

Balancing refinement and manliness: a beauty formula for men's social and professional success

Abstract

This article discusses the difficult balancing act between refinement and manliness that male beauty vloggers seek to perform, in the context of shifting ideals of masculinity in China's modern history. It examines several techniques that male beauty vloggers promote as a non-feminising aesthetics, which enable young men to gain social prestige and professional advancement, without being labelled sissies or damaging their heteronormative masculinity in any way. The vloggers' strategy resonates with attempts in the male cosmetics industry starting in the Republican era to create new masculine ideals that enhance men's social, sexual and professional appeal, while enabling them to continue to enjoy the benefits of a conventionally acceptable masculinity. At all times, women's impact on re-shaping male ideals has been significant. The article highlights the argument from both men and women that refined and manly makeup offers the ordinary Chinese man a productive, quick and affordable way to gaining an edge in a highly competitive world. Hybrid and flexible masculinities and the heterosexual matrix provide the main conceptual frameworks for the study.

Introduction

If a man wears makeup, does that make him a “sissy” (娘炮 *niangpao*, lit. “sissy cannon”)? Thus runs a heated question of debate in contemporary China.¹ Amid burgeoning sales of men’s cosmetics but also increasing suspicion of male femininity, Chinese male beauty vloggers offer new hybrid and flexible forms of masculinities as they perform a delicate balancing act between meeting market demand for a refined male look and producing a sufficiently manly aesthetics that avoids censure from the authorities. According to the vloggers, to get ahead in today’s highly charged business world, using cosmetics products helps adaptable men get a competitive advantage over their less flexible counterparts, without compromising their normative masculinity. Although Chinese male beauty vlogging has hitherto not attracted much scholarly attention, it provides clear insights into how market, state and societal forces are mobilising, contesting, and reshaping the intersections of gender, sexuality and nation in contemporary China; and it helps show how gender, sexuality and nation operate as social categories. Operating largely on social media, with the support of the cosmetics industry and large commercial platforms, entrepreneurial male vloggers have mobilised hitherto feminised practices of makeup wearing in pursuit of the expression of a new ideal of masculinity that involves enhanced personal grooming and hygiene practices, individual expression, and which aims for social success and career development. In a reform-era environment that reflects global trends towards the pluralisation of gendered and sexual identities, they have leveraged the style of the lucrative figure of the Chinese entertainment industry’s well-groomed, good-looking, toned, gentle and youthful male stars nicknamed

¹ See, for example, the thread on Zhihu 知乎, a hugely popular forum-style website in China, titled “Do you agree with the many people who say that young men who wear makeup are sissies?” 好多人說男生化妝很娘，你同意這觀點嗎？ Available online at <<https://www.zhihu.com/question/515366335>> (last accessed 6 August 2023).

“little fresh meat” (*xiaoxianrou* 小鲜肉). Viewed historically, the cosmetics industry has been grappling with the challenge of squaring cosmetics use with a sense of manliness since the Republican era. Foreshadowing the *xiaoxianrou*, the well-groomed, pioneering figures of the “modern boy” (*modeng qingnian* 摩登青年; *modeng nanzi* 摩登男子) in the 1920s and 1930s and the post-Mao “creamy youth” (*naiyou xiaosheng* 奶油小生) opened up new aesthetic possibilities for young men. Contemporary male beauty vloggers draw on the allure of the *xiaoxianrou* to market cosmetics for men to young men and their female partners, as a means for young men to gain social prestige. However, the diversification of gendered and sexual identities has also caused widespread anxiety about decreasing manliness among men and boys, has amplified claims of an unfolding “crisis of masculinity”, and has given rise to state and societal policing of behaviour deemed feminine or “sissy.”²

The pluralisation of gender and sexual identities since the beginning of the reform era has caused growing anxiety among the authorities, who have launched a strong crackdown against male effeminacy, homosexuality, and feminism since the mid-2010s. Current anxieties about the feminization of the nation’s men have crystallised in “sissyphobic” discourses that stigmatise male effeminacy.³ Effeminate men are seen as a threat to the very existence of the

² Tingting Hu, Liang Ge, Ziyao Chen, and Xu Xia, “Masculinity in Crisis? Reticent/Han-Xu Politics against Danmei and Male Effeminacy,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (2023). DOI 10.1177/13678779231159424; Geng Song, “Little Fresh Meat’: The Politics of Sissiness and Sissyphobia in Contemporary China,” *Men and Masculinities* 25.1 (2022):68–86. DOI 10.1177/1097184X211014939; Shuaishuai Wang and Hongwei Bao, “‘Sissy capital’ and the Governance of Non-Normative Genders in China’s Platform Economy,” *China Information* (2023). DOI 10.1177/0920203X221147481; Yating Yu and Hongsheng Sui, “The Anxiety over Soft Masculinity: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the ‘Prevention of Feminisation of Male Teenagers’ Debate in the Chinese-Language News Media,” *Feminist Media Studies* (2023). DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2022.2046124. Kam Louie, “The Niangpao (effeminate men) controversy in China: How to be a real man in the family, school and society,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 102 (2024). DOI 10.1016/J.WSIF.2023.102861.

³ Song, “Little Fresh Meat.”

nation.⁴ Sissyphobia has been amplified and encouraged in the Xi era through calls for physically tough “masculinity education” (*yanggang jiaoyu* 陽剛教育), state bans on men’s earrings, gay themes, and effeminate men in television shows, online “boy’s love” (*danmei* 耽美) drama series, and internet games.⁵ Since 2015, the state has banned the portrayal of gay relationships in the media and labelled homosexuality as abnormal, demonstrating its determination to shape the kind of male sexuality it believes is suitable for a modern China.⁶ By 2021, the government implemented censorship of representations of feminised masculinities on video streaming platforms, due to its heightened concerns about the prevalence of “sissies” in social media.⁷

Nevertheless, the Chinese male beauty sector continues to flourish, due to the acceleration of metropolitan economic growth, a creative industries boom, the spread of digital social media, as well as the shifting modes of gender expression mentioned above. A

⁴ In 2013, Xi Jinping is reported to have attributed the collapse of the Soviet Union to the lack of a “real man”. Xi is quoted as saying: “In the end, no one was a real man, no one came out to make a stand and fight” (*zui hou, jing wu yi ren shi nan’er, mei shenme ren chulai kangzheng* 最后，竟无一人是男儿，没什么人出来抗争。) Chu Bailiang 储百亮, “Xi Jinping jinggao Zhonggong jiqu qian Sulian jiaoxun” 习近平警告中共记取前苏联教训, *Niuyue shibao zhongwen wang* 纽约时报中文网, February 15, 2013, available online at <<https://cn.nytimes.com/world/20130215/c15xi>> (last accessed 9 April 2023).

⁵ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “China Bans Depictions of Gay People on Television,” *The Guardian*, March 4, 2016, <www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/mar/04/china-bans-gay-people-television-clampdown-xi-jinping-censorship> (last accessed 15 April 2023); Hu et al., “Masculinity in crisis?”; Yuan Li, “No Earrings, Tattoos or Cleavage: Inside China’s War on Fun,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2019, available online at <www.nytimes.com/2019/03/27/business/china-war-on-fun-earrings-tattoos.html> (last accessed 15 April 2023); Joe McDonald, “China Bans Men It Sees as Not Masculine Enough from TV,” *AP News*, September 3, 2021, <<https://apnews.com/article/lifestyle-entertainment-business-religion-china-62dda0fc98601dd5afa3aa555a901b3f>> (last accessed 15 April 2023); Bei Yi Seow, “China Orders Gaming Giants to Cut ‘Effeminate’ Gender Imagery,” *Yahoo News*, September 9, 2021 <<https://news.yahoo.com/china-orders-gaming-giants-cut-052311000.html>> (last accessed 10 September 2021); Wang and Bao, “Sissy capital”; Zhao Siwei 趙思維, “Jiaoyubu dafa ‘Fangzhi nanxing qingshaonian nüxinghua’ ti’an: Zhuzhong ‘yanggang zhi qi’ peiyang” 教育部答復“防止男性青少年女性化”提案：註重“陽剛之氣”培養, *The Paper* 澎湃, January 21, 2021, available online at <www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_10984683> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

⁶ Ellis-Petersen, “China Bans Depictions.”

⁷ Wang and Bao, “Sissy capital.”

much re-posted article from the influential business and technology internet platform Huxiu (虎嗅), ascribes the interest in cosmetics of “refined” (精致 *jingzhi*) makeup wearing men from the “post-95” generation to their growing consumer power, the influence of celebrities on their lifestyle, and the overall popularity of beauty culture among young people.⁸ Male beauty vloggers are increasingly influential in the beauty sector: by 2019, they accounted for over 20% of all beauty vlogging on the three major platforms of Douyin, Kuaishou, and Bilibili; and compared to that year’s growth rate of 39% for overall beauty content views, male beauty content saw a growth rate of 82%.⁹ By 2021, the male audience for male beauty influencers reached 185 million, mainly concentrated in the 25-30 age group.¹⁰ Beauty influencers’ recommendations are the third most significant source of information for young men, after recommendations from friends and from girlfriends, the latter indicating the important role that women play in shaping men’s beauty habits.¹¹

An article on Sohu, one of China’s most well-known websites, maps the shift in popular masculine ideals, stating “Wake up! Rugged tough guys are no longer popular; these days it’s the refined male idol who’s in demand.”¹² The Huxiu article echoes that sentiment: “Fair,

⁸ Qingshan ziben 青山資本, “Weishenme 95 hou nansheng geng ai huazhuang le?” 為什麼 95 後男生更愛化妝了? Huxiu, 虎嗅 (2018), available online at <<https://www.huxiu.com/article/248126.html>> (last accessed 15 October 2023).

⁹ Shenghuo jiaxuan 生活佳選, “Weishenme xianzai de nansheng yue lai yue ai huazhuang le?” 為什麼現在的男生越來越愛化妝了? Zhihu, 知乎 (2021), available online at <<https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/364569730>> (last accessed 15 October 2023).

¹⁰ Wu Shubin 吳淑斌, “Dang yiwei nansheng chengwei meizhuang bozhu” 當一位男生成為美妆博主, *Sanlian shenghuo zhouban*, 三聯生活週刊 (2021), available online at <<https://www.lifeweek.com.cn/h5/article/detail.do?artId=132105>> (last accessed 15 October 2023).

¹¹ Xu Xiuqi 徐秀緝, “Ruhe ba huazhuangpin maigei 95 hou nansheng” 如何把化妝品賣給 95 後男生? CBO, 化妝品財經在線 (2021), available online at <<https://www.cbo.cn/article/id/50147.html>> (last accessed 15 October 2023).

¹² Keji jiedu 科技解讀, “Nansheng zenme huazhuang buhui bei shuo niangpao” 男生怎麼化妝不會被說娘炮, Sohu 搜狐 (2019), available online at <https://www.sohu.com/a/287323226_386277> (last accessed 15 October 2023).

delicate and gentle "little fresh meat" and "puppy-like" images have become the new favourites among women, replacing the muscular tough guy, uncle persona, and the domineering male CEO figure."¹³ Groups of enthusiastic male fans now strive to imitate their idols' makeup aesthetics, such as Wu Yifan's (吳亦凡) eyebrow style, G-Dragon's (Kwon Ji-yong) eye makeup, Lu Han's (鹿晗) skincare routine, and Huang Zitao's (黃子韜) eyeliner.¹⁴

Social media's competitive focus on visual perfection, an increasingly controversial influence on young women's body image across the world, is also impacting young men. An article on the influential news website, *The Paper* (澎湃新聞), attests to young men's increasing sense of "appearance anxiety," literally "face value anxiety" (*yanzhi jiaolü* 顏值焦慮), stating that in the face value-centric era it is widely accepted that one's "face value" has become part of one's "soft power," and that it can be quantified in terms of income opportunities.¹⁵ The 2018 "China Youth Aesthetic Competitiveness Report" revealed that 98% of "post-2000" men feel pressure regarding their appearance.¹⁶

While seeking to look more refined, most young men are afraid of looking feminine, according to a recent report on male cosmetics use: "Young men want to keep things simple, but do not want to look completely unkempt. They don't want to appear so exquisitely groomed that they lose their air of masculinity; neither do they want to become what young

¹³ Qingshan ziben, "Weishenme 95 hou nansheng geng ai huazhuang le?"

¹⁴ Qingshan ziben, "Weishenme 95 hou nansheng geng ai huazhuang le?"

¹⁵ Yinke meixue 印客美学, "1.85 yi Zhongguo nanren, zheng zai toutou huazhuang?" 1.85 億中國男人, 正在偷偷化妝? *The Paper*, 澎湃新聞 (2021), available online at <https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_13495019> (last accessed 15 October 2023).

¹⁶ Qingshan ziben, "Weishenme 95 hou nansheng geng ai huazhuang le?"

women call 'scruffy' (*buxiu bianfu* 不修邊幅) or 'rough-looking' (*cao hanzi* 糙漢子)."¹⁷

According to the report, a typical viewpoint was expressed by a respondent who emphasised restraint when applying makeup: "I can't accept seeing a guy excessively painting his eyebrows or lips in advertisements, but I believe that moderate grooming can be a plus for young men: after watching Zhang Ruoyun 張若昀 touch up his eyebrows in 'Flowers and Youth' (花兒與少年) and seeing Li Chen (李晨) in 'Running Man' (奔跑吧兄弟) falling into the water and losing half his eyebrows, I realized the importance of appropriate makeup for young men."¹⁸

To avoid looking feminine, the makeup approach that many young men have embraced is the "fake-natural look," literally "fake-natural face" (*wei suyan* 偽素顏); searches for "男生化妝" (*nansheng huazhuang*, men's makeup) on Bilibili, a major video-sharing platform, often lead to videos from male beauty influencers promoting "fake-natural" makeup solutions for men.¹⁹ This cautious approach inevitably shapes men's choices when purchasing cosmetics: according to a 2020 beauty market insights report, men prefer products such as concealer, foundation, and beauty balm creams over eyeshadow and lipstick in order to look "clean" and "decent," not overly made-up.²⁰

China's new digital culture is exemplified by *wanghong* 網紅 ("internet celebrities"), the influencers of the Chinese internet, characterised by their good looks and penchant for

¹⁷ Chen Mei 陳媚, "Nanren 'zhuang', zhi baiyi" 男人"妝", 值百億, 21st Century Economic News, 21 經濟網 (2022), available online at <http://www.21jingji.com/article/20220124/herald/fa5b5f038d0b0fb31f65161974b3c22b.html> (last accessed 15 October 2023).

¹⁸ Chen Mei, "Nanren 'zhuang', zhi baiyi."

¹⁹ Yinke meixue, "1.85 yi Zhongguo nanren."

²⁰ Yinke meixue, "1.85 yi Zhongguo nanren."

lifestyle and entertainment topics. They famously sport a *wanghong lian* 網紅臉 (“internet celebrity face”), achieved through cosmetic surgery and makeup routines.²¹ Achieving “high face value” (*yanzhi gao* 顏值高) has become a career necessity for internet celebrities, including the young men who promote beauty products as a pathway to professional and social success.²² In 2018, South Korean actor Lee Dong Wook’s promotion of Chanel men’s lipstick became a social media sensation. In 2021, Jing Boran (井柏然), a well-known Chinese actor, was signed to promote a local brand, Liran (理然), through the slogan “men should also live beautifully” (*nanren ye yao huode piaoliang* 男人也要活得漂亮). Several male celebrities have also become the marketing face of cosmetics aimed at women.²³ The authorities recognise the importance of the digital, entertainment and beauty industries for consumer-led economic growth. Indeed, the beauty economy is China’s fifth largest consumer market, promoted and shaped by government economic goals and aesthetic expectations.²⁴ The state is therefore willing to tolerate and even support the sale of male cosmetics, as long as male makeup use does not promote effeminacy in men. It is under these conditions that male beauty vloggers seek to create hybrid masculinities that flexibly balance refinement and manliness. Gender and sexuality as social categories thus serve multiple market, state and societal needs and desires in China.

²¹ Anett Dippner, “How much is my face worth? Neoliberal subjectification, the beauty economy, and the internet celebrity culture in China,” *ASiEN* 147 (2018):38–63, see pages 41–42, and 47.

²² Hua Wen, “Gentle yet Manly: *Xiao xian rou*, Male Cosmetic Surgery and Neoliberal Consumer Culture in China,” *Asian Studies Review* 45.2 (2021):253–271. DOI 10.1080/10357823.2021.1896676.

²³ Chen Mei, “Nanren ‘zhuang’, zhi baiyi.”

²⁴ Jie Yang, “*Nennu* and *Shunu*: Gender, Body Politics, and the Beauty Economy in China,” *Signs* 36.2 (2011):333–357. DOI 10.1086/655913.

Under these conditions, men's cosmetics sales have increased exponentially; and notably more significantly than elsewhere in the world. From 2016 to 2019, China's men's cosmetics market grew at a rate of 13.5%, whereas the global average for the same period was 5.8%.²⁵ In 2019, male consumers contributed to 41.5% year-on-year growth in the beauty category on Alibaba's Tmall, China's largest ecommerce website.²⁶ The following year, Alibaba data showed that 2020's "Double 11", China's largest shopping sales day, saw a year-on-year increase of over 3000% in the stockpiling of imported cosmetics products for men.²⁷ Similarly, the "2020 Mid-Year Beauty Insights Report" from Xiaohongshu (小紅書), a highly popular social media platform among China's youth, indicated rapid growth in the male beauty "he-conomy" (他經濟), particularly among younger men from the post-90s generation.²⁸ Generation Z, the "post-95" generation, is showing the strongest interest in male cosmetics: a 2021 survey of 87 young men from Generation Z found that more than 40% of respondents already used skincare products, while over half reported being comfortable with the idea of using cosmetics.²⁹ Over a quarter of interviewees thought that men should break through societal constraints and "attain makeup freedom" (*shixian huazhuang ziyou* 實現化妝自由); while only one fifth of interviewees said they could not accept men wearing makeup at all.³⁰ In 2022, Tmall announced the elevation of "men" (*nanshi* 男士) to first-tier industry status due to triple-digit growth in male cosmetics and body care products; and

²⁵ Shenghuo jiaxuan, "Weishenme xianzai de nansheng yue lai yue ai huazhuang le?"

²⁶ Chen Mei, "Nanren 'zhuang', zhi baiyi."

²⁷ Shenghuo jiaxuan, "Weishenme xianzai de nansheng yue lai yue ai huazhuang le?"

²⁸ Chen Xiaozhen 陳曉珍, "Kan lian shidai, zhichang nanxing geng yao xuehui huazhuang?" 看臉時代, 職場男性更要學會化妝? Jiemian xinwen, 界面新聞 (2021), available online at <<https://www.jiemian.com/article/5494064.html>> (last accessed 15 October 2023).

²⁹ Xu Xiuqi, "Ruhe ba huazhuangpin maigei 95 hou nansheng."

³⁰ Xu Xiuqi, "Ruhe ba huazhuangpin maigei 95 hou nansheng."

according to Euromonitor International data, the 2023 Chinese male cosmetics market is projected to achieve sales of 20 billion yuan.³¹

Young men's increasing use of cosmetic products is heralded as the emergence of the "male face value economy" (*nanxing yanzhi jingji* 男性顏值經濟).³² According to the 2018 "China Youth Face Value Competitiveness Report" (*Zhongguo qingnian yanzhi jingzhengli baogao* 中國青年顏值競爭力報告), many professionals believe that appearance is particularly important in the workplace; 80% of young individuals surveyed for the report stated that a "high face value" can lead to better career development; 90% held that good "face value" can contribute to promotions and salary increases.³³ The 2021 Generation Z survey found that many of the respondents used skincare and makeup as part of a "daily maintenance" (*richang baoyang* 日常保養) routine, with goals that included "improving self-image" (*tisheng ziwo xingxiang* 提升自我形象) and "solving skin problems" (*jiejue pifu wenti* 解決皮膚問題); nearly a fifth of respondents used cosmetics because their girlfriends wanted them to, signalling significant female influence on shaping male ideals.³⁴ Gaining the respect of others is one obvious motivation for young men's makeup use, but at the same time, as a generation renowned for its individualistic spirit, they are also often seeking a sense of inner satisfaction.³⁵

³¹ Chen Mei, "Nanren 'zhuang', zhi baiyi."

³² *Nanxing yanzhi jingji* can be more idiomatically translated as the "male looks economy" or the "male appearance economy." I have retained the more literal translation of "male face value economy" to highlight the focus on enhancing facial looks through cosmetics.

³³ Chen Xiaozhen, "Kan lian shidai."

³⁴ Xu Xiuqi, "Ruhe ba huazhuangpin maigei 95 hou nansheng."

³⁵ Chen Mei, "Nanren 'zhuang', zhi baiyi."

The “face value” advice provided by male beauty vloggers is usefully viewed in the context of its relationship with “advice media” as a genre, which has been notably discussed in East Asian television studies, including how beauty sensibilities in the PRC are connected with wider East Asia cultural spaces. For instance, as Tania Lewis, Fran Martin and Wanning Sun point out, in a statement that could equally be applied to social media beauty and lifestyle vlogging, lifestyle television’s “pedagogies of good taste, appropriate consumption, and desirable identity” provide rich ways of understanding “selfhood and constructions of the good life in a given society.”³⁶ The role of advice media in building high *suzhi* 素質 (“quality”) individuals concerns “preoccupations with consumption, middle-class identity, people’s emotional and economic survival in times of rapid social change, and the individualization of social life and civic responsibility.”³⁷ Seen in this light, as with lifestyle television, male beauty vloggers are contributing to “idealizing a type of [gendered] personhood associated with urban modernity.”³⁸

This article discusses the difficult balancing act between refinement and manliness that male beauty vloggers seek to perform. It examines several techniques that male beauty vloggers promote as a non-feminising aesthetics that will enable young men to gain social prestige and professional advancement, without being labelled sissies or damaging their heteronormative masculinity in any way. The notions of hybrid and flexible masculinities and the heterosexual matrix provide the main conceptual frameworks for the study. While contemporary concerns and practices often have their own distinctive characteristics

³⁶ Lewis, Tania, Fran Martin, and Wanning Sun, *Telemodernities: Television and Transforming Lives in Asia* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

³⁷ Lewis, Martin and Sun, *Telemodernities*, 8-9, 12.

³⁸ Lewis, Martin and Sun, *Telemodernities*, 12.

pertaining to today's commercial and technological contexts, they are further illuminated when located within the longer historical context of the formation of modern masculinities.

Modern masculinities: the historical context

Tensions between refinement and manliness in the production of masculinities have not been uncommon in the histories of nations, which, as Joanne Nagel has convincingly shown, occurs because masculinity and nationalism are intimately connected.³⁹ Writing about Western countries, Alan Peterson points out that “crises of masculinity” often occur when large-scale socio-economic change includes more assertive demands by women, such as in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France and England and late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century Europe and America.⁴⁰ Commenting on eighteenth century England, Michèle Cohen argues that “polite gentlemanliness [was] rent with anxieties, in particular the anxiety about effeminacy, because tensions between masculinity and refinement made it difficult for a man to be at once polite and manly”.⁴¹ The creation of hybrid masculinities arose as a result. For instance, the nineteenth century English novel sought to rework masculinity by injecting the more manly chivalric ideal into male characters, such as the symbolically named Mr Knightley in Jane Austen's *Emma*.⁴² Qing dynasty literature exhibited a similar process in response to the perceived popularity of an androgynous ideal in the late Ming: anxieties about a “crisis of Confucian masculinity” that intensified throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

³⁹ Joanne Nagel, “Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21.2 (1998): 242–269.

⁴⁰ Alan Petersen, *Unmasking the Masculine: “Men” and “Identity” in a Sceptical Age* (London: Sage, 1998), 19–20.

⁴¹ Michèle Cohen, “‘Manners’ Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750–1830,” *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005):312–329, see page 313.

⁴² Cohen, “‘Manners’ Make the Man,” 326–328.

resulted in the appearance of hybrid male protagonists, “heroic scholars” who possessed martial tendencies as well as relatively androgynous characteristics.⁴³

Late nineteenth-century, semi-colonised China was infamously deemed the “sick man of East Asia.” The consensus diagnosis was that China’s supposedly enfeebled and overly refined elite men required an injection of virility to render them capable of building and defending the modern Chinese nation. Shifting political, social and economic structures in early twentieth century China (and elsewhere in East Asia) spurred the emergence of entrepreneurial and industrialist masculinities that “updated” the literatus persona.⁴⁴ In the commercial sphere, the figure of the “scholar-merchant” or “scholar-businessman” emerged as an aspirational masculinity for elite men after the shock of China’s defeat to Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895. As both a practically oriented man of “strong hands” and the possessor of a powerfully educated mind, the scholar-businessman exemplified a combination of marketplace and intellectual masculinities.⁴⁵ Newly available knowledge from the fields of physics, chemistry and other sciences spurred experimentation from the scholar-businessmen that contributed to establishment of modern industries, including cosmetics production.⁴⁶ Political and commercial motivations shaped a national context in which the

⁴³ Giovanni Vitiello, *The Libertine’s Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁴⁴ Eugenia Lean, *Vernacular Industrialism in China: Local Innovation and Translated Technologies in the Making of a Cosmetics Empire, 1900–1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

⁴⁵ Lili Zhou, “The Reconstruction of Masculinity in China, 1896-1930” (Ph.D. diss., University of Technology, Sydney, 2012), 122-63.

⁴⁶ Eugenia Lean, “Recipes for Men: Manufacturing Makeup and the Politics of Production in 1910s China,” *Osiris* 30.1 (2015): 134-57.

Michèle Cohen, “‘Manners’ Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750–1830,” *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005):312–329, see page 313.

health, beauty and wellbeing of the population became a priority focus, spurring the development of made-in-China products.

And yet, in the 1910s and 1920s, entrepreneurial manufacturers, who were overwhelmingly male, felt locked out of the chaotic national political environment. These men felt obliged to seek alternative forums to advocate the manufacture of new beauty products. As with disempowered intellectuals before them, these cosmetics industry pioneers found a means to communicate through the appropriation of a feminine-coded voices.⁴⁷ In their case, the burgeoning Republican-era magazine industry provided them with an effective means of promoting the production of beauty products, in particular women's magazines, which enabled views from the feminine-coded domestic "inner chambers" to exert influence among the reading public. In the 1910s, many technical articles appeared in women's magazines, detailing how to make soap, perfume and makeup in the home; written in the names of women, although sometimes penned by men, these articles were targeted at both women and men.⁴⁸ This use of the inner chambers and a virtuous woman's voice brought moral authority, a sense of authentic sentiment, and new forms of knowledge to help shape the emerging new masculine ideals at a time when the public sphere was in chaos.⁴⁹

Throughout the Republican era, profound anxieties about men's gendered behaviours continued to manifest due to the linkage of masculinity with the nation. By the 1930s, the emergence of consumerist masculinities was already prominent, due to the more stable

⁴⁷ For example, the banished official Qu Yuan 屈原 (339-278 BCE), in his celebrated poem "Encountering Sorrow" (*Li Sao* 離騷), depicted the ruler/subject relationship through a husband/wife (or lover/mistress) paradigm. Geng Song, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 51–60.

⁴⁸ Lean, *Recipes for Men*, 134–37, 141.

⁴⁹ Lean, *Recipes for Men*.

national industrial development ushered in during the Nanjing decade (1927–37).⁵⁰ Anticipating contemporary concerns about excessive refinement in men, commentators deemed the figure of the fashionable, skin cream-applying “modern boy” an effeminate danger to the nation’s vitality and strength.⁵¹ This was despite manufacturer’s efforts to emphasise masculine-coded phrases in the adverts for skin cream for men. 1930s’ adverts for the popular skin cream Hazeline Snow, which featured images of the modern boy, pitched it as an after-shave cream and used terms such as “upright men” (*gonggong nanzi* 觥觥男子) and “comfortable and clear” (*xuanlang* 軒朗), while simultaneously avoiding terms used in the Hazeline Snow adverts targeted at women, such as “delicately beautiful” (*jiaoli* 嬌麗); the adverts emphasised “physical comfort and health” to avoid associating the product with feminine aesthetics⁵² Nevertheless, the “modern boy” was strongly criticised as excessively consumerist and for being apolitical, in distinction to the authenticity of the politically minded “new youth” (*xin qingnian* 新青年), at a time of rising nationalism in the face of the threat from Japan; the “modern boy” was deemed too soft and not sufficiently patriotic due to his preference for foreign products.⁵³ To combat male effeminacy, normative discourses promoted hybrid masculinities as the best way to remasculinise Chinese men and the nation. In attempts to toughen the nation’s men, foreign gymnastic and martial techniques were introduced into military training to form a military masculinity that merged Western physical

⁵⁰ Lean, *Recipes for Men*, 134–37, 151.

⁵¹ Yushu Geng and Mobeen Hussain, “Marketing Modernity, Selling Hazeline: A Comparative Study of Indian and Chinese Markets, 1908–1957,” *The Historical Journal* (2023):1–34. DOI 10.1017/S0018246X23000584

⁵² Geng and Hussain, “Marketing Modernity,” 22–23.

⁵³ Geng and Hussain, “Marketing Modernity,” 26–27.

training regimes with long-standing practices from China's own military traditions.⁵⁴ New ideals of male masculinity spread well beyond the military realm: hybrid configurations of the "scholar-warrior" drawing on hard and soft elements of masculinity came to the fore in every sphere of daily life.⁵⁵

In the Mao era, Soviet representations of worker and soldier heroes strongly influenced the imagery of Chinese masculinity.⁵⁶ Anxieties about men's deviation from standard worker-soldier-peasant aesthetics were expressed in class terms, due to the pervasive politicisation of everyday discourse. Even simply growing a moustache could result in a factory worker coming under official attack for exhibiting "bourgeois" behaviour. In the post-Mao era, the "crisis of masculinity" of the first half of the twentieth century, that had seemed to be resolved by the worker-peasant-soldier triad of masculine roles during the Mao era, resurfaced in a new guise. The target of widespread anxiety was the wave of boyish singers that emerged to meet the market demand for a soft masculinity, the so-called "creamy youths" of the 1980s.⁵⁷ Such concerns pointed to deep insecurities about the masculinity of Chinese men, and a yearning for a model of tough modern masculinity that China could call its own.⁵⁸ Even the figure of the white-collar man, emblematic of a re-emerging cosmopolitan masculinity in the early 2000s that juxtaposed both a refined appearance and the appropriately male pursuit of wealth, fell under suspicion for "feminine"

⁵⁴ Nicolas Schillinger, *The Body and Military Masculinity in Late Qing and Early Republican China: The Art of Governing Soldiers* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016).

⁵⁵ Jun Lei, *Mastery of Words and Swords: Negotiating Intellectual Masculinities in Modern China, 1890s-1930s* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2021).

⁵⁶ Bret Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

⁵⁷ Song, *The Fragile Scholar*.

⁵⁸ Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, 159.

attention to his looks and use of basic cosmetic products.⁵⁹ The latest figure seeking to find a balance between refinement and manliness, the *xiaoxianrou*, inherits and reworks aesthetic sensibilities from the slim and soft premodern *caizi* 才子, the Xuehuagao-applying “modern boy” of the Republican era, and the *naiyou xiaosheng*. The *xiaoxianrou* epitomises a flexible, hybrid masculinity through his seeking to be “gentle yet manly.”⁶⁰ His feminine facial aesthetics, complemented by his lean and toned body, have proven to be a powerful commercial combination in China and throughout East Asia.

In his discussion of Western discourses of masculinity, Alan Peterson argues that the contemporary “crisis in masculinity” is wider in scope than previous ones, since it involves all sections of society and converges with a broader “crisis of modernity” in which the epistemological foundations of categories that have been used to frame thinking since the nineteenth century have come under sustained attack.⁶¹ This broader assault includes the destabilisation of gender and sexual categories established since the late nineteenth century, upon which the contemporary Chinese state has drawn for its own fundamental conceptualisations of appropriate identities and practices of men and women, in what Howard Chiang calls “epistemic modernity.”⁶² The “crisis of masculinity” in China in the post-Mao era has thus been characterised as penetrating every aspect of contemporary life, including the translation of labour unrest and social inequality into a moral, gendered issue,⁶³

⁵⁹ Geng Song and Derek Hird, *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2014).

⁶⁰ Wen, “Gentle yet Manly.”

⁶¹ Petersen, *Unmasking the Masculine*, 20–21.

⁶² Howard Chiang, “Epistemic modernity and the emergence of homosexuality in China,” *Gender & History* 22.3 (2010): 629–57.

⁶³ John L. Osburg, “Engendering wealth: China’s new rich and the rise of an elite masculinity,” (Ph.D diss., University of Chicago, 2008); Jie Yang, “The crisis of masculinity: Class, gender, and kindly power in post-Mao China,” *American Ethnologist* 37.3 (2010): 550–62.

the “feminisation” of boys and young men in education,⁶⁴ Chinese men’s “lack” of masculinity compared to Western men,⁶⁵ and men’s emasculation vis-à-vis the Party-state.⁶⁶ In her study of male representations of men in 1980s literature, Zhong Xueping understands the post-Mao crisis of masculinity as comprising sexuality, desire, anxiety, relationships with women, sexual politics, against the backdrop of the entirety of modern and recent Chinese history.⁶⁷ Such all-pervading contexts intensify the sensitivities surrounding Chinese masculinities.

Investigating hybrid and flexible masculinities: concepts and methods

Studies of Chinese masculinities have consistently emphasised the hybrid and flexible composition of Chinese masculinities. Kam Louie’s seminal work on representations of men in historical literature conclusively showed that Chinese masculinities had long encompassed an interplay of elements of *wen* 文 (“cultural attainment”) and *wu* 武 (“martial valour”), which came together in different ways in the figures such as the scholar official (*shidafu* 士大夫), the hero (*yingxiong* 英雄) and the good fellow (*haohan* 好漢).⁶⁸ Geng Song has drawn attention to the additional importance of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 positioning of officials and their superiors for the performance of historical masculinities.⁶⁹ Using the concept of the

⁶⁴ Xu Anqi 徐安琪, “Nanhai weiji: yige weiyang-songting de wei mingti” 男孩危機: 一個危言聳聽的偽命題, *Qingnian yanjiu* 青年研究 1 (2010): 40–46.

⁶⁵ Sun Longji 孫隆基, *Zhongguo wenhua de “shenceng jiegou”* 中國文化的“深層結構” (Hong Kong: Jixianshe, 1983).

⁶⁶ Nimrod Baranovitch, *China’s New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978–1997* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁶⁷ Zhong Xueping, *Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000)

⁶⁸ Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶⁹ Song, *The Fragile Scholar*.

“assemblage,” Geng Song and Derek Hird have shown how Chinese masculinities in the contemporary era are composed from globally circulating ideals linked to notions of modernity and the historically embedded ideas and practices associated with Chinese cultural traditions. The emerging white-collar men incorporate personal grooming techniques and the display of good “taste” into their masculine subjectivities precisely to enhance their social prestige and professional opportunities.⁷⁰ Anxieties have crystallised when masculinities have been deemed to be too closely associated with the feminine and thus sapping the vitality of the nation. However, proponents of softer masculinities have argued that these masculinities are a necessary step towards eroding patriarchy and establishing more equitable gender relations. In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly considered whether relatively feminised masculinities do indeed effect substantive change in asymmetrical gendered hierarchies.

The concepts of hybrid and flexible masculinities offer a useful lens on the production of gender and sexual boundaries.⁷¹ 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.”⁷² Similarly, flexible masculinities are “a form of identity practice that adapts to accommodate a range of dominant male stereotypes and more alternative versions of masculinity” that requires pre-established “heteronormative

⁷⁰ Song and Hird, *Men and Masculinities*.

⁷¹ James J. Dean and Nancy L. Fischer, “Thinking Straightness: An Introduction to Critical Heterosexualities Studies,” in James J. Dean & Nancy L. Fischer, eds., *Routledge International Handbook of Heterosexualities Studies* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 1–17, see pages 10–11.

⁷² Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe, “Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities,” *Sociology Compass* 8.3 (2014): 246–258, see page 246.

masculine capital”; they offer “opportunistic” modes of alternating between different forms of masculinity in ways that are “reflexive and expedient.”⁷³ Through the production of hybrid and flexible masculinities, straightness is constantly being remade in ways that reflect and shape gendered and sexual hierarchies, a process which “involves seeing heterosexuality as a social construct that invokes particular gendered and sexual power relations between men and women, and between heterosexuals and sexual minorities.”⁷⁴ The social production of heterosexual relations thus plays a key role in the reproduction of gender divisions.⁷⁵ A key question in the literature is whether hybrid and flexible masculinities enable men to retain or even increase gendered and sexual privileges, or whether these masculinities undermine such privileges.⁷⁶ Studies of hybrid and flexible masculinities conclude that while they may incorporate feminine-coded characteristics into their repertoire and thereby blur gender boundaries to an extent, at the same time they do not significantly shift embedded gendered and sexual hierarchies.⁷⁷ Moreover, research has shown that the adoption of softer gender attributes enables men to gain power and prestige without losing social privileges.⁷⁸ Male grooming is considered to be one of the mechanisms men utilise “for establishing maleness

⁷³ Sarah Gee, “Bending the codes of masculinity: David Beckham and flexible masculinity in the new millennium,” *Sport in Society* 17.7 (2014): 917–936, see page 927 and p.929.

⁷⁴ Nancy L. Fischer, “Seeing ‘Straight’, Contemporary Critical Heterosexuality Studies and Sociology: An Introduction,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 54.4(2013): 501–510, see page 501. DOI 10.1111/tsq.12040

⁷⁵ Stevi Jackson, “Gender, Sexuality and Heterosexuality: The Complexity (and Limits) of Heteronormativity,” *Feminist Theory* 7.1 (2006): 105–121, see page 105.

⁷⁶ Bridges and Pascoe, “Hybrid Masculinities,” see page 247.

⁷⁷ Bridges and Pascoe, “Hybrid Masculinities”; Daniel B. Eisen and Liann Yamashita, “Borrowing from femininity: The caring man, hybrid masculinities, and maintaining male dominance,” *Men and Masculinities* 22.5 (2019): 801–820. DOI 10.1177/1097184X17728552; Casey Scheibling and Marc Lafrance, “Man up but stay smooth: Hybrid masculinities in advertising for men’s grooming products,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 27.2 (2019):222–239. DOI 10.1177/1060826519841473.

⁷⁸ Eisen and Yamashita, “Borrowing from femininity.”

and recovering a sense of power no longer wielded in other realms.”⁷⁹ The consensus in the literature on hybrid and flexible masculinities is that they “remain firmly entrenched within a heteronormative system of gender and the political economy of consumer capitalism.”⁸⁰

This study’s conceptual approach also includes the notion of the “heterosexual matrix”, a “grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized,”⁸¹ which offers a means of explaining why gender is often viewed an unchanging and key determinant of identity.⁸² The heterosexual matrix is generated from the proposition that gender expression derives from a stable sex identity, i.e. “masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female,” and is produced on the basis of heterosexuality as a norm.⁸³ The matrix thus leads to heteronormative assumptions about sexuality when the sex and gender of a person are known or taken for granted, and produces assumptions about gender when sex and sexuality are the known or presupposed categories.⁸⁴ From the latter perspective, the heterosexual matrix compels a “natural” gender expression upon bodies with known sexualities, regardless of the actual gender expression of individual bodies. For example, men who fear being stigmatised as gay 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 own heterosexuality. To allay the fears of Chinese men that they will be stigmatised as feminine

⁷⁹ Elena Frank, “Groomers and consumers: The meaning of male body depilation to a modern masculinity body project,” *Men and Masculinities* 17.3 (2014): 278–298, see page 292.

⁸⁰ Scheibling and Lafrance, “Man up.”

⁸¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2nd ed) (New York; London: Routledge, 2006), 194, see note 6.

⁸² Chris Brickell, “Masculinities, Performativity, and Subversion,” *Men and Masculinities* 8.1 (2005): 24–43. DOI 10.1177/1097184X03257515.

⁸³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 194, see note 6.

⁸⁴ Kristi Tredway, “Judith Butler Redux - the Heterosexual Matrix and the Out Lesbian Athlete: Amélie Mauresmo, Gender Performance, and Women’s Professional Tennis,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 41.2 (2014):163–176. DOI 10.1080/00948705.2013.785420.

and a sissy for wearing makeup, Chinese male beauty vloggers therefore promote a refined yet manly look to straight men, which involves applying makeup that is not visible to others. This look offers a refined aesthetics for men but maintains a conventionally masculine presentation, which in turn preserves the wearer’s heterosexuality in the eyes of others. An understanding of how the heterosexual matrix operates thus sheds light on why the fake-natural look is attractive to straight-acting men in the current climate of sissyphobia in China.

The analysis of refined masculinity makeup aesthetics below is based on a survey of 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 overall popularity: all possessed significant numbers of fans, ranging from 215,000 to 4.3 million. The selected vloggers all possessed verified Weibo accounts, holding either “Orange V” status or “Golden V” status, the latter indicating that the vlogger is a “key opinion leader.” Most of the vloggers were born in or after 1995, positioning them as members of “Generation Z,” a relatively well-off and technologically sophisticated cohort who engage intensely with social media from which they desire “authentic” and “passionate” advice on brands from their peers.⁸⁵ Weibo was chosen as the primary site of inquiry as it is one of the most ubiquitous social media platforms in China. Videos posted by the Weibo vloggers on Bilibili were also included, as Bilibili is one of China’s most popular video-sharing websites. These two platforms have approximately 450 million and 100 million users respectively, the vast majority under 30 years old. Both have

⁸⁵ Anonymous, “6 Things to Know about China’s Gen Z Consumers – and How They Can Afford Luxury Brands,” *South China Morning Post*, October 5, 2019, available online at <http://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/luxury/article/3031540/6-things-know-about-chinas-gen-z-consumers-and-how-they-can>, (last accessed 15 April 2023).

successfully monetised the energy and occasional edginess of youth culture. Weibo is deemed a “virtual playground for youth,”⁸⁶ whereas Bilibili’s is especially famed for its viewers “bullet comments”, which speed across videos while they play.⁸⁷ Weibo and Bilibili are among the top platforms that male consumers turn to for information about male beauty products, vying with Xiaohongshu and Douyin for market share.⁸⁸ Most of the men’s makeup videos surveyed were between two to four minutes in duration, although some videos lasted up to ten minutes. Videos without a discernible narrative thread relating to gender identity or performance were disregarded. Following Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis framework,⁸⁹ the topics of discussion in the videos that involved gender identity and performance were noted and then grouped into themes. One theme emerged as the most prominent, the promotion of a refined, yet still manly masculinity, achieved through non-visible makeup, to allay men’s fears of feminisation. This key theme is divided into sub-themes of assertion of straight masculinity, the quick and easy application of makeup, the importance of eyebrow grooming, and achieving a fresh, clean, and natural look.

Refined masculinity as a strategy for gaining prestige and retaining privileges

Seeking to negotiate the political, social and commercial tensions that pull masculinities in different directions, male beauty vloggers have turned to a masculinity that is “refined”

⁸⁶ Li Tao, “China’s Weibo Leverages Star Power to Profit from Huge Youth Following as Oldies Lose Interest” *South China Morning Post*, 2017, October 9, 2017, available online at <<https://www.scmp.com/tech/china-tech/article/2114545/chinas-weibo-leverages-star-power-profit-huge-youth-following-oldies>> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

⁸⁷ Leticia-Tian Zhang and Daniel Cassany, “Making Sense of Danmu: Coherence in Massive Anonymous Chats on Bilibili.com,” *Discourse Studies* 22.4 (2020): 483–502. DOI 10.1177/1461445620940051.

⁸⁸ Qingshan ziben, “Weishenme 95 hou nansheng geng ai huazhuang le?”

⁸⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3.2 (2006):77–101. DOI 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

(*jingzhi* 精致) but not feminine. The aesthetics of the “refined man” (*jingzhi nan* 精致男) provide many young men with an appealing alternative to the “wolf warrior” (*zhanlang* 戰狼) masculinity popularised in war films and TV dramas in recent years.⁹⁰ These two models of masculinity both encompass globally circulating notions of what makes a man as well as historically deeply embedded *wen* and *wu* characteristics that have informed Chinese masculinities for millennia.⁹¹ The tenacity of predominantly *wen*-oriented masculinities that incorporate some *wu* elements suggests their continuing appeal despite fears that they lack conventional manliness. The refined man is often associated with the figure of the *xiaoxianrou*. His key characteristics include well-manicured eyebrows, clean-shaven face and use of moisturisers and cleansers. Echoing historical discourses, the shaping of his eyebrows in particular are seen as having fundamental importance in ascertaining his “face value.” A well-coiffured hairstyle, well-matched clothes, and a trim and fit physique are other markers of the refined man, who maintains a “fresh and relaxed” (*qingshuang* 清爽) and “natural and comfortable” (*ziran shufu* 自然舒服) look by keeping his skin, clothes, and shoes clean and presentable at all times.⁹²

Nevertheless, most men aspiring to make themselves look refined and attractive do not want to do so at the expense of their masculinity; on the contrary, they see makeup as a

⁹⁰ Anonymous, “Weishenme jingzhi nanhai yue lai yue duo?” 为什么精致男孩越来越多? *The Paper* 澎湃, April 24, 2019, available online at <https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3336214> (last accessed 15 April 2023); Fang Tong 方同, “‘Nanxing qizhi’ yinfa relie zhenglun: ‘90 hou’ nanxing zhuzhong ‘xingxiang dazao’” “男性气质”引发激烈争论: “90后”男性注重“形象打造”, *Qingnian cankao* 青年参考 12 September, 2018, available online at <http://qnck.cyol.com/html/2018-09/12/nw.D110000qnck_20180912_1-12.htm> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

⁹¹ Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*.

⁹² Jiu shen de weixun richang 九婶的微醺日常, “Jingzhi nanhai de shi da tezheng” 精致男孩的十大特征, *Zhihu* 知乎, July 3, 2019, available online at <<https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/40807018>> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

means for them to enhance their masculine appeal. Responding to these desires, male beauty vloggers advocate a non-feminising “fake-natural look for straight men” (*zhinan weisuyan zhuang* 直男偽素顏妝), in which makeup is applied so as not to be visible, with the explicit aim of allaying straight-identifying men’s fear of being labelled a sissy.⁹³ Negotiating and accommodating state desires for manly aesthetics as well as market demands for elegant looks, male beauty vloggers create a refined yet still manly masculinity that young men can aspire to without fear of stigmatisation. Four prominent themes in non-feminising makeup videos for men include assertion of straight masculinity, the quick and easy application of makeup, eyebrows as important but contested sites, and the end goal of using makeup to look naturally fresh, clean, and relaxed.

Asserting straight masculinity, avoiding femininity

“No need to fear that you will be called a sissy!” (*buyong pa bieren shuo ni niang* 不用怕別人說你娘) is the slogan that headlines a popular “straight man everyday makeup” video by male beauty vlogger Qianmi-wanli 千米万里, who has 172,000 fans on his Bilibili channel. His four-minute video has been viewed almost one and a half million times and has amassed over 5,500 comments, making it his most watched and most commented on video. The video has no audio commentary: with a Japanese pop song as its backing track, it shows a simple makeup routine for achieving what Qianmi-wanli calls a “straight man fake natural make up” (*zhinan wei suyuan huazhuang* 直男偽素顏妝容) look that “costs no more than 100 yuan”

⁹³ The equivalent phenomenon to the “fake-natural look” in Anglophone beauty vlogging is termed “no makeup makeup”. However, “no makeup makeup” is generally not pitched as a means for men to avoid looking feminine.

(*bu chaoguo 100 kuai* 不超過 100 塊), which even “poor boys can study” (*qiong nanhai ye keyi xueqilai* 窮男孩也可以學起來), and which serves as “make up for going out every day” (*richang chumen zhuangrong* 日常出門妝容). The title image shows before and after pictures, and features slogans reassuring viewers that “[the makeup] fundamentally can’t be seen!” (*genben kanbuchu* 根本看不出) and that “straight men can also be bold!” (*zhinan ye keyi dadanhua* 直男也可以大膽話).⁹⁴ Qianmi-wanli’s video epitomises the balancing act that appeals to many young men in China today: keen to emulate the fame, riches and personal attractiveness of finely groomed, makeup wearing *xiaoxianrou* pop idols, at the same time they seek to enhance their personal and career success within the expectations of everyday business and social environments. For the vast majority of them, this means performing a heteronormative masculinity (regardless of their inner sexual identity) that runs no risk of being labelled feminine. Qianmi-wanli cleverly suggests that wearing makeup is “bold,” a conventional masculine attribute, and simultaneously distances his makeup routine from any aspersions of femininity. There is no risk to the heteronormative masculine capital of his consumers, if they adopt his flexible yet modulated approach. His method is quick and cheap, which not only ensures it suits a wide audience but also plays to the “masculine” characteristic of preferring activities that are speedy and not too intricate, as is further discussed below.

A similarly pitched ten-minute video, titled “Straight man fake-natural look makeup” (*zhinan weisuyan zhuang* 直男偽素顏妝), advocates a natural makeup look for men that rejects feminine associations. Produced by Hangzhou-based male beauty vlogger Zeng

⁹⁴ The video is available online at <<https://www.bilibili.com/video/av24447096>> (last accessed 15 April 2023). Qianmi-wanli’s Bilibili channel is available online at <<https://space.bilibili.com/34271919>> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

Xuening 曾學宁, the video has garnered over 269,000 views, 1,100 likes and over 230 comments on Weibo, making it one of his most popular videos.⁹⁵ Born in 1997, Zeng has 1.8 million fans on his Weibo account. Zeng writes in the short text accompanying the video that men should enhance their looks by using makeup that is not too thick or “flirtatious” (*yaoyan* 妖艷) in style. 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 an un-madeup face lowers facial capital and damages life chances, appearing “flirtatious” is feminine-coded and to be avoided.

Attempting to balance refinement with manliness through flexible and hybrid masculinities puts attention on the performance and boundaries of straightness. 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 on the sexuality of other vloggers.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, Zeng’s sexuality is constantly doubted by viewers. One bullet comment alleges that his gestures “give him away [as gay]” (*shoushi chumaile* 手勢出賣了). Zeng continually attempts to amplify his heteromascularity: 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 men (*chun yemen* 純爺們).” However, a bullet comment parodies Zeng’s claim, taunting him:

⁹⁵ The video is available online at <<http://t.cn/AilTkf8q?m=4396824972654409&u=2819165581>> (last accessed 15 April 2023)

⁹⁶ A few male beauty vloggers have been explicit about being gay, such as Benny Dong Zichu (董子初), who openly discusses his same-sex relationships, but the vast majority of male beauty vloggers do not address their own sexuality. While it would be reasonable to assume that there are a range of sexual identities to be found among male beauty vloggers, the reticence of those who are gay to be open about their sexuality is understandable given the widespread promotion of the “fake-natural” look as a strategy to avoid being vilified as a sissy, and, by implication, gay. There is some discussion of “out” male beauty vloggers in Liu Xiaotu 劉小土, “Huazhuang de nanrenmen” 化妆的男人们, Huxiu, 虎嗅 (2018), available online at <<https://www.huxiu.com/article/273351.html>> (last accessed on 15 October 2023).

“We are manly bottoms, we are pure manly bottoms (*chunde gong ling* 純的公 0),” using gay slang for the receptive role in homosexual sex.⁹⁷ Despite Zeng’s attempts to persuade his viewers that a flexible approach to makeup wearing will not compromise their straightness and manliness, the boundaries of straightness are easily pushed beyond the comfort zone of some viewers. The success of male beauty vloggers depends on their ability to promote makeup products and routines that male consumers believe will enhance their social prestige while enabling them to retain their gendered privileges. If the boundaries are pushed too far, men fear they will be stigmatised as sissies and gay.

Another popular Weibo video in the same genre is “Men’s natural makeup” (*nanshi ziran zhuangrong* 男士自然妝容), which on Bilibili 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* 直男偽素顏妝! 男士如何畫出又“man”又高級幹淨的妝容).⁹⁸ This video is produced by Cui Hengjie, a Guangdong-based vlogger who joined Weibo in 2012, where he vlogs under the name of Derek Yi Yimao (翼一卯) and has amassed over 423,000 fans; his Bilibili account is named Teacher Derek Cui (Derek Cui Laoshi 崔老師). Cui does not provide a date of birth on his Weibo account and looks slightly older than the male beauty vloggers like Qianmi-wanli and Zeng. In this video, Cui focuses on how “straight men” can enhance their looks by wearing non-visible makeup and at the same time retain their masculinity, albeit a masculinity that reflects shifting norms.

⁹⁷ 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.

⁹⁸ The video is available online at <<https://www.weibo.com/tv/v/HyH66ohUC?fid=1034:4382665990987774>> and <<https://www.bilibili.com/video/av55565744/>> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

In the text accompanying the video, Cui alludes to the unsuitability of unreconstructed masculinities and to the appeal that well-groomed male appearances now possess: “The tough guy (*yinghan* 硬漢) era is already over; makeup needs to keep up with the times.” Cui claims that “men’s makeup can be very manly as well as fashionable,” arguing that: “It doesn’t have to be the type of makeup associated with little brothers.” “Little brothers” (*xiao gege* 小哥哥) is an internet term that became popular in 2017 to describe “soft and kind-hearted” (*you wenrou you shanliang* 又溫柔又閃亮) cute young men.⁹⁹ As a slightly older vlogger, Cui appears to 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. For these slightly older men, their growing power and wealth renders them less reliant on “face value” alone to attract young women. Here, the “little brother” figure’s relative femininity provides a foil against which Cui is able to emphasise the masculine dimensions of a refined aesthetics. Promoting a look half-way between the tough guy and the “little brother,” Cui is selling an aesthetic formula for enhanced relationship and career success.

The videos analysed above advocate a refined look that preserves a normative masculine presentation, with the promise that the wearer will gain prestige, retain his social privileges, thereby assuaging the fears of young men that they would be stigmatized as feminine if seen to be wearing makeup. According to the vloggers, the main benefits of wearing non-feminising makeup are that it makes a man look more attractive, feel more

⁹⁹ Anonymous, “Xiao gege” 小哥哥, Baidu 百度, (no date), available online at <<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5%E5%93%A5/23780053>> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

confident, and perform better in social and business interactions. This approach clearly works within conventional heteronormative frames. By associating non-visible makeup with straight sexuality, the vloggers reinforce the heterosexual matrix assumption that straight-identifying men should enact a “masculine” identity; at the same time, they offer the promise of a more refined, more fashionable masculine aesthetic that brings with it many rewards.

Quick and easy to apply

Popular discourses of gender in China frame men as naturally adept at handling the big picture aspects of tasks, while women are more suited to working on the details. Reasons given include men being more daring, self-confident, straightforward and hungry for success than women. As one self-help book for professional men puts it, men have the ability to focus on major issues and leave minor issues to sort themselves out, unlike women’s propensity to become excessively entangled in small matters, quibbling over every detail.¹⁰⁰ Among Chinese men, there is widespread buy-in to the view that women are more suited to handling small and less important matters than men because of immutable gender differences.¹⁰¹ This view extends to the amount of time men should be prepared to put on makeup. One of the main reasons that men give for not wearing cosmetic products is that “I’m too lazy to use them, it’s a hassle” (lande yong, mafan 懶得用, 麻煩).¹⁰² In an interview, a male user of cosmetics admitted that if it weren’t for the tedium of removing makeup, he would be willing

¹⁰⁰ Wang Yingbo. 王櫻博 *Nanren yiding yao zhuan qian: wanmei nanren de shengcai zhi dao* 男人一定要賺錢: 完美男人的生財之道 (Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe, 2009), 121.

¹⁰¹ Song and Hird, *Men and Masculinities*.

¹⁰² Xu Xiuqi, “Ruhe ba huazhuangpin maigei 95 hou nansheng.”

to wear it every day.¹⁰³ As one male author cynically summed up: “Let's not even discuss whether we have the makeup skills; even if we did, we simply don't have the time. And if we had the time, we'd surely choose to get a little more sleep.”¹⁰⁴

Videos analysed for this article show how vloggers and viewers alike reinforce the idea that men have little time or patience to spend lengthy amounts of time on intricate makeup routines. As mentioned above, Qianmi-wanli's fake-natural makeup video for straight men only lasts four minutes; and by claiming that even “poor boys” can master non-feminising makeup, he underlines the simplicity of the products needed and by implication the lack of a need for significant time investment. Zeng Xuening's popular video on fake-natural makeup for straight men 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* 十分鐘簡簡單單日常出門妝，拒絕厚重濃妝).¹⁰⁵ 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* 精神小夥) in a flash.” Another popular vlogger, Chengdu-based Tian Yuhuan 田逾歡, born in 1995 and possessing around 600,000 followers, similarly offers his viewers “A 10-minute method to change your look – refined boys natural makeup techniques’ (*shi fenzhong huantou shu: jingzhi nanhai ziran zhuangrong jiqiao* 十分鐘換頭術: 精致男孩自然妝容技巧).¹⁰⁶ With his carefully titled video, Tian neatly captures the balance between achieving a refined look

¹⁰³ Chen Xiaozhen, “Kan lian shidai.”

¹⁰⁴ Keji jiedu, “Nansheng zenme huazhuang.”

¹⁰⁵ The video is available online at

<www.bilibili.com/video/av60239468?from=search&seid=12846891125075728997> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

¹⁰⁶ The video is available online at <www.bilibili.com/video/av35882071> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

through cosmetics without having to lengthen one's daily behavioural routines. The title emphasises how achieving an elegant look does not entail sacrificing hours in the bathroom, the type of behaviour associated with women, and will not result in a feminised appearance. The "quick fix" promoted by the vloggers underlines the flexibility and expediency of men's makeup routines: consumers of men's makeup can enjoy the advantages of enhancing their appearance without eroding their heteronormative masculine capital.

Eyebrow grooming

Eyebrows proved a prominent point of reference in male beauty vloggers' videos of men's makeup techniques. An article on the website of the popular lifestyle magazine, *Lifeweek* (*Sanlian shenghuo zhouban* 三聯生活周刊), gives the example of 21-year-old male beauty blogger Arma, who has put eyebrow shaping at the centre of his most male aesthetics.¹⁰⁷ Similar attention to eyebrow grooming routines is found in online discussions. The most liked contribution to one of the many Zhihu 知乎 threads discussing men's makeup emphasises the cardinal importance of eyebrows in enhancing facial looks.¹⁰⁸ The comment explicitly links the shape of a man's eyebrows to increasing his air of masculinity. It advocates what it calls "sword eyebrows," which it claims will "make the contours of a young man's face more distinct and masculine" (*jianmao hui rang nansheng de lian de lunkuo geng fenming geng you yanggang qi* 劍眉會讓男生的臉的輪廓更分明更有陽剛氣). Furthermore, the comment

¹⁰⁷ Wu Shubin, "Dang yiwei nansheng chengwei meizhuang bozhu."

¹⁰⁸ See the Zhihu thread "Xiandai shehui, nanren you biyao huazhuang ma?" 现代社会，男人有必要化妆吗? Available online at <www.zhihu.com/question/22403757> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

acknowledges that men might find it difficult to shape their eyebrows, and therefore recommends a special men's eyebrow kit to help them do the job. On the same thread, another contributor similarly heralds the power that grooming "thick sword eyebrows" (*nongmi de jianmao* 濃密的劍眉) has to produce a manly bearing. According to this comment, "thick eyebrows immediately help to compound an energetic spirit and make the eyes appear deeper"; and "using a thick eyebrow pencil makes one's manliness (*nanzihan qigai* 男子漢氣概) stand out." These comments suggest that for men to groom "sword eyebrows" is not feminising at all; on the contrary, for those men willing to work flexibly on their appearance, sword eyebrows will enable them to build even more heteronormative masculine capital. Here, refined aesthetics and manliness work hand in hand. This focus on eyebrows is not surprising when viewed through the lens of a Chinese aesthetic tradition in which eyebrows are celebrated both for their aesthetic beauty and capacity to convey deep emotion.¹⁰⁹ Historically, this attention to eyebrow aesthetics spread across East Asia; as a consequence, South Korean male beauty standards similarly emphasise and help raise the contemporary profile of eyebrow grooming for men.¹¹⁰

An innovative video that draws on historically embedded tropes of eyebrow aesthetics has been produced by male beauty vlogger Wang Ran R (王燃 R), who was born in 1996 and is based in Changsha, Hunan. He joined Weibo in 2013 and now has approaching one million followers. The vast majority of his videos are pitched squarely within the mainstream men's

¹⁰⁹ Zhuang Zhonggang 莊中剛, "Gudai wenxue zhong de 'mei' yixiang yanjiu" 古代文學中的"眉"意象探究, *Journal of Changchun University* 長春大學學報 24.5 (2014):643–646.

¹¹⁰ Jessica Rapp, "Redefining Male Beauty," Wunderman Thompson, August 7, 2018, available online at <<https://www.wundermanthompson.com/insight/redefining-male-beauty>> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

makeup market, as exemplified by the vloggers discussed above. Yet his video on eyebrow aesthetics brings together a rich assemblage of ideas and images that he has creatively fashioned into a new idiom. The video is untitled on Weibo, but on Bilibili it is called: “Chinese style makeup: Maggie Cheung Green Snake imitation makeup” (*Zhongshi zhuangrong: Zhang Manyu Qing She fangzhuang* 中式妝容 張曼玉青蛇仿妝). It has over 800 likes on Weibo and over 200 comments, exceeding many of his other videos.¹¹¹ In the video, Wang guides the viewer through a series of steps of makeup application, with the aim of recreating Maggie Cheung’s look as the eponymous lead in Tsui Hark’s (徐克) 1993 film *Green Snake* (*Qing she* 青蛇). Less than two minutes into the video, Wang states:

Now we come to the main point of the makeup. This is a little exaggerated, but it creates eyebrows with a very Chinese classical charm by giving the tail of the eyebrow an upwards tilt. This feels a little like a Peking Opera eyebrow. I think this movie’s makeup is very interesting, ingeniously incorporating some Peking Opera elements into Green Snake’s makeup.

Wang’s short accompanying text to the video and discussion of eyebrow shaping during the video express a desire to convey a sense of timeless Chinese cultural essence. His eyebrow aesthetics are inspired by the definitive national art forms of Peking Opera and classical ink wash paintings inspire. These two art forms are often treated analogously, in that their practitioners aspire to convey “beauty” (*mei* 美) and the essence of a role or a landscape, rather than strive for historical or topological precision.¹¹² Indeed, viewer comments on

¹¹¹ The video is available online at <www.bilibili.com/video/BV19441147a8> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

¹¹² Elizabeth Wichmann, *Listening to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 2.

Wang's aesthetic creation, posted on Weibo beneath the video, repeatedly praise it precisely for its beauty.

However, in more mundane beauty vlogging for everyday “fake-natural” makeup, male beauty influencers have found that the connection between eyebrows and manliness is not always easily made. In Zeng's video, eyebrows proved an interesting flashpoint in terms of negotiating the boundaries of straight masculinity. 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 and the northeastern—therefore masculine-sounding—dialect word *zei* 贼 (“extremely”) to create and describe eyebrows that look “extremely three-dimensional, handsome, strong and defined” (*zei you litigan, zei shuaiqi, zei yinglang* 贼有立體感, 贼帥氣, 贼硬朗). However, some viewers' bullet comments castigate Zeng for transgressing their perceived norms of straight masculinity. One viewer asks: “Which straight guy has this kind of eyebrow?” Invoking the notion that normative masculinity does not permit intricate grooming practices, another viewer laments: “There are so many steps to this—straight guys are already exhausted by now. A frequently expressed concern in the comments on the video is the way that Zeng does his eyebrows is simply not what a “straight man” would do. Zeng seeks to address such criticisms by acknowledging that “for men, painting one's eyebrows every day is really tiring,” recognising that grooming one's eyebrows is not quite as quick and easy as expected according to the standards of heteronormative masculinity. Zeng struggles to achieving a refined eyebrow look in a short enough timescale: if the result of the eyebrow grooming is not appropriately manly or it takes too much effort and time, straight male consumers may feel that their masculinity is at risk. As with Zeng, Cui singles out eyebrows as “the most

important thing for men” and emphasizes a “natural” (*ziran* 自然) look, urging men to choose an eyebrow pencil colour close to their hair colour. Leaning in to 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.” Constructing a look explicitly in distinction to the “little brothers” of the entertainment world, Cui sets out clear limits to the flexibility of his target male consumers in their makeup use.

This section has underscored the delicate balance between refinement and masculinity that the vloggers strive for. Not only must the vloggers find a way to groom eyebrows that preserves or enhances a masculine aesthetic, they must also ensure their proposed routine is quick and simple to undertake, to avoid the feminine-coded behavioural characteristic of paying attention to small details. A fourth strategy that the vloggers use is to claim that makeup that cannot be seen will render the wearer looking more clean, fresh, natural and relaxed.

Clean, fresh, and natural

As the Sohu website article puts it, “cleanliness isn't just about having a clean face, it's also the overall impression and air you project”; which is important, because today’s young women prefer “young men with fair and tender skin and a clean appearance” (*pifu bai nen, kanqili hen ganjing de nansheng* 皮膚白嫩、看起來很乾淨的男生).¹¹³ Male beauty vloggers work these motifs into their sales pitches about how makeup can help young men look more clean and fresh. In the final stages of Zeng’s video, he reassures viewers he is a “clean, fresh

¹¹³ Keji jiedu, “Nansheng zenme huazhuang buhui bei shuo niangpao.”

and natural person” (*qingxin ziran de ren* 清新自然的人). Cui uses the same tropes of cleanliness, naturalness, freshness and manliness that Zeng associates with straight masculinity: men should look “fresh and relaxed” (*qingshuang ganjing* 清爽幹淨), “unlike women, men don’t need excessive embellishment (*guoduo xiushi* 過多修飾),” and “simple base makeup and eyebrows are all that’s needed to become a clean-looking boy (*ganjing de nanhai* 幹淨的男孩).” Tian also uses the same kind of language when describing his “makeup for straight men,” using terms such as “clean” (*ganjing* 幹淨), “fresh and relaxed” (*qingshuang* 清爽), refined (*jingzhi* 精緻), and “natural” (*ziran* 自然), emphasizing that that it should not be easily discovered by others. Furthermore, Zeng adds that he is not “unconventional” (*teli-duxing* 特立獨行) and not “able to pretend” (*hui zuo de* 會作的), referring euphemistically to the feminising exuberant gestures and animated tones of some other male beauty vloggers, while affirming his own straight-acting masculinity as natural. In this way, he underscores the heterosexual matrix’s association of normative masculine gender performance with straight sexuality.

There is a consensus among the vloggers that the success of a fake-natural makeup routine can be measured by the degree to which it leaves the wearer with an enhanced fresh, relaxed, clean and natural look. The vloggers’ pitch to male consumers and their partners is that by investing in careful use of cosmetics products, men can even increase their stock of heteronormative masculine capital. Straightness is apparently naturalised through this framing, despite the paradox that makeup use can enhance the performance of straightness. Femininity and homosexuality in men, by contrast, are designated as somehow unclean, full of artifice, forced, and unnatural. While the vloggers are undoubtedly trying to promote a positive image for men’s makeup wearing, their framing of makeup for straight men is

problematic due to this reinforcement of sissyphobic and homophobic discourses, even though the vloggers do not explicitly attack feminine or gay men. Explicit support for men to perform gender and sexuality in ways of their own choosing is left unspoken by the vloggers: prevailing social attitudes, state regulations and commercial interests shape their approach.

Conclusion

Chinese male beauty vloggers negotiate the categories of gender, sexuality and nationalism amid multiple forces at work in China today produced and circumscribed by state, market and society. With the goal of creating a new masculine ideal, the vloggers avoid the fraught political sphere, seeking to shift male grooming habits in the direction of increased cosmetics use. Sponsored by local and global cosmetics conglomerates, the vloggers have adapted hitherto feminised discourses promoting the benefits of makeup wearing, in their pursuit of a new ideal of masculinity. China's economic boom, coupled with its own iterations of growing global gendered and sexual pluralisation, has helped enable the rapid expansion of the beauty industry and have fostered the development of beauty vlogging on social media. Popular culture's fetishization of appearance and grooming as a means of self-advancement has empowered beauty vloggers as purveyors of "face value" and "facial capital"; and the influence of East Asian models of "soft" masculinity, seen in figures like the *xiaoxianrou*, has helped promote male interest in cosmetics. Emphasising the career and relationship benefits of makeup wearing, vloggers promote a refined masculinity on multiple social media platforms to a wide audience of young men from different backgrounds across China.

Yet, at the same time, unease and anxiety about the feminisation of men has accelerated, leading to widespread claims of a "crisis of masculinity" and the implementation

of policies for “masculine education.” The vloggers have an inescapable interest in a balancing act that promises male consumers significant benefits from wearing cosmetics but simultaneously guarantees the preservation of their masculinity. Crises of masculinity are not a new phenomenon: they typically manifest a core tension between relatively “refined” masculinities and conventionally acceptable manly behaviour. China’s modern cosmetics industry was born in the early Republican era at a time when the masculinity of Chinese men was intensely under the spotlight, necessitating a standpoint located with the women’s “inner chambers” to legitimise new urban forms of entrepreneurial masculinity. In the 1920s and 1930s, the well-groomed “modern boy” became the site of fears of the danger posed to the nation by the effeminate male consumer, at a time of rising nationalism in the context of Japanese aggression. In recent modernity, the emergence of homosexual identities has added another dimension to discourses linking gender with the nation. In contemporary China, the state has compounded social prejudice towards “sissies” and gay men by instigating various bans on their media representations. Intensifying nationalism and an emphasis on national security have deepened concerns about male effeminacy. Nevertheless, despite the increasingly sissyphobic environment, the market for men’s makeup continues to grow. Mainstream male makeup users are willing to leverage facial cosmetics to enhance their self-confidence as well as social and career prospects; however, they are not willing to put their own interests at risk and thus are strongly averse to makeup use that might stigmatise them as feminine or gay, given prevalent political and social trends. Chinese male beauty vloggers have therefore sought to create a hybrid and flexible model of masculinity that manifests both refinement and manliness through makeup aesthetics that do not compromise on heteronormative masculine appearance and behaviour.

The male beauty videos examined in this study present makeup as the means to a new ideal for contemporary men, a hybrid refined yet manly masculinity that borrows elements of the *xiaoxianrou* aesthetic and is characterized as fresh, clean, and relaxed. While not without its limitations, the refined masculine look—which is increasingly popular among young Chinese men, as soaring sales of men’s cosmetics help to evidence—offers a stark contrast to the socialist era worker-soldier-peasant model masculinities or tough guy “wolf warrior” masculinities promoted in recent films and TV series. Women’s voices, whether appropriated from female beauty discourses, or through girlfriends cajoling their boyfriends into embracing a new masculine persona, provide intimate and genuine reasons for men to embrace the use of makeup in their daily routines. The vloggers assert the suitability of fake-natural makeup for straight men, while distancing it from sissiness and homosexuality. Their strategies include amplifying the notion that straight men, unlike women and feminised men, are not comfortable with taking time to master detailed and intricate practices. When dealing with eyebrow shape, historically a key aspect of Chinese and East Asian aesthetics, mainstream vloggers try hard to provide quick, non-feminising eyebrow grooming techniques that are designed to accentuate, not diminish, conventional masculinity, although they do not always meet their viewers expectations of masculine appearance. To further bolster their normative credentials, Chinese male beauty vloggers invoke an image of the sissy as “other,” to masculinise the look they are trying to sell. By promoting straight men’s concealment of makeup use, vloggers feminize visible makeup use and reproduce gendered and sexual stereotypes that associate fussiness of appearance with women and gay men. Although not explicitly endorsing sissyphobia, by promoting the fake-natural makeup look, male beauty vloggers reinforce sexual and gender options that circumscribe potential ways of being men.

Overall, the vloggers have undeniably contributed to a makeup “revolution” for men, with the support of the cosmetics’ industry and the female partners of young male consumers, that has repurposed hitherto feminine discourses to offer an attractive refined alternative to tired rehashes of twentieth-century models of tough guy masculinity. Yet due to their cautious attention to heteronormative boundaries, the vloggers have reinforced patriarchal norms that privilege the masculine and stigmatise the feminine. Nevertheless, precisely because of this flexible and hybrid yet carefully calibrated approach, they are selling a winning formula, as burgeoning cosmetics sales for men show. Many men recognise that an inflexible adoption of tough guy masculinity does not serve their interests in every field: women do not generally want to be married to a 24/7 wolf warrior; aggressive and unkempt masculinity does not in and of itself usually aid career progression. Promising to enhance men’s social, sexual and professional appeal while enabling them to continue to enjoy the benefits of a conventionally acceptable masculinity, refined and manly makeup offers the ordinary Chinese man a productive, quick and affordable way to gaining an edge in a highly competitive world.