

JEWELRY

The importance of China's Gen Z men in pearl earrings

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Sporting feminine-looking jewelry has become more than a passing trend for Chinese Gen Z men, who are mirroring "Fresh Young Meat" opulent fashion styles. Image credit: Cough In Vain

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Men wearing fancy jewelry itself is not a groundbreaking event. In recent years, Hollywood star Harry Styles has been repeatedly spotted wearing a pearl necklace. Then there is the fashionista crowd in Tokyo's trendy Harajuku district.

Both are examples of a shifting idea of modern manhood at least image-wise.

In China, [millennial](#) and Gen Z style icons are taking the male jewelry game a step up, pushing the boundary of traditional masculinity to a new limit.

In 2020, Chinese men sporting intricate, feminine-looking jewelry has been the defining feature of Chinese fashion print magazine covers.

In April, *T Magazine China's* cover featuring pop star Wang Yibo broke Weibo's top trending ranking. The cover image features Mr. Wang staring at the viewer with wet hair, a fiery red wool coat, and a pair of Givenchy pearl earrings. It is reminiscent of Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer's masterpiece, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

On [Weibo](#), the cover received critical acclaim from young netizens, who praised *T Magazine China* and Wang Yibo for "having the flair to pull it off."



T Magazine China's April cover featuring pop star Wang Yibo. Image credit: @TMagazin's Weibo

A similar luxe-androgynous formula continued to reign in China's avant-garde fashion scene.

In May, *Elle China* featured pop idol **Jackson Yee** wearing a set of Tiffany rose gold bracelets and rings, normally a look that is typically worn by well-off ladies of leisure.



ELLE China's May cover featuring idol Jackson Yee. Image credit: Elle's Weibo

SuperELLE, the video team behind *Elle China*, featured pop singer Fan Chengcheng decked out in a full set of shiny, intricate jewelry on its June cover.

To Chinese **Gen-Zers and younger millennials**, seeing their favorite male stars in dainty necklaces, knuckle rings and glam jewelry has become the new normal.



SuperELLE's June cover featuring pop singer Fan Chengcheng. Image credit: Elle's Weibo

Innocent but sexy

Men wearing jewelry is not a new genre.

Globally, younger generations of men have opted for bigger, shinier accessories as a form of self-expression. But, at least in the West, gold chains, knuckle rings and statement ear studs speak to traditional masculinity.

In essence, jewelry is acceptable for men only when it helps to accentuate strength and power, making one look either more like a "badass" or a rock star, while visibly feminine jewelry materials, such as pearl or rose gold, has remained largely unexplored.

"Today, many fashion-forward **Chinese men** love opulent design or accessory looks that are typically feminine," said Pooky Lee, an influential fashion critic and the founder of Shanghai-based curator studio ExhibitingFashion. "This is quite different than the male fashionistas in the West."

"Innocent but sexy 〇" is the latest buzzword to define attractiveness in men among young China.

Conversely, the term also defines contemporary China's rigid beauty standard for women.

As the adjectives to describe attractive men and women become identical, the aesthetic of men and women's fashion becomes increasingly blurred, too.

On the Gen-Z favorite site **Bilibili**, a trending video by influencer **@Kaiho** shows him alternate six different accessory looks, including a dainty pearl necklace and full silver jewelry set, and demonstrate how looking "innocent but sexy" is the current way to conquer women.

This new wave of male fashionistas loves a genderless and dashing bold dress code.

Today, male jewelry with a genderless, "innocent by sexy" charm not only dominated the editorials of *ELLE China* and *T Magazine China*. It also was the main aesthetic for many luxury brand campaigns such as **Tiffany**, Cartier and **Bulgari**'s recent ads featuring China's "**Little Fresh Meat**" idols.



Kris Wu is known as one of the earliest icons to exalt the eclectic, female-in-male look. Image credit: Sohu

The "**Little Fresh Meat**" celebrity culture has contributed to the appeal of jewelry for young Chinese men.

Coined by netizens, the term refers to the genre of delicately featured, handsome young males that currently rule the Chinese entertainment industry.

Kris Wu, a Chinese rapper and an ex-member of K-pop boy band EXO, is the tribe's key figure in promoting and normalizing the "men in pearl jewelry" look.

Since 2017, Mr. Wu has been the center of media attention for his genderless, edgy fashion that often pairs pearl necklaces with a boxy suit or pink knitwear with rapper-style sneakers. Many young Chinese girls see him as the national sex symbol.

In 2018, the rise of androgynous pop idols has drawn attacks from the Chinese government.

Multiple state news outlets including Xinhua and the Communist Youth leagues criticized that the trend is eroding young men's masculinity and encouraged national TV to minimize such influence by blurring the stars' earrings and tattoos.

However, these attacks were met with a strong backlash among young Chinese netizens, who see the insistence on an outdated view of masculinity as desperately backward.

Sign of progressiveness

Despite the government's agenda, Chinese millennials and Gen Zers venerate the gender-fluid, edgy approach to men's fashion.

Whether it is putting on pearl necklaces or wearing lipsticks, they see men's style evolution more as a refreshing change-up to an old system than an effeminate vision of manhood.

Looking for a more edgy look, young cultural hipsters are branching out to lesser-known, gender-fluid jewelry and fashion labels.



2019 campaign of Shanghai-based jewelry brand Cough in Vain. Image courtesy of Cough in Vain

Fashion curator Pooky Lee told *Jing Daily*, "Contemporary jewelry brands that prioritize fun concepts instead of raw materials per se are gaining lots of traction in China now. Some local brands like Cough in Vain already have a solid fan community."

Founded in Shanghai in 2016, Cough in Vain is an avant-garde accessory brand that produces genderless statement pieces.

Wearing jewelry, even the visibly feminine pieces, does not clash with the youngsters' view of masculinity. Far from it, it is deemed as being culturally progressive.

[@YaoDeFashion](#), a popular fashion blogger on Weibo told *Jing Daily*, "No matter what their own interpretation of masculinity is, these young men do not relate the way they dress to the way they channel their manliness. There is now more freedom to dress compared to our parents' generations."

The right to experiment with different styles has become a testimonial to a more open society, at least towards youth styles.

"There is much more tolerance towards different fashions today. People rather pay attention to seeing the uniqueness in someone else's look, than arguing over the topic of what masculinity should be," [@YaodeFashion](#) said.

While most brands are still obsessing with the "She Economy" today, it is time for them to acknowledge and value the growingly image-conscious market of Chinese men.

Wearing makeup, grooming, looking after their skin and experimenting on fashion's latest trends are now part of their daily norms.

As they become more style-savvy and progressive, men will soon expect more experimental pieces from big-name

brands.

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