

All study and no play makes a dull boy in China, some say (and worry)

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Zhang Mei Lian enrolled her 16-year-old son Zhang Jin Jieming into all-boys classes out of concern he was becoming too feminized. Lara Farrar/MCT

SHANGHAI — Zhang Mei Lian is worried that her 16-year-old son does not know how to be a man.

She is worried that he is falling behind his female classmates in school. She fears that he isn't athletic enough, and that he does not know how to fix things like a broken light.

"Our current education system is really bad for boys," Zhang said. "Boys should be strong." Otherwise, they turn into boys who act like girls, she said.

Zhang isn't the only one who is worried about young Chinese men. Many people in China are. This is not just a concern here. Boys' falling scores in school has been the subject of several studies in the United States.

"Lack Of Manliness"

“We tend to describe it as the feminization of men or lack of manliness,” said Li Wendao who is the co-author of a book called “Save the Boys.”

Just as in the United States, a big worry is that girls are doing better than boys in school. According to “Save the Boys,” Chinese girls score better than boys on college entrance exams. They are also more likely to go to college. More of them are winning scholarships for college money, too.

Experts blame the country’s education system. Parents and teachers force children here to do lots of memorizing. The goal is to help them pass national exams for high school and college.

Outside the classroom, they are forced to take private lessons in different subjects. They study at night, on the weekends and during holidays. Girls, these experts say, are better able to handle such studying. But boys, they argue, need more free time to be wild.

This type of studying leads to behavioral problems.

“There is no question boys here do not know how to act like men,” said Mark Kurban. He teaches at a high school in Shanghai. “Boys tend to be lazier than the girls. They just really want to play basketball the whole time in school.”

Turning Boys Into Men

One high school in Shanghai is trying to fix the problem. Last fall, it began offering classes for boys only. The classes teach wilderness training, using tools, boxing and repairing things.

Lu Qisheng is the leader of the school. The country’s rule of allowing families to have only one child is another challenge. It was put in place more than 30 years ago because the number of people in China was growing too quickly.

People wanted boy babies more than girls. The families that did have male children spoiled them so much that these children are called “little emperors.” Most boys are raised only by their mothers because their fathers are busy working. All this resulted in males who expect special treatment.

“This has weakened their ability to live independently,” Lu said.

Some people here blame television shows and movies from South Korea. These programs are watched in China and show men who do not look very manly. Some say that is changing the idea of being male.

“I think Chinese women, especially young women in cities, some of them share this kind of preference,” said Song Geng who teaches at the University of Hong Kong.

Scholar Or Soldier?

More men in China are buying beauty products, even makeup.

There are reasons for this. In old Chinese plays, gentle male scholars were the ones who won women’s hearts. Warriors did not.

This idea disappeared in the early 1900s, however. Men were forced to cut their long hair. And then the Communist Party came to power in 1949. Soldiers and strong men who could defend their country became the model.

But now things are moving back to the older view. There is a widerer idea of what makes a man a man.

But it creates problems in a country where men control things.

“In the family, women’s role is to assist men,” said Li Yinhe. She is one of China’s most famous scholars on the difference between men and women. “The Chinese saying is that the man leads and the woman follows.”

Quiz

- 1 Zhang is worried about her son for all of the following reasons, EXCEPT:
- (A) He is not very athletic.
 - (B) He is getting bad grades.
 - (C) He wears his mother's makeup.
 - (D) He doesn't know how to fix things.
- 2 According to the article, all of the following are reasons why boys are not manly, EXCEPT:
- (A) Chinese mothers have spoiled their sons.
 - (B) Boys believe gentle men win women's hearts.
 - (C) Schools are offering wilderness training classes.
 - (D) They do not get time to participate in activities that boys normally would do.
- 3 Select the paragraph from the article that states the reason why the single-child law went into effect.
- 4 What is the reason that some Chinese believe watching movies can make boys less manly?
- (A) Movies show boys that do not look manly.
 - (B) Male stars wear a lot of makeup in movies.
 - (C) Most movies show male warriors fighting.
 - (D) Chinese people think watching movies is unmanly.