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Some Thoughts on China's Sexual Revolution: Sexuality and Social Change in Contemporary China

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Sun Zhongxin

The International Resource Network's website will debut this spring at www.irnweb.org. To inaugurate the website, the IRN has commissioned essays by sexuality studies researchers from around the world. Authors were asked to reflect on sexuality studies, and its relations to movements for sexual rights or GLBT rights, in their regions. The articles will appear on the site in their original language, and will also be translated into at least one of the website's four main languages—Chinese, English, French, and Spanish. Dr. Sun Zhongxin, whose article is excerpted below and is one of several essays from China, taught the first homosexual studies course at Fudan University in 2005.

The last two years saw several changes in the public discourse around sex and sexuality in China. So what are some of the most controversial sex-related topics to be raised in China recently? According to an article in the *Beijin Sci-Tech* newspaper:

- hundreds of female college students refused to sign a "chastity contract";
- a billionaire placed marriage ad for a virgin;
- "flash marriages" gained popularity among the young in the city;
- Chinese homosexuals made their "debut" on CCTV, the television network of the People's Republic of China;
- the first homosexual studies course opened for students at Fudan University;
- the first Chinese homosexual marriage took place on the Internet.

Of these six news items, three related to homosexuality, two related to female chastity, and one revealed a change in attitude towards sexual marriage: they all reveal changing attitudes toward sex and sexual behavior in China. This

short article seeks to address some of the sociological factors that have led to the current turning point in sexuality in the contemporary Chinese social context.

The Market Reform and Opening-up Policy

China's reform and opening-up policy has caused a number of broad transformations in Chinese society. Until recently, the field of sociology in China had rarely concerned itself with new issues in the field of sexuality. Yet the great influence placed on people's sex lives during the process of social transition cannot be overlooked. The rejection of the ideals of the Cultural Revolution, during which sex was used as a political tool for social control, played an influential role in bringing about these changes.

During the Cultural Revolution, everyone wore the same uniform. Women tried to hide their feminine curves under their clothes. Individual sexual preferences were supposed to give way to lofty revolutionary ideals. Extra-marital affairs were portrayed as a derogatory lifestyle and pre-marital sex was construed as immoral. Homosexuality was illegal and would be punished under the statutes for "hooliganism." A person had to be sexually well-behaved in order to advance in his or her career.

Recently, however, reforms in the area of sexuality have led to less government control over individuals' private lives. These changes are reflected in the state's diminished interference with and control of sex-related areas, in more sexual information and products openly available, in a diversity of sexual lifestyles, and in the strong appeal of understanding sexual rights as human rights. This slow retreat of the government's role in the control of the personal life can be traced to at least October 2003, when the new marriage registration principles passed. These principles simplified the processes of marriage and divorce. The committed parties no longer need certification or confirmation from their place of work or the local Resident Committee to get married or divorced. The pre-marital

physical, which among other things once contained an indication of the woman's virginity, is no longer obligatory. The new principles reflected a respect for human rights, a protection of marital freedom, and a change in the government's role with regards to sexual issues.

While the major principles of the current Chinese family planning policy aim to control the population and enhance the overall population quality, the side effect of the policy is to promote a separation of sexual behavior from reproductive purposes. If a couple can only have one child, sexual behavior can not longer be sanctioned solely for biological purposes. For the first time, changes in the legal code publicly recognize sex not just in biological terms, but as an aspect of the pursuit of happiness.

Stable Economic Development and Consumerism

Various sex products are now sold openly in the market. Information about sex and sexuality is spreading directly or indirectly through such public media as street-side advertising. In addition to being accessible in stores, on school campuses, and on TV and radio programs, information about sex can also be quickly easily found on the Internet. All this information, good and bad, has helped push aside many of the traditional sexual taboos and thus undermined traditional norms of sexual practice.

In the legal arena, sexual minorities, including gays and lesbians, are appealing for their rights; in the marketplace, the pursuit of profit is creating market niches for sexual minorities. The developing economy and consumer culture has led to more emphasis on individual enjoyment and a newfound respect for diversity.

The Rise of the Middle Class in China

When we talk about social change in contemporary China, we cannot ignore the great changes in and reorganization of social stratification. One of the most important features is the rise of the

middle class. White collar workers in

China tend to focus on their personal happiness and to pay more attention to their own quality of life. They are also more likely to remain politically conservative. Most website owners and users are white collar workers, and some other social groups also are comprised mostly of members of the middle class, including the "DINK" family (double income, no kids), single person households, and cohabitating couples who violate the traditional sex norms. The middle class is also the target group for most gay bars, dating parties, "Dating on Saturday" programs, and sports groups, among others, in Chinese cities. The rapid rise and growth of the middle class has the potential to produce new emancipation discourses for different sexual minorities, including gay men and lesbians, that will to break the silence.

Popularization of Higher Education

The impact of higher education on China's sexual revolution cannot be underestimated. As entrance rates into Chinese universities soar, younger people in China may be adopting different sexual ideologies from their elder generation, in part because they have more opportunities to study various human and social sciences. With the increasing availability of higher education in Chinese cities, young people are more geared toward the pursuit of equality, freedom and self-realization. At the same time, the opinions and ideas of elite intellectuals, such as professors, researchers, lawyers and policy-making consultants are being expressed more frequently to the public at the media reports and conferences.

Feminist discourse in China

Although gender equality is one of China's national policies, to a large extent mainstream feminist discourse in China tends to ignore sexuality issues. Considering those topics either not important or fearing that raising them will bring unnecessary trouble, most feminist scholars stick to the so-called "significant issues," such as women's employment, education, political participation, marriage and family. Issues specifically concerning women's sexuality were also avoided in the past. Even so, the critical thinking of feminist discourses has challenged stereotyped gender roles, including sexuality roles. The latter especially has influenced many young people. A few feminist scholars have now started to

emphasize women's sexual rights and the diversity of sexualities among Chinese women.

The Role of the Media and the Internet

The media is one of the most potent catalytic agents of sexual revolution in China. The Internet wields influence on sexual behavior through promoting alliances, sharing knowledge, and providing a platform where diverse voices can be heard. Many informal homosexual social networks originally developed through Internet and private websites. There are many stories of individuals who came to accept their sexual identity mainly because of the Internet. It is obvious that the Internet is a powerful channel for people to find sexual partners, to organize offline activities, or just simply to have access to sexual knowledge and sex-related information. The Internet provides a level of anonymity that is otherwise rare in Chinese society.

Opening the door: AIDS and Sexuality

Recently, the importance of AIDS prevention in China has been stressed by both the global society and the Chinese government. Sexuality must be openly discussed in order to address concerns about the AIDS epidemic. For example, in the summer of 2005, CCTV discussed the topic of AIDS in a show titled, "Homosexuality: Confronting is Better than Evading." Scholars and activists realized that discussions of sexuality, especially homosexuality and commercial sex work, were more likely to be viewed as legitimate in the context of discussions of HIV risk. They have been developing strategies to work together with the government to prevent the spread of AIDS.

Globalization and Alliance of Social Forces

It has become hard to close the door on globalization since China adopted a market reform policy. Globalization creates an environment in which many people travel across countries and from one region to another in China. It creates information sharing, product sharing, capital flow, and value sharing, and includes some basic understanding of sexual rights, gender equality

and human rights. Various projects in China on sexuality, reproductive health, and AIDS prevention have raised people's awareness of non-conforming sexualities. Some non-profit international and national organizations are also working in China. In addition, the international academic community, together with Chinese scholars, are sponsoring workshops and conferences for research on sexuality.

Conclusion

Some argue that because the sexual revolution is Western, it is therefore foreign and chaotic. However, having analyzed the institutional basis for the sexual revolution in contemporary China from a sociological perspective, it is clear the sexual revolution has deep local roots. Social policy, political reform, economic development, and the rise of middle class in China have all led to the formation of our sexual cultures and the change in attitudes toward sexuality. The key turning points have been the development of the Internet, the use of HIV prevention discourse to talk about sexuality, and globalization. The change of talk about sexuality, far more than the change in sex behavior itself, reflects the dramatic transformations of the past two or three decades.

Although there are still too few scholars engaged in sexuality studies in the social science field, and the sociological study of sexuality is still marginal, the voices claiming sexual rights can now be heard. Meanwhile, the various facets of the sexual revolution have raised a claim for more feasible strategies and countermeasures, such as advocating sexual education among young people, raising public conscious about safe sex, fighting against all kinds of discrimination and ignorance, protecting women's rights, advocating respect for diversity, equality and harmony, and teaming up with all the social forces such as non-profit organizations, government organizations and academic institutions.

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