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Men in China take GROOMING
to an entirely new level. TEXT: LARA FARRAR

*a*dam Ji is 28. He works as an editor at a lifestyle magazine in Shanghai. In his bathroom, he has dozens of beauty products from dozens of brands. Shampoo. Conditioner. Leave-in conditioner. Moisturizer. Facial cleanser. Facial mask. Body wash. Hair gel. Toner. Cologne. Aftershave. Kérastase. Biotherm. Dior. Nivea. Clinique. Neutrogena. Lancôme. La Roche-Posay. L'Oréal.

When we meet at a café to discuss his grooming regimen, Ji is wearing a silver necklace with a charm in the shape of a crown, Easter-green shorts and a black shirt that he designed as part of a fashion collection he says he planned to launch years ago. His fingernails are perfectly manicured, and his toenails are painted silver. His once-jet-black hair is now platinum blond.

"Guess how many hours it took to dye my hair blond," says Ji.

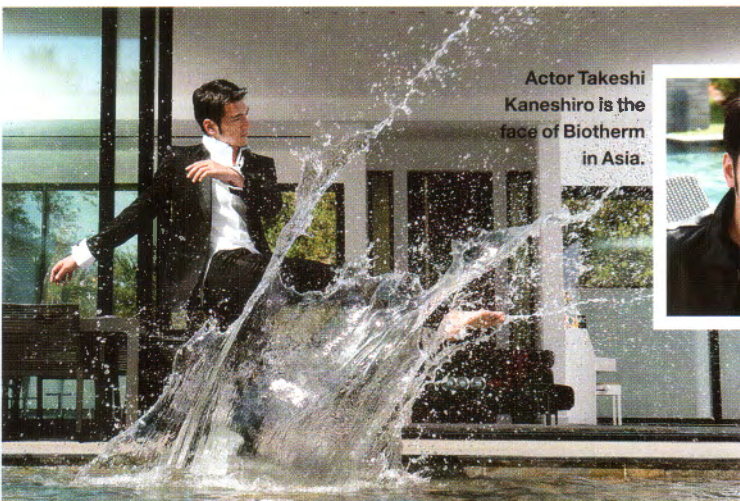
"I don't know. Four?" I reply.

"Ten," he says. "Out of all the people you have interviewed, am I the most diva?"

"Yeah, you are pretty diva," I answer, and then I pause. I'm somewhat hesitant to ask my next question, but I feel I must at least inquire: "Are you gay?"

"No," he says, adding that he considers it a compliment that I think he might have a boyfriend. "Not every straight person can pass as gay," he replies. "It's not easy to look gay; it takes a lot of time, effort and money."

Ji's obsession with looking beautiful is slightly more extreme than most men, but it's not all that uncommon. "It's literally a sort of peacock syndrome," explains Kunal Sinha, chief knowledge officer for Ogilvy China, a brand-management firm. "Men have to find ways of differentiating themselves in order to get jobs and girlfriends. They are hungry for attention because they far outnumber▷



Actor Takeshi Kaneshiro is the face of Biotherm in Asia.



In China, skin-care lines (like Olay Men Solutions) dominate the male-grooming market.

women, so the sense of competition is fierce. It is something that weighs very heavily on them.”

As a result of China's one-child policy, which was initiated in 1979 to control the country's population, there is a massive gender imbalance. Male children are favoured to carry on the family line, which means that untold

“It's not easy [for a straight guy] to look gay; it takes a lot of time, effort and money.”

numbers of females have been put up for adoption or were aborted or the victims of infanticide. There are now 32 million more males under the age of 20 than there are women, according to a 2009 paper published by the *British Medical Journal*, which means that 32 million men will not be able to find wives in the future.

“People are attracted to money and power, especially in China,” explains Sinha. “But when you don't have these, you have to try to find a way to stand out.” In other words, men have to become preening peacocks with a beauty routine that rivals a Hollywood starlet. Multinational cosmetics companies have spotted this social trend and are keen to break into the still relatively underdeveloped male beauty market in China. Market research has determined that Chinese men are more likely to take grooming advice from their wives, girlfriends and peers. They are also heavily influenced by the media and more likely to invest in an entire line of cosmetics rather than a single product, says Sinha.

Companies such as Procter & Gamble (P&G) are developing entire skin-care lines specifically for this emerging market. Last year, it launched Olay Men Solutions, its first-ever men's line from its Olay skin-care brand. “It's already number three in the market,” says Damon Jones, global communications director for male grooming at P&G. “In China, we are seeing around 30 percent

year-on-year growth in the [male grooming] sector. Guys are looking for radiant skin. China is probably one of our most unique markets. If you look at our business everywhere in the world, male grooming has been a shaving-dominated category. In China, we are seeing quite the opposite. Our skin-care business is larger than our blades and razor business, and that is the only market in the world where that is the case.”

According to Jones, as well as representatives from Sephora, marketing strategies aimed at Chinese men are not that dissimilar to those created for women. Men care about ingredients and what they will do—and they notice celebrity spokespersons. (See sidebar.) Rain, the Korean megastar, is the spokesperson for Mentholum for Men, a mass-market brand popular among college students. And Takeshi Kaneshiro, a half-Japanese, half-Taiwanese actor, is Biotherm's cover boy.

Men in their 20s and 30s are most concerned with anti-oil and anti-fatigue treatments, as well as hairstyling products. Older men use hair dye and are now—at the insistence of their wives—getting Botox treatments, laser resurfacing and even facelifts. All men, regardless of their age, are heading to spas in record numbers. Georgie Yam, founder of the Chinese spa chain Dragonfly Therapeutic Retreat, says that 25 percent of his facial business is from men. Four years ago, it was zero. “I can tell you that in China, if you can find a company that caters to men's cosmetics and is daring enough with their marketing and product lines, they'll make a lot of money,” says Yam.

Even though there's money to be made, it doesn't guarantee that every peacock will find his mate. “There is an old saying that the talent is for the man, and the beauty is for the woman,” says Li Yinhe, one of China's first sociologists to research sex and gender issues. It's a sentiment that rings true with Hong Zi Cun, a 23-year-old migrant who works in a karaoke bar in Yiwu, a small city about two hours south of Shanghai by train. Zi Cun says that he doesn't use any particular cosmetics products, but he has a haircut that is popular with young▷

migrant men. It is big hair, teased and heavily moussed. Zi Cun says that the hairstyle differentiates them from the peasants they left behind at home, helps them get jobs and also hopefully lands them girlfriends. "There are too many men in Yiwu," he says. "You have to do this because it

helps you look nice. It is very hard to find a girlfriend. Girls always want to be with a city resident, to be with someone who is rich. Your appearance can only trick simple-minded girls. Most women won't stay with you if you don't have money." □

GIRL-BOY CRUSH

The Chinese ideal of male masculinity is the opposite of the Western model. In China, it's a compliment for a man to be described as soft, beautiful and feminine. If you have a pretty face and a boyish body, you'll be noticed. On occasion, you might be mistaken for being gay—but that, too, is a compliment. "Not everyone has a clear picture of how to be gay or the specific details of gay life," says Frey Hua, who is 32, gay and works in the publishing industry. "But judging by its appearance, it is superior to being straight, so that's why it's considered a compliment. Maybe it's also Asian culture. We don't really pursue strength or masculine images. A lot of male celebrities in Asia are very delicate."

Liu Zhu is a perfect example of this. The petite 20-year-old singer has become a sensation since he debuted as the first cross-dressing contestant last year on *Super Boy*, the Chinese all-male version of *American Idol*. In a country where homosexuality was considered a mental illness and a crime only around a decade ago, Zhu's highly public appearance was deemed shocking and brave. It also raised awareness that maybe it is acceptable for men to look more feminine.

But China's interest in effeminate males isn't an entirely new trend. Hundreds, even thousands, of years ago, during much of the country's dynastic period, men who were scholars or culturally accomplished were seen as superior compared to men who were strong and muscular. Often, being gay was "considered quite normal," according to Kam Louie, author of *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*. "Softer, sensitive types were considered manly. If you look at Chinese plays, it is the scholar who always gets the girl. The warrior never does."

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a novel set in 18th-century China that is considered one of the country's literary masterpieces, the central character, Jia Baoyu (his name means "precious jade"), wears rouge and hated being a boy when he was a child. "He's considered incredibly attractive in the novel," says Louie. "All the young women want to be with him. He's the epitome of being an attractive man. In modern times, if you ask young people, very few would say that he is portrayed as being so feminine, but in pictures you can't tell whether he is a boy or a girl."



Super Junior, a popular (and pretty) Korean boy band

Being thin and culturally refined fell out of fashion when the Communist party took over in 1949; China's girlie boys were not only unacceptable but also a threat to the state. Under Mao Zedong, all things artistic were labelled as bourgeoisie and capitalistic, which meant gentle, acculturated males became virtually extinct. A good man was a strong labourer, blindly followed the government, loved his country, wore simple clothes and believed in simple things: "That was the height of the move away from the pen and the brush to more physical pursuits," says Louie.

Now, however, peasant chic is out and the pen and the brush are back. Researchers suggest that the resurgence of the modern-day effeminate Chinese man is due to fashion and pop-cultural influences from Japan and Korea. "That's where girlish men have emerged over the past couple of decades," says Jung-Sun Park, a professor of Asian Pacific studies at California State University, Dominguez Hills. Park points to *Boys Over Flowers*, a '90s Japanese anime series, as an initial driving force. The series featured characters with a girlish demeanour popularizing "pretty men who look like a flower."

Today, Korean celebrities, like Rain (a singer, model and dancer), and boy bands, such as Super Junior, as well as a host of television series with slender, pretty-faced actors, have become popular on the mainland among young men and women. Chinese men say that they turn to the Korean or Japanese males for inspiration because, rather than Western examples of masculinity, their styles coalesce with their Asian sensibilities. "Japanese people, especially men, pay a lot of attention to their appearance," said Xu Chenhao, a 33-year-old from Shanghai who works in the financial industry in Hong Kong. "You look at the average man on the street; he is always dressed up." Chenhao regularly gets facials as well as massages and uses beauty products ranging from La Prairie eye serum to facial masks from SK-II.

Chinese women also have a certain fixation with pretty boys. A segment of females in their late teens and 20s is obsessed with Korean girlie-boy celebrities. "The girlie-looking boys are nice," a 23-year-old graduate student at Fudan University in Shanghai tells me. "Straight men—we all think they want something from us. Chinese girls are not that open about the sexual thing. We always want to make sure that we are safe." L.F.