

ACCESSORIES

## The "It" bag goes unisex in China

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*Chinese millennial men are looking beyond beauty. The It bag market is the next step to make their style statements heard. Image credit: Dior. Illustration: Haitong Zheng/Jing Daily*

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The term "It" bag is often perceived as heavily feminine.

Across the globe, women have long been the key demographic to success in the It bag business, and China is no exception.

The much-diffused Internet slang "," appropriates the ancient Chinese medicine saying of "cure guarantee" in a pun to spell "bags cure all types of illness" in today's context.

Yet it would be naive to exclude Chinese men in this fashion frenzy.

As gender norms continue to relax among the Chinese youth, sporting an It bag is increasingly indispensable to the total look of a Chinese male fashionista.

A "unisex" shopping trend, embodied by behavior such as men buying women's bags or women buying men's bags, is on the rise.

In the November Beijing launch party of the **Dior** x Rimowa's collaboration, Chinese male celebrities dominated the stage.

Actors Feiyun Chen, Han Dongjun and Lin Yi were all there to wear and promote the collaboration's cross-body hand case.

Sean Gao, a marketing manager based in Hong Kong, told *Jing Daily* that the hand case is already in his wish list.

"I like it because it has a strong, firm look, and it is gender-neutral," Mr. Gao said.

"In my day-to-day, I usually do shoppers because a shopper is not specifically designed for men or women," he said.

A quest for the more gender-inclusive design was the underlying sentiment.



Actor Feiyun Chen endorsing the hand case from Dior x Rimowa's collaboration. Image credit: @Dior's official Weibo

But there have also been a growing number of Chinese men, straight or gay, who are opting for women's bag, regardless of the gendered indication.

Eric Liu, a Shanghai-based fashion blogger, told *Jing Daily* that he buys from the women's bag section because the men's section usually lacks choices.

Unlike Mr. Gao, Mr. Liu does not think the designer's gendered intent as important.

"The first made-for-women bag I bought was Marc Jacobs' Snapshot," Mr. Liu said. "It has a gender-neutral look and a cool chain design.

"As a straight man, I don't feel embarrassed about wearing a bag designed for women because no one has pointed that out," he said.

However, he admits that most of fashion's big names still have a limited offering of men's bags.

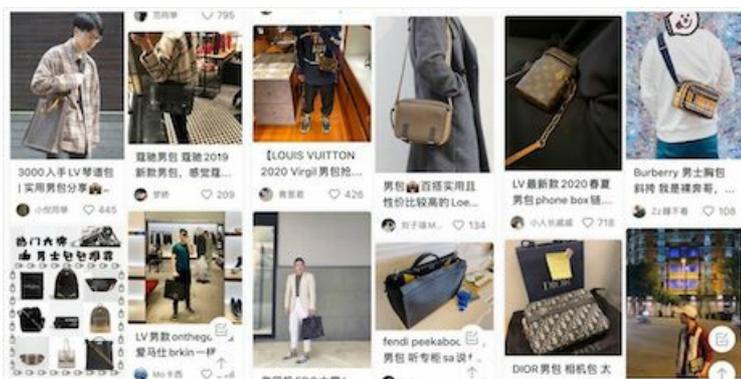
In his opinion, the existing choices are either too "street," too utilitarian, or simply not fashionable enough.

Deny it or not, China's fashion scene is undergoing an accelerated transformation of gendered identity.

The number of male fashion bloggers on Chinese social media is spiking, boosted by the now-widespread "**Little Fresh Meat**" male idol phenomenon.

On Weibo and **Little Red Book**, popular hashtags such as # (what men wear) and # (practical men bag recommendation) give a sneak peek into the country's male fashionista community, although the so-called "practical" style tips often gear towards choices that are more trend-forward than practical.

From posting about everyday tote, utility pouch, to logo-laden fanny packs, Chinese men fashionistas pursue the It bag just as fervently as women do.



The "It bag" dude community on Little Red Book. Image credit: LRB screenshot

In the West, the general implication for "unisex bag" still leans on the talk of utilitarian backpacks or, at most, a weekender bag for elegant occasions.

An It bag for men is reserved for a closed and exclusive circle of urban fashionistas.

In China, however, owning fashion-forward, big-name bags is a much more mainstream practice among the millennial men.

Thanks to the broad gender fluidity trend in fashion, many old-time It bags for women now have launched their men versions: **Fendi's** Peekaboo, Dior's saddle bag, Loewe's Puzzle bag, **Louis Vuitton's** Soft Trunk collection, to name a few.

According to social posts, some Chinese women also opt for these men's versions for a more oversized, effortless chic look.



Dior's China brand ambassador Junkai Wang wearing the brand's iconic Saddle Bag. Image credit: @Dior's official Weibo

A series of media images in China have injected this sense of gender fluidity among the youth, blurring their

boundaries of traditional masculinity and femininity.

In early 2018, the Chinese television talent show "Idol Producer" gave rise to a wave of K-pop-style male idols wearing a chest-pack, neon-color jacket, bleached hair and earrings.

While delicate-featured male idols proliferate, young Chinese women are buying more **power suits** and increasingly attracted by a "girl boss" identity.

In October 2018, Japanese condom brand Okamoto published a **post** titled "Boys buy bags, girls buy condom" on its **WeChat** account, saying that the ratio of women buying condoms on its ecommerce had risen from 30.6 percent to 40.1 percent during November 2016 and June 2018.

In a country where systematic gender inequality and traditional family norms still persist, these signs of youth social changes would have all be seen as culturally outrageous just a decade ago.

But today, even the adjective Chinese millennials use to praise women and men have radically changed.

For example, the more relevant way to compliment a woman is to say she is "very alpha" instead of "very pretty."

To praise a man, they are adopting languages like "fashionably coquettish" ( in Chinese).

Though the notion of "coquettish" is often associated with an overtly flirtatious woman in the West, it refers to the androgynous cool appeal of a modern Chinese male idol.

In beauty, big names such as Givenchy Beauty, **Este Lauder** and Guerlain have tapped young androgynous idols Jackson Yee, Wang Kai, and Yang Yang to capture the Chinese beauty consumers, now both female and male.

But Chinese millennial men today are looking beyond beauty. The It bag market is the next step to make their style statements heard.



*A street snap of actor Xiao Zhao wearing Gucci's GG Supreme messenger bag went viral. Image credit: Sina China*

In 2019, a Gucci bag "the GG Supreme messenger bag" has been closely associated with actor Xiao Zhan, as the street snap of him wearing that bag got viral on the Internet.

Celine, the French house mostly known for its women's bags, appointed male idol Li Jian to carry the brand's logo handbag on the September issue of *Elle Men*.

ARE THESE BAGS marketed to their female fans, or style inspiration for the fans' boyfriends, or other Chinese men?

Perhaps the answer is not important.

What is important is to have something that is "It" and cool enough to put on.

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