, he reaffirms the need to reshape his own eyebrows because they are naturally thin and require filling out, hoping that viewers with thin and light eyebrows will follow his example.

Using eye makeup is an even more strictly policed boundary of masculinity, leading Zeng to categorically forbid its use: 'If you want a genuine fake-natural look, then you absolutely must not put on eye makeup' (*qianwan buyao hua yanzhuang le*). Nevertheless,

immediately after this unequivocal statement, Zeng promotes a five-colour eye shadow palette that 'suits straight guys' (*shihe zhinan*) and dabs on some eye shadow to show how easy it is to apply. The tension between staying within supposed limits of straight masculinity and the commercial imperative to sell beauty products that Zeng is working under is laid bare through these contradictory statements. After Zeng advocates the application of light nose contouring and lipstick, a viewer comments that straight men should not go to the extent of these steps.

The performance and boundaries of straightness is a central concern of Zeng and his viewers, echoing wider discourses about celebrities that seek to 'straightwash' perceived effeminate behaviour (Song and Liu, 2024). For Zeng, his straight identity and behaviour is a matter of commercial competition as well as a personal issue: he asserts his own straightness and casts doubts about the sexuality of other 'straight man fake-natural look makeup' vloggers by mimicking their supposed flamboyant presentation style. Zeng is far from the only male beauty vlogger who emphasises his own heterosexuality: even those vloggers who express tolerance of homosexuality may seek to disavow it as their own sexuality, as explicit identification of oneself as gay risks the removal of one's videos by censors (Li and Wu, 2025). Nevertheless, Zeng's sexuality is constantly doubted by viewers. One bullet comment alleges that his gestures 'give him away [as gay]' (*shouchi chumaile*); another bullet comment asks if he plays the role of a 'top' in homosexual sex. Zeng continually attempts to restore his hetero-masculinity: after advising his viewers that applying a little lipstick is fine as long as it is not a bright colour, he hastily adds: 'We are men; we are real [literally 'pure'] men (*chun yemen*).' Such macho assertions do not convince all viewers; a bullet comment parodies Zeng's claim saying: 'We are manly bottoms, we are pure manly bottoms (*chunde gong ling*)', using gay slang for the receptive role in homosexual sex.[3] Zeng undermines his own attempts to recode

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[3] A 'manly bottom' is Chinese gay slang for someone who presents themselves as very masculine, as if they are a 'top' (the penetrative role), but in fact plays a passive, receptive role in homosexual male sex.

makeup wearing as acceptable for men through his strident emphasis on straightness and manliness; his and his viewers' comments show that visible makeup wearing is still overwhelmingly associated with femininity and homosexuality. The heterosexual matrix casts a homosexual identity on men who wear makeup, an identity that Zeng as a male makeup wearer cannot fully avoid. Nearing the end of the video, Zeng's announcement that 'Today's straight men fake-natural makeup is all finished' is followed immediately by a bullet comment that states: 'The fake-straight man's makeup is all finished' (*wei zhinan jiu hua haole*). Struggling to assert his construction of straight identity, Zeng demands of his viewers: 'Tell me in a loud voice: straight or not? fake or not?'

In the final stages of the video, Zeng acknowledges that he does not use 'special features' (*tedian*), referring to the flamboyant gestures and excited tones of some other male beauty vloggers. He is a 'clean, fresh and natural person' (*qingxin ziran de ren*), not 'unconventional' (*teli-duxing*) and not 'able to pretend' (*hui zuo de*). 'I can't do it', he says in English, the only time he uses English in the video and the last words of the video before he says goodbye. Zeng's use of English underscores the cosmopolitan orientation of Zeng's justification of an orthodox presentation of heteronormative Chinese masculinity. Zeng thus reaffirms the heterosexual matrix's association of male bodies, normative masculine performance, and straight sexuality; conversely, male bodies that act femininely are suggestive of homosexuality in the terms of the heterosexual matrix. At the end of the video, Zeng still cannot escape the power of the heterosexual matrix, as a final bullet comment pours scorn on his masculinity: 'I laughed myself silly at this being called no special features' (*zhe hai jiao mei tedian wo dou xiaofengle*). Comments posted under the video show mixed views: there are several wry comments about Zeng being a 'fake straight man', and there are also comments praising his makeup techniques, but a frequently expressed caveat is that the way he does his eyebrows is simply not what a 'straight man' would do. While Zeng is attempting to push the boundaries

of the social production of status, some viewers still strive to hold him accountable to their existing ideas about masculinity and sexuality. Nevertheless, the video's high popularity is suggestive of its influence.

Fashionable yet manly: avoiding the 'little brother' look

Cui Hengjie is a Guangdong-based vlogger who joined Weibo in 2012, where he vlogs under the name of Derek *Yimao* and has amassed over 423,000 fans; his Bilibili account is named Teacher Derek Cui (Derek Cui Laoshi). Cui does not provide a date of birth on his Weibo account and looks older than the male beauty vloggers in their early to mid-twenties observed for this research; in one video he implies that he is in his mid-thirties. In a pertinent video, Cui focuses on how 'straight men' (*zhinan*) can wear non-visible makeup and thereby retain their masculinity. On Weibo, the video is entitled 'Men's natural makeup' (*nanshi ziran zhuangrong*); on Bilibili, it is called 'Straight man fake-natural look! How men can wear makeup that's both manly and very clean' (*zhinan weisuyan zhuang! nanshi ruhe huachu you 'man' you gaoji ganjing de zhuangrong*).[4] In the text accompanying the video, Cui suggests that a softer masculinity is now fashionable: 'The tough guy (*yinghan*) era is already over; makeup needs to keep up with the times.' Nevertheless, he acknowledges that men may still be wary of wearing makeup, saying: 'for most men—especially straight men—makeup is something to be fearfully avoided.' Cui uses the same tropes of cleanliness, naturalness, freshness and manliness that Zeng associated with straight masculinity. Men should look 'fresh and relaxed' (*qingshuang ganjing*); and 'unlike women, men don't need excessive embellishment (*guoduo xiushi*)': 'simple base makeup and eyebrows are all that's needed to become a clean-looking boy (*ganjing de nanhai*).'

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[4] The video was accessed on Weibo at https://www.weibo.com/tv/v/HyH66ohUC?fid=1034:4382665990987774 and on Bilibili at https://www.bilibili.com/video/av55565744/.

As with Zeng, Cui singles out eyebrows as 'the most important thing for men' and emphasizes a 'natural' (*ziran*) look, urging men to choose an eyebrow pencil colour close to their hair colour. Leaning into the camera, Cui firmly rejects other forms of makeup for men, such as contouring, highlighting, eyeshadow, eyeliner, and rouge, asserting 'you don't want any of that.' 'The goal of men's makeup is to remain invisible and to make oneself feel more handsome (*shuaiqi*), refined (*jingzhi*) and complete (*wanmei*)', Cui asserts, evoking images of cosmopolitan masculinity.

Cui claims that 'men's makeup can be very manly as well as fashionable', which parallels Hua Wen's above-mentioned description of *xiaoxianrou*. 'It doesn't have to be the type of makeup associated with little brothers', Cui states. 'Little brothers' (*xiao gege*) is an internet term that became popular in 2017 to describe 'soft and kind-hearted' (*you wenrou you shanliang*) cute young men ('Xiao gege'). As an older vlogger in his thirties, Cui may be pitching his vlog towards men entering marriageable age who wish to project a more mature appearance and personality than the 'little brothers', to advance their careers and reassure potential marriage partners of their responsibility and reliability. Here, the 'little brother' figure's relative femininity provides a foil against which Cui constructs the masculinity ('manly as well as fashionable') of the fake-natural makeup look.

Cui's self-confident performance of normative masculinity and unequivocal delimitation of the limited scope of men's makeup contrasts with Zeng Xuening's more fluid approach to makeup for men and anxiety about viewers' perceptions of his gender performance. Unlike Zeng, Cui does not seek to establish a straight sexual orientation, nor do the bullet comments put his sexuality into question. The relatively few viewer bullet comments on Cui's makeup techniques are all positive, such as 'this is very practical for men' (*zhege dui nansheng haishi hen shiyong de*). On Weibo, unlike Zeng, Cui posts short responses to the comments, which also appear beneath the video, affirming his agreement or thanks. Given that Cui's

audience may be a slightly different demographic from Zeng's, his disassociation of his makeup approach to the more pronounced 'cute' look of 'little brothers' keeps his aesthetics in line with the logic of the heterosexual matrix, which may account for the absence of questions about his sexuality in the bullet comments.

'Men have the right to love beauty too'

Tian Yuhuan is a Chengdu-based male beauty vlogger, born in 1995. He joined Weibo in 2010 where he has approaching 600,000 followers. He has been awarded 'Golden V' status and is thus a 'Key Opinion Leader'. Tian argues that 'men have the right to love beauty as well [as women]' (*nansheng ye you ai mei de quanli*) and that wearing makeup also helps men build self-confidence. Tian uses the same kind of language as Zeng and Cui when describing his 'makeup for straight men' (*zhinan zhuang*), using terms such as 'clean' (*ganjing*), 'fresh and relaxed' (*qingshuang*), refined (*jingzhi*), and 'natural' (*ziran*), emphasizing that that it should not be easily discovered by others. On Weibo, his video 'Straight men fake-natural look makeover (*zhinan weisuyan huantou zhuang*) has achieved over 422,000 views; on Bilibili, the same video has been watched over 36,000 times and is titled: 'Straight man fake-natural look makeup: A 10-minute method to change your look – refined boys natural makeup techniques' (*zhinan weisuyan huantou zhuang shi fenzhong huantou shu: jingzhi nanhai ziran zhuangrong jiqiao*).[5]

Tian pushes further than Zeng and Cui in makeup possibilities for straight men, advocating careful use of eye and nose makeup. After posing the question, 'should men wear

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[5] The videos were accessed on Bilibili at https://www.bilibili.com/video/av35882071, on Weibo at https://m.weibo.cn/search?containerid=100103type%3D1%26q%3D%E7%9B%B4%E7%94%B7%E4%BC%AA%E7%B4%A0%E9%A2%9C%E6%8D%A2%E5%A4%B4%E5%A6%86, and on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTDPp1Q-8sU.

eye makeup?', Tian explains that he likes to make his eyes appear deeper by applying very light eye shadow, otherwise they look too plain; he also applies light nose contouring to give his nose a more raised look. He argues that 'highlighting (*gaoguang*) is very important for men', yet defines strict limits for straight men, warning that they 'shouldn't use pearlescent (*zhuguang*) highlighting'; rather, they should 'as much as possible use relatively natural highlighting' (*jinliang shi pian ziran de gaoguang*)', which results in an 'elegant' (*yaguang*) look. Tian's creative suggestions seek to encourage straight-identifying men to be a little bolder with their makeup choices, yet the heteronormative framing of his instructions and insistence on non-visible makeup render his efforts squarely within the heterosexual matrix.

As with Zeng's video, the bullet comments cast doubts on Tian's sexuality. Early in the video, when his finished 'look' is displayed as a teaser, a bullet comment quickly flashes: 'this is not like a straight man at all' (*zhe yidianr dou bu zhinan*); another mocks it as 'extremely ugly' (*nankan sile*); and in quick succession two comments reflect that 'it seems like I have some kind of misunderstanding about the term straight man' (*kanlai shi wo dui zhinan zhege ci you shenme wujie*) and 'I am more and more lost in recognising straight men' (*wo yijing zai bianren zhinan lushang yue zou yue milu*). In contrast, some comments are very positive, including 'the visual effect is really very good' (*zhuang xiao hai ting haode*). Although Tian's presentational style is not particularly 'flamboyant,' he adopts a 'cute' look, which among some viewers has triggered suspicion of the sexuality associated with this aesthetic. A final bullet comment from a critic sums up heteronormative aspirations and fears: 'I want to be handsome, not beautiful' (*wo xiang shuai, bu xiang mei*).

Challenging sissyphobia

Only one out of the 40 vloggers surveyed in this study criticized the labelling of visible makeup wearing men as 'sissies.' This vlogger takes the name of *Hao da yige xiao hanxian*, which translates loosely as 'What a Big Dawn Pixie' (hereafter Dawn Pixie). Dawn Pixie is Nanjing-based, was born in 1996, and has amassed nearly 280,000 fans on Weibo and over 215,00 fans on Bilibili. Discussing his general approach to makeup wearing, Dawn Pixie says there is not much difference between his face without makeup and his made-up face, because he doesn't apply eye makeup, or nose contouring, or contouring in general. Using similar vocabulary to other male beauty vloggers, he claims that wearing makeup energises how men look, fills them with confidence, and renders them 'clean' (*ganjing*), 'neat' (*zhengjie*), and 'full of vitality' (*jingshen baoman*).

Seemingly unafraid to wade into sociopolitical critique, unlike the vast majority of carefully apolitical vloggers, Dawn Pixie has pinned a video to the top of his Weibo account that forensically deconstructs a Chinese company's 'copying' of the product designs of a well-known Japanese stationery company. With similar directness, Dawn Pixie condemns sissyphobic abuse of men who wear visible makeup, which sets him apart from the other vloggers in this study. 'Men who wear makeup are deemed to be sissies: this is gender discrimination', he states in his video titled 'Sissy? Why men should wear makeup and the meaning of men's makeup' (*Niangpao? Nansheng weishenme yao huazhuang & huazhuang de yiyi*).[6] Some Bililbili bullet comments label Dawn Pixie himself a 'sissy'; one comment says he is not. Dawn Pixie argues that dislike of makeup wearing is not intrinsic to men, but due to public pressure: men should not feel they have to wear 'fake-natural look' makeup; they should wear whatever makeup presents their best possible look. He sets out a nuanced approach for men's makeup, rather than the visible/non-visible binary demanded by the heterosexual matrix:

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[6] The video was accessed on Weibo at http://t.cn/E2LQ3R8?m=4307065096562385&u=5266654520 and on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsDGBrKueVM, and on Bilibili at https://www.bilibili.com/video/av36069857.

'What men don't understand is that between an un-made-up face (*suyan*) and being heavily made-up (*nong zhuang yan mo*) there are a lot of small gradients they can choose from.' Putting the decision in the hands of the individual viewer, Dawn Pixie suggests using a cost-benefit analysis: 'The benefits that makeup wearing brings me far outweighs the criticism I receive: whether you're a man or a woman, think deeply about the benefits wearing makeup can bring you.'[7] Dawn Pixie's willingness to challenge social prejudice and discrimination against makeup-wearing men and to question conventional masculine aesthetics is refreshing; however, his advice to his viewers is still carefully calibrated and he does not adopt strident positions on minority sexual identities and rights. As such, his approach is similar to the vloggers in Li and Wu's (2025) study of pandemic-era male beauty vloggers, who often adopt relatively indirect ways of endorsing inclusive attitudes regarding progressive gendered and sexual identities to safeguard their social media channels. By contrast, overt feminisation and homosexual identification that deviates from state masculine ideals incurs a heavy cost to career ambitions (Song and Liu, 2024).

Notwithstanding rare exceptions like Dawn Pixie, most male beauty vloggers in this study follow Zeng, Cui and Tian in promoting men's makeup wearing without questioning normative gender hierarchies and social inequalities. While Dawn Pixie is willing to challenge the boundaries of masculinities, by celebrating personal choice and refuting the association of visible make-up and sissyhood, vloggers who insist on 'fake-natural' non-visible makeup for straight men actively police the boundaries of masculinity by asserting that a fundamental aim of men's makeup design is to avoid being labelled a sissy. Nevertheless, all four male beauty

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[7] Dawn Pixie's willingness to speak out against societal gender discrimination was also evident when he joined criticism of the government's proposal to implement 'masculine education' (*yanggang jiaoyu*) to tackle a 'crisis of masculinity' among boys. Dawn Pixie condemned this proposal for its inherent denigration of femininity and its binary attribution of masculinity to boys and femininity to girls. See https://weibo.com/5266654520/JFA9JEqmY?from=page_1005055266654520_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1634368458877.

vloggers concur that their male viewers should utilize makeup to strive for a fresh, clean, refined, elegant, confident, and energized cosmopolitan look.

The spectre of the sissy and the reinscription of heteronormative cosmopolitan masculinity

Chinese male beauty vloggers have emerged under postsocialist socioeconomic conditions that encourage entrepreneurialism and competition in the beauty sector. Under these circumstances, the beauty industry has developed into a major sector of the national economy, demonstrated by headline events such as Li Jiaqi's head-to-head sales 'battle' with Ma Yun on Taobao that deploy postfeminist rhetoric and hybrid masculinities to extend male consumer choice but do not seek to undo gendered social inequalities (Chen, 2025). Popular culture's fetishization of appearance and grooming as a means of self-advancement has empowered beauty vloggers as purveyors of 'facial capital'; and the appeal of models of 'soft' masculinity, such as *xiaoxianrou* entertainment idols, has spurred the development of the male cosmetics market. Social media platforms form important arenas in which Chinese male beauty vloggers and their viewers debate, test, and police the boundaries of heteronormative masculine appearance and behaviour. Despite a backlash against the 'feminization' of men, often endorsed and enacted through official channels, the market for men's makeup continues to grow, albeit permeated by sissyphobia. Nevertheless, recent trends show a rising number of prominent vloggers creatively, although still cautiously, seeking to challenge masculine aesthetic conventions and stereotypes; the reluctance of Chinese male beauty vloggers to directly identify as gay or strongly support gay rights is a strategy to avoid censorship and removal of their videos from social media platforms in the context of state policies and techniques that foster compliance and self-regulation (Li and Wu, 2025; Song and Liu, 2024).

The three 'fake-natural look' vloggers discussed above argue that the invisibility of their makeup design preserves a natural manliness of straight-identifying men; the clear cost of visible makeup-wearing is social marginalization and vilification as a sissy. As if to provide immediate validation of these arguments, viewers' bullet comments deride the younger vloggers, whose appearances present a more ambiguous masculinity, as fake straight men; despite the vloggers' protestations that they are straight and/or that their makeup suggestions are safe for straight men. The underlying message is that if men are perceived to cross the boundary between non-visible and visible makeup, they will be held accountable for 'doing gender' inappropriately, as gender norms dictate that visible makeup wearing is a feminine practice that is appropriate solely for women. Only one vlogger in the survey denounced the feminization of men who wear makeup and challenged the idea that men's makeup must remain invisible, although he avoided politically sensitive remarks on sexuality that could have led to the censoring of his video. Moreover, all four vloggers affirmed the same benefits for makeup-wearing: a clean, elegant, and energised look. Viewed from the perspective of commercial interest, this is not surprising, as the clean, refined and confident look caters to the preoccupations of the relatively prosperous cosmopolitan white-collar men in China's big cities. As a polished aesthetic associated with success in the global market economy, the clean cosmopolitan look could not be further away from the Maoist triad of worker-soldier-peasant masculinities or the rough rural protagonists that predominated in the post-Mao root-seeking cultural wave in the 1980s. And yet, this domestication of cosmopolitan elegance and sophistication works simultaneously to stigmatise and devalue other masculinities.

The effectiveness of the male beauty vloggers' sales pitch relies on the heterosexual matrix rendering particular bodies, genders and desires as natural. Makeup-curious but straight-identifying 'masculine' men who fear being called sissy are the target audience for fake natural makeup: due to the mainstream coding of visible makeup wearing as feminine, straight-

identifying men's makeup wearing must remain invisible to preserve their manliness. Utilizing the heterosexual matrix as a conceptual lens shows that an apparent shift towards gender equality (e.g. men exercising their 'right' to love beauty and wear makeup), in actuality may consolidate existing gender and sexual hierarchies that position men above women, and some men over others (Christofidou, 2021, p. 89; McRobbie, 2005, p. 55).

The problem lies not with the practice of 'fake-natural' techniques in and of themselves, but how they are positioned by male beauty vloggers as a means to preserve masculinity. In a climate of sissyphobia, reminiscent of the 'specter of the fag' discourses that Pascoe argues regulate adolescent American male sexuality and gender, Chinese male beauty vloggers invoke the spectre of the sissy through sissyphobic discourses that claim that real men don't wear makeup; they draw on widely expressed anxieties about a crisis of masculinity in which sissyphobia, as with homophobia in contemporary Western societies, has become "a central organizing principle of [the] cultural definition of manhood." (Kimmel, 1994, p. 131). However, there is no evidence of 'intent to wound', which aligns with Anderson's notion of inclusive masculinities. Yet, the inclusivity many vloggers demand with regard to social acceptance of men wearing cosmetics does not extend to including men who wear makeup visibly. The vloggers argue for makeup wearing to be equally available to men and women, but do not support an openness to diverse makeup wearing practices among men, which reinscribes hierarchies and undermines the possibility of horizontal relations between different kinds of masculinities (Christofidou, 2021, 86.) While male beauty vloggers may not explicitly endorse 'homohysteria,' they legitimize fears that visible makeup identifies men as feminine and are complicit in circumscribing sexual and gender options that limit potential ways of being men. Despite their claims of challenging gender norms, the vloggers in this study almost without exception reaffirm a basic framing of the heterosexual matrix, in which practices associated with women are positioned as feminising and incompatible with mainstream masculinities; in

doing so, they regrettably reinforce the social estrangement and discrimination suffered by men deemed to be 'sissies.'

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