



This picture shows Meenakshi Amma practitioner and teacher of 'Kalaripayattu', a traditional martial art originated in Kerala, posing for pictures at her family-run Kadathanadan Kalari Sangam school in Vatakara in the Kozhikode district of the state of Kerala. — AFP photos



This picture shows Sajeev Kumar (top center) training students at his family-run Kadathanadan Kalari Sangam school in Vatakara in the Kozhikode district of the state of Kerala.

GREAT-GRANDMOTHER KEEPS INDIAN MARTIAL ART ALIVE

Deftly parrying her son with a bamboo cane, Meenakshi Amma belies her 78 years with her prowess at kalari, thought to be India's oldest martial art. The great-grandmother in Kerala, southern India, has been a driving force in the revival of kalaripayattu, as the ancient practice is also known, and in encouraging girls to take it up. "I started kalari when I was seven years old. I am 78 now. I am still practicing, learning and teaching," the matriarch of the Kadathanad Kalari Sangham school, founded by her late husband in 1949, told AFP. "When you open the newspapers, you only see news of violence against women," she said.

"When women learn this martial art, they feel physically and mentally strong and it makes them confident to work and travel alone." Kalari, which contains ele-

ments of dance and yoga, can involve weapons such as swords, shields and staffs. Reputedly 3,000 years old, and mentioned in ancient Hindu scriptures, it remains infused with religion in the present day. India's British colonial rulers banned the practice in 1804 but it survived underground before a revival in the early 20th century and after independence in 1947. In recent decades it has come on in leaps and bounds, thanks in no small measure to Meenakshi, who won a national award in 2017. Now it is recognized as a sport and practiced all over India.

Inside Meenakshi's kalari hall, her bare-chested son Sanjeev Kumar, a lungi tied around his waist, puts barefoot pupils-boys and girls alike through their paces on the ochre-red earth floor. "There are two divisions in kalaripayattu-one is that kalaripay-

attu is peace and the other is kalaripayattu in war," said the "gurukkal" (master). "It's an art that purifies mind, body and soul, improves concentration, speed and patience, regenerates physical and mental energy." When totally connected mentally and physically to kalari, then the opponent disappears, the body becomes eyes. "It's a form of poetry," said civil engineer Alaka S. Kumar, 29, daughter of Kumar and the mother to some of Meenakshi's many great-grandchildren. "I am going to teach kalari, with my brother. We have to take over. Otherwise it is gone." — AFP

Meenakshi Amma (top center) along with her son Sajeev Kumar (top left), training students.



This picture shows Meenakshi Amma (right) along with her son Sajeev Kumar, sparring at their family-run Kadathanadan Kalari Sangam school.



This picture shows Sajeev Kumar (top second left) training students.



Meenakshi Amma (right) standing next to a practitioner giving an Ayurvedic massage to another.

Superfans lie low as China cracks down on 'false idols'

Beijing high schooler Chen Zhichu used to spend 30 minutes a day boosting actor Xiao Zhan online as one of a legion of superfans, before the practice fell foul of the government for promoting "unhealthy values". State regulations last month banned "irrational star-chasing"-online celebrity rankings, fundraising and other tools used by China's fandoms to get their idols trending on social media-in the latest of a series of

crackdowns across Chinese society. Known for his androgynous good looks, Xiao earned legions of devoted, mostly female fans through his role in the 2019 fantasy drama *The Untamed*, and has over 29 million followers on Weibo alone.

"I used to upvote posts in his Weibo fan forum and buy products he promoted," Chen, 16, told AFP in a busy downtown shopping district. "It was pretty exhausting trying to keep him trending at number one every day." Fans power China's lucrative idol economy, previously forecast by state media to be worth 140 billion yuan (\$21.6 billion) by 2022. In a country where young people have few other means of influencing public life, full-time fan content creators-dubbed "zhanjie" or "station sisters"-can propel a star's rise from obscurity by creating viral images of them.

Critics say fan culture is an exploitative industry aimed at profiting from minors, built on artificially inflated social media engagement-something the government wants to eliminate through the new regulations. Authorities say the new rules are needed to curb excessive aspects of fan

culture, including cyberbullying, stalking, doxxing and bitter online wars between fandoms. But many fans say they derive pleasure from seeing their idols flourish and have found a sense of community from the shared online space.

Morality crackdown

Communist authorities are also worried about idols for another reason: their ability to mobilize fan armies at a moment's notice, often dominating social media for days. "It's the beginnings of a mass movement and that is what the government doesn't want," said a social studies professor at a Chinese university who did not wish to be named.

Multiple crackdowns have swept the tech, education and showbiz sectors in recent months, as authorities increasingly target the rich and powerful in a push for greater socioeconomic equality. But it is also partly to instill "healthy", government-sanctioned societal values in young people, so they are less influenced by wayward celebrities. "Chinese youth lack other types of idols," said Fang Kecheng,

communications professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "It's very hard for them to have other means of civic participation (such as activism)."

China's broadcast regulator last month banned performers with "lapsed morals" and "incorrect political views", as well as what it termed "sissy men"-an androgynous aesthetic popularized by Korean boybands, and imitated by male Chinese idols like Xiao. Experts read the latter as a sign of Beijing's increasing discomfort with alternative forms of masculinity at a time of falling birth rates and rising nationalism, as films with macho, military heroes are promoted by the state.

'Necessary growth stage'

For one idol-in-waiting in Shanghai, the crackdown on celebrity culture is a chance for an industry reset. Regulation "is a growth stage that the industry needs to go through" 26-year-old Li Chengxi told AFP during rehearsals for a reality dance competition filming in Nantong, east China. Li has been an avid dancer and actress since childhood. After graduating

from the elite Peking University, she tried to make it as an entertainer, starring in a few films and idol talent shows-a genre now banned by broadcast regulators.

Still, she remains unfazed by the potential for state rules to cramp her progress. "When huge waves break ashore, the gold left behind will shine even brighter," she said. Chinese entertainers wanting mainstream success have little choice but to agree with the state, whose disapproval can ultimately sink their careers. While Li has over 200,000 followers on social media, it's far from viral superstardom. And for now, Chinese superfans are keeping a low profile both on and offline. "After this round of clean-ups, there will still be fan activities, but maybe fewer than before," said one Beijing-based fan in her twenties surnamed Geng. "Everyone's watching and waiting." — AFP



Chinese actress and singer Li Chengxi posing during a dance routine at an interview with AFP. — AFP photos



This photo shows Chinese actress and singer Li Chengxi putting on make-up next to the studio where the television show 'Born to Dance' is filmed in Nantong, in China's southeastern Jiangsu province.