

Sexuality in Contemporary Chinese Culture

Josephine Ho (National Central University, Taiwan)

It is certainly an odd experience to find among discussions of poverty, labor movement, democracy, identity, human rights, and spirituality, all serious sounding topics, a special session on the taboo subject of sexuality. It is even stranger to see sexuality included in a conference on building the civil society, an endeavor usually associated with a clearly defined public realm run by individuals for whom sexuality, except in its most negative and criminal aspects, may be one of their least concerns. Yet, it is when we think of sexuality in relation to the historical condition of contemporary Chinese culture that the conspicuous and ubiquitous presence of sexuality becomes somewhat comprehensible.

Sexuality in its Historical Presence

Perhaps we need to first ask: why the sudden concern with sexuality? What forces, historical as well as social, can we detect at work in the topical events that have helped promote sexuality to its present status of emergency? And how have the discursive exchanges and contestations surrounding these events shaped our understanding and feelings toward sexuality? Several significant events in the 1990s highlight sexuality's most recent dramatic emergence in the Chinese world:

—The Chinese translation of *The Kinsey Institute New Report on Sex* (1990) sold more than 100,000 copies in the shrinking book market of Taiwan in 1992, thus creating the most impressive but least expected sales figure for a rather conservative publishing house, which has obviously underestimated the public's undeclared interest in the subject.¹ The timely arrival and warm reception of the sex report signal that sexuality has developed such an undeniable visibility and evoked such a strong sense of anxiety that what we are witnessing in the sales is a craving for some direction and guidance, given in the credible and authoritative form of statistical or empirical studies, so as to facilitate the understanding and evaluation of personal values and practices in the ever-expanding field of sexual matters.

—Perhaps as one mimicking response to the popularity of the Kinsey report

and as one form of expression of the political concerns of the moment, an unprecedented mass survey of sexual life sponsored by a now defunct popular Taiwanese weekly was conducted simultaneously in 1993 in more than a dozen communities in both Mainland China and Taiwan, purportedly revealing the dramatic changes and differences in sexual mores and practices, which may then serve the delicate purposes of determining the differing degrees of westernization/modernization in the two regions while at the same time ascertaining the commonalities among the Chinese in both regions.²

—On Mainland China the sudden surge of publication of several voluminous studies of the Chinese sexual culture, ancient and especially contemporary (including such works as *Contemporary Sexual Culture of China* (1992)'s *The Presence of Sexuality in Contemporary China* (1993) *Current Conditions of Sexuality in China* (1995)), provided narratives that congealed the cultural significance of sexuality for modern-day China.³ *Time Magazine's* timely cover story on the sexual revolution in China further highlighted rapid changes in that society.

—Continuous investment in China's industries in the past decade has meant not only a new twist in Hong Kong's and Taiwan's economic future, but also a new page in their sex history. It has now become a common practice for businessmen to have a second home as well as a second (or more) woman in China as they establish their businesses there. In the meantime, the influx of money from Hong Kong, Taiwan, as well as from other foreign investors, into China has now rekindled the oldest business in human history in a land that had sworn to rid itself of prostitution. Other trends of non-marital sexual exchanges in China have also penetrated the barriers of age, sex, race, sexual preference, etc., thus further accelerating the disintegration of the age-old moral code of chastity.

—In 1994 the alleged rape case of one Taiwanese female college student by her professor propelled the local women's groups to jointly organize their first street demonstration against all forms of sexual harassment of women. Amidst angry slogans, the issue of women's self-determination in matters related to their (sexual) pleasures was for the first time brought into view, thus creating not only heated discussions of sexual morality in the popular press but also a schism within the feminist camp over the open affirmation of (female) sexuality and pleasure.⁴ In 1995 women students on one of the most prestigious campuses in Taiwan organized a public showing of adult films in the women's dorm as an assertion of women's rights to their sexual desires. Faced with insinuating sexual remarks as well as moral condemnations, coupled with the threat of possible allegations of

piracy violations, the students finally resolved to changing their cause from the affirmation of women's erotic self-determination to the denunciation of adult films in general, thus further concretizing the schism within the feminist camp.

—At the end of 1996, sex-related crimes, which have always been commonplace but considered negligible in Taiwan, have finally won the media's serious attention following the heinous rape murder committed against one feminist who was also an active leader in the opposition party. As the investigation of the case sank into stagnation, the naked body of the kidnapped teenage daughter of a famous entertainer surfaced in the spring of 1997, capturing the fears and anger of the whole country, which the government is still trying to appease. Since then, the dangers of sex have become a constant presence in the popular imagination.

—From 1994 on a small-scale lesbian and gay movement has been developing in the Chinese world, encouraged on by the convergence of several factors: the seemingly friendly atmosphere created by a film market that aims to win international recognition, an arts and literature culture that seeks to invigorate itself, and a commodity culture that works to create new subjectivities which may be translated into new consumers and new consumption styles. The development of theories in gay and lesbian studies in the academically more advanced western countries from which the East often seek intellectual leadership has also added legitimacy to this new field of discourse. Both forces have greatly enriched the homosexual culture in the Chinese world.

—Spurred on by an ever-expanding capitalist culture that promotes the smooth and diverse flow of not only capital but also desire, the movement of women and teenagers in the erotic culture seems to cause the most anxiety, not only because they have traditionally been portrayed as a-sexual beings easily victimized by the sexual messages presented in advertising, clothing, movies, and other leisure activities; but more importantly because the growing mobility and autonomy of women and teenagers in sexual matters prove to be devastating to the maintenance of unequal power relationships within the family. The diversification of desire has thus prompted governments to adopt conservative sex education programs which further exacerbate the tension between desire and control. All of these recent developments gained wide visibility as sensationalized reports and sexually explicit programs throughout the newly established cable systems propel the local media industries into a new stage of fierce competition. While such representations provide an outlet for long repressed and newly created desires, they have also come under attack by those who see sexuality as the worst choice

for the dramatization of social and economic change. Still, ideological battles, social contradictions, and other political struggles are frequently displaced unto the surrogate realm of sexuality, creating waves of discourses that further saturate and complicate the structure of feelings surrounding sexuality. It is obvious from the above list that the historical presence of sexuality in contemporary Chinese culture would then be loaded with all the conflicting forces of scientific knowledge, physical danger, women's rights, female pleasure, consumption of commodities, etc. as each incident settles into sediments of diverse emotional traces and exhausting discursive exchanges, which constantly refract our experiences of sexuality.

Sexuality as a Gender Issue

The proliferation of discourses and practices in relation to sexuality is carried mostly by the movement of women in the social sphere and as such it also carries the most significance for women. Traditional Chinese values such as chastity and fidelity have always dictated the function and use of women's bodies and prescribed dire consequences for those women who dare to stray from the narrow path or accidentally fall outside grace because of male sexual violence. Such conservative values may be workable in a state of culture where mobility and interpersonal contacts were limited, where women's places remained bound to their male relatives' households, and where the irrefutable parentage of a child was of utmost importance. Yet the revolution in production modes has eroded the traditional assignment of women to such an extent that even traditionally family-oriented Asian states are now mobilizing female homemakers to become new sources of productive labor in an increasingly competitive world market.⁵ With their experience in the public sphere, their newly gained economic power, and a consumption culture that fosters their newly created female subjectivity, women have gradually developed a new sense of self-control and a new claim to self-actualization—even in relation to their desires and pleasures independent of traditional channels of satisfaction. Coupled with mobility and individualism, self-determination has become the spirit of the age for Chinese women, making them all the more difficult to be restrained by traditional female values of abstinence.

Such changes in women's life trajectories have created a profound sense of unease among men. As more and more men find it harder and harder to make a respectable living in a time of seeming affluence yet concomitant with a time of severe retrenchment; as many women's change of status and power seems to only

harden their snobbery when responding to men's courtship; hostility toward mobilizing and confident women turns into a deep-seated resentment. Capitalistic surges of seductive images and illusive promises of satisfaction further aggravates the sense of frustration and powerlessness felt by discontented men, at the same time increasing women's fears and anxieties with all the more detailed reports of heinous sex crimes. It is then quite ironic that within such a context of unpleasant associations and imminent dangers that the call for sexual freedom for women was issued forth. Repeated reports of sexual harassment cases and the indifference of the social structure toward such incidents had finally spurred the women's groups in Taiwan into a mass protest in 1994, which was not only an expression of women's fears and anger but also an effort to assert women's mobility within the social sphere. Yet the strategy, while asserting female self-determination, described it only as the right to say no to men's sexual advances, and thus failed to move beyond a passive "freedom from (sexual harassment)," to an active "freedom to (assert female sexual desires)" which would greatly transform and empower women. Marginal feminists were quick to point this out and urge that anti-sexual-harassment campaigns not limit their demands to merely demanding more lights, more guards, more protection, etc. which only add to the powers of the state rather than empowering women. Besides, such measures fail to challenge the gendered rearing practices which leave women weak, fearful, and withdrawn; not to mention severely crippling them in their acquisition of a fulfilling sex life. In short, something more active and aggressive must be done if we hope to strengthen women physically, psychologically, and sexually.

The result was a newly created area of struggle where traditional values and practices that make up women's negative feelings toward sex met with the gleeful voice of women's hopes and experiences of bodily pleasures. It is also believed that, as an area fraught with gender divisions and most contributive to gender formations, sexuality needs to be reconceived so that new generations of women could be brought up with completely new gender configurations.

Sexuality as a Sex Issue

As feminists debate the dangers and pleasures of sexuality, thus creating an atmosphere where sexuality gradually won legitimacy as an area of social struggle, the previously shrouded intricacies of sexuality gradually came to the fore and other sexual subjectivities also found an opportunity to announce their existence and claim their entitlement. If racial justice and gender justice have each in turn gained recognition as legitimate social fields of struggle in the civil society, then

erotic justice may be the latest addition to the list.

As a notion that resists the treatment of sexual practices and preferences as denoting personality flaws, moral deficiencies, or some other deep problems, "erotic justice" may take a little while to sink in, just as it took us a while to recognize and condemn the common practice of treating a person's race or gender affiliations as irrefutable grounds for discrimination. In fact, it is exactly because sexuality has long been slighted that injustices in that area rarely receive due attention and subjects with sexual experiences of or sexual tastes for the out-of-the-ordinary are brutally discriminated on a regular basis. (Such sexual subjects may include homosexuals, rape victims, children born out of wedlock, HIV-positive patients, sexually active senior citizens, "loose women," exotic dancers and other sex workers, etc.) This is especially true for women, for whom sexuality is often automatically considered as an area of danger and wrong doings, so much that any woman who ventures into it or strays from the norm would suffer gravely. Such beliefs have stigmatized sexuality as the most unmentionable topic for the Chinese, many feminists included.

Yet, like it or not, the expansion of capitalism in the Chinese culture has already incorporated sexuality into the day-to-day production and consumption of commodities. Likewise, various sexual subjects have found some means of representation and some forms of resistance strategy from among the proliferation of leisure culture, media and advertising, changes in gender roles, the popularization of sexology, the philosophy of sexual enjoyment as promoted by consumption-oriented ethics, the actively sexual subculture of teenagers, etc. The progressive social movements, on the other hand, have for various ideological concerns overlooked or even condemned such clear signs of a full-fledged sex revolution. The general and typical response is that struggles in the economic or political realms are somehow more "fundamental" than those in the erotic realm which are considered to be of bourgeois taste and thus are luxuries to which the marginal social movements can not afford to devote already limited energy. It is believed that when economic and political changes have been effected, then erotic changes will take care of themselves. As a result, rapid growth in the "forces of erotic production" has yet to be further radicalized into challenges to existing "relations of erotic production" so as to promote a pluralistic, open, fluid sex culture where erotic justice is no longer a far-fetched dream. This reserved attitude toward the question of sexuality is not without its precedent in the history of the left.

Austrian Freudo-Marxist Wilhelm Reich observed the same problem follow-

ing the Russian revolution:⁶

"It is generally believed that the essential aspect of the Soviet sexual revolution was to be found in the changes set down in legislation. But a legal or otherwise formal change achieves social significance only when it really reaches 'the masses,' i.e., when the mass psyche is restructured. This is the only way for an ideology or a program to become a historically revolutionizing force—solely by a deep-seated change in the feelings and instinctual life of the masses. For the often quoted and yet so little understood 'subjective factor of history' is to be found exclusively in the psychic structure of the masses. Therefore, no investigation of historical developments may call itself revolutionary if it regards the psychic condition of the masses merely as a product of economic processes and not also as their motor force." (Reich 174)

What Reich is pointing out here is that the really profound social changes take root not merely on the institutional level of things; nor do institutional changes automatically translate into changes in mentality, psychology, or daily life practices. Women's hard-won economic independence and legal rights do not automatically dispel the anxiety and fear that accompany their daily lives; nor do these advances automatically erase women's hesitancy and passivity in sexual matters. In fact, changes in the economic, political, legal realms do little to remove the stigmatization and pain that have crippled a large part of women's psychic and emotional lives, not to mention perpetuating the hostile environment in which future generations of women will be brought up. Insights from Gramsci and Althusser have taught us to see the world of daily routine practices as the material reality that grounds subjectivities. That is to say, dramatic changes in the most taken-for-granted areas of daily practice make or break the further consolidation or the gradual erosion of existing power structure. That brings us to one of Reich's most important contributions to the topic, which has much to do with the crucial site of leftist struggles. As Reich does not hesitate to point out, "the patriarchal family is the structural and ideological breeding ground of all social orders based on the authoritarian principle" (161). Reich is not unaware of the fact that against the background of ever-eroding family ties—such as the erosion of the economic power of the father over his wife and children—the economic bond has been broken and sexual inhibition has enjoyed some relief from it. But Reich maintains that that does not mean sexual freedom. In fact, it is the poverty of erotic satisfaction and affirmation, effected by the authority and dominance of

the Father, that has created the passive yet fascist personalities whose involvement in revolutionary activities fall short of a thorough change in temperament that would truly consolidate the fruits of the revolution. As Reich puts it, The external freedom necessary for sexual happiness is not yet that happiness itself, which primarily requires the psychic capacity for shaping and enjoying it. In the family, genital needs were largely replaced by infantile dependencies or pathological sexual habits which were endowed with all the power of sexual energy but destroyed the capacity for every biologically normal orgasmic experience. Family members hated each other, consciously or unconsciously, and superimposed on their hatred a spasmodic love and a sticky attachment which poorly camouflaged their origin in concealed hatred. In the foreground of these difficulties were the women, genitally crippled and unprepared for economic independence, unable to renounce the slavish protection of the family and the substitute gratification of ruling over their children. Economically dependent, their lives a sexual desert, these women had regarded the rearing of their children as the central meaning of their life." (164)

Such is the situation of all too many women in today's Chinese world. It is clear that economic freedom would fail to deliver the self-determination it promises so long as our family structure, our child-rearing practices, our views toward female sexuality, and our sex-negative culture remain rigidly in tact. In short, a revolutionary restructuring of culture must be put in place if revolutions in other realms hope to be truly successful.

It is here that certain readings of Michel Foucault may be invoked to state that the struggle to restructure (sexual) culture does not necessarily bring forth liberation from the alleged (sexual) oppression, for the call of resistance against oppression often entails other power maneuvers and may turn into oppressive forces themselves. While being somewhat enlightening, such a comment overlooks the important factor of the context of its own enunciation. After all, what are the supposed effects of such a gesture upon an emerging marginal group in the midst of seemingly hopeless struggles against the seemingly all-powerful hegemonic structure? Would we direct similar warnings at workers fighting against capitalism, indigenous groups fighting against racism, or women fighting against patriarchy? If not, then why direct this special warning at those who fight on the sexual front? What is the ground of our decision to do so? Could it be that erotic prejudices are at work here?

Another reading of Foucault may claim that sexual revolutions do not prom-

ise liberation, for the increase in sexual discourse would only subject people to more sexual control and sexual discipline. Again, such a reading overlooks the fact that “the increase in discourse” does not say anything about the nature of the discourse that is being produced. Nor does it say anything about its effect upon the field of discourse as more and more of the so-called subjugated knowledges enter the scene. After all, not all discourses produce the same power effects; not all powers carry the same ramifications for the groups involved.

A third view, one that is popular among many feminists, may hold that sexuality is a field so thoroughly saturated with male power that any woman who enters it will only suffer more harm from it. Their advise is then for women to stay out of the sexual realm. (Parallel statements of this kind can also be found in the pessimistic views of the West as they look to the seemingly powerless resistance waged against the imminent arrival of the Chinese power in Hong Kong.) Yet I find it difficult to understand the objective of this kind of defeatist language, except perhaps to show that, compared with those women who dare to venture into the so-called danger zone of sexuality, the ones who stay out and provide little support to those who are in the game have more “political wisdom.” Actually, it is probably the middle-class and the elite’s way to say that they are “different” from those senseless “bad” women who “succumb to” the sexual lure of male power. On the other hand, at least for some of us, the field is wide open for the creation of a new erotic culture, one that is not invented or designed by elite intellectuals dreaming about the arrival of the new heaven and new earth overnight, but is born with the wisdom and experiences of those low-down souls who have already ventured beyond the given boundaries and developed their own strategies for survival within the highly repressive Chinese sex culture. In fact, it may very well be “the happy hookers,” the sexually active teenagers, “the other woman,” the lesbians, and other bad women who could offer the necessary knowledges and strategies that would truly change this culture for women. With their intervention and challenge in the social realm of sexuality, the terms of the debate, as well as the conditions of oppression and struggle, are already changed. In fact, in relation to the quest for erotic justice, no matter how much or little progress they make, the women, the teenagers, the homosexuals, and other sexual minorities will no longer have to start their struggle from ground zero. They can start from the thinking and practices that are now being created in contemporary Chinese sex culture.

Endnotes

- ¹ The publishing house, which bears the Chinese name of “Teacher Zhang”, has since then been labeled by many critics as “Teacher Huang”, hinting at its improper role in publishing “obscenities”—for in Taiwan’s strongly anti-sex culture, the mere mention of sex is considered obscene. The publishing house, with its English name proclaiming its belief in “Living Psychology,” has since then translated the work of William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson as well as the Hite Report by Shere Hite, and sponsored quite a few studies of sexuality in the local context, thus further legitimating discussions of sexuality in the forms of sexological studies or empirical research.
- ² The survey thus fulfills the delicate needs of the moment when the relationship between the two sides showed such signs of rare amiability that even a survey of such taboo aspects of people’s lives was received somewhat warmly.
- ³ Although there had always been works of a casual kind that deal with the cultural aspects of sexuality, the publications cited here may be the first serious attempts by college-level scholars to win respectability for the study of sexuality through linking it with scientific methods. Incidentally, as demonstrated by the prefaces they wrote for these volumes, the authors are well aware of the historical significance and the delicate nature of their efforts within a culture that is fraught with contradictions when it comes to sex.
- ⁴ The debates within the feminist camp erupted with the present author’s controversial book, *The Unruly Woman: Feminism and Sexual Emancipation* (1994), and have expanded to include discussions of the erotic rights of teenage girls, married women, and, most recently, sex workers.
- ⁵ As the world market becomes ever more competitive, meaning that it is becoming ever more difficult to maintain certain levels of profit-making, the search for cheap labor that is less resistant to the demands of production has found housewives and teenagers quite desirable for its purposes. Consequently, governments no longer view housewives as “homemakers”; instead, the labor force administrators describe housewives as “idling labor,” a term rife with the normative implications of capitalistic work ethic and fully promising a reassignment of the role of women.
- ⁶ Citations of Reich are take from *The Sexual Revolution: Toward a Self-Regulating Character Structure*, trans. by Therese Pol (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1945, 1962, 1969, 1974).