

# Women *& Sexuality in China*

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Harriet  
Evans

# **Women and Sexuality in China**

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Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality  
and Gender Since 1949

Harriet Evans

Polity Press

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# **Women and Sexuality in China**

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# *Preface and Acknowledgements*

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Since I first went to China as a student more than twenty years ago, my friendships and relationships with Chinese women have changed and developed in diverse and often exciting ways. I have known a few of my friends since the early years of my acquaintance with China. I have come to know many more since then, through research and shared interests, through my students and through mutual connections, both in and outside China, in Europe and in the United States. My research interests have grown out of these friendships, out of the discussions and conversations they have generated, as well as out of my commitment to feminist ideas and goals. As the contexts in which we have maintained our discussions have changed, so old themes have been replaced by new ones, or have been interwoven into new approaches and analyses to produce different understandings. Some themes have returned to our conversations repeatedly: questions about how we see ourselves as women, how we conduct ourselves as daughters, mothers, partners and wives – questions about gender and sexual identity. Our responses to these questions have also, of course, been as diverse as the differences between us. Some of my friends strongly resist what they see as the negative gender implications of China's rapidly changing social and cultural environment. Others welcome the changes for the possibilities they give to explore new and empowering meanings associated with being a woman. Yet throughout the shifting ways in which the Chinese women I know have talked about their lives, a number of shared assumptions have emerged – for example, about notions of duty, obligation and pleasure, about the kinds of responsi-

bilities having a female body implies, and about the links between women's reproductive role and gender practice. This book is an attempt to understand some of the dominant discourses within which these assumptions have been shaped; it is an attempt to try to formulate some ideas about why and how they are shared.

Even though the writing of this book has been of relatively short duration, the ideas and passions out of which it has emerged have been part of my life since I embarked on my career in Chinese studies. Many people have been indispensable to its completion. First are the women and men whose friendship has offered me an understanding of contemporary Chinese society rarely conveyed in academic writing: Bu Wei, Chang Xiangqun, Gao Changfan, Guo Yuhua, Huang Dian, Qian Wenbao, Shen Rui, Yang Lian and You You. In China, a number of academics have given me invaluable help and encouragement by sharing with me their ideas and research findings: Chen Yiyun, Fei Juanhong, Geng Wenxiu, Li Yinhe, Liu Dalin, Mu Aiping, Pan Suiming, Shan Guangnai, Shen Chonglin, Shen Yuan, Tan Shen, Tao Chunfang, Wang Xingjuan, Wei Zhangling, Xu Anqi and Zhang Ping. I would also like to thank Charles D'Orban, Jean Hung and Zhao Yiheng for their valuable suggestions about sources.

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# Bibliographical Abbreviations

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AP	<i>Associated Press</i>
CND	<i>China News Digest</i>
DJJK	<i>Dajia jiankang (Health for everyone)</i>
DZJK	<i>Dazhong jiankang (Popular health)</i>
DZYX	<i>Dazhong yixue (Popular medicine)</i>
HNRB	<i>Henan ribao (Henan daily)</i>
HYYJT	<i>Hunyin yu jiating (Marriage and family)</i>
JTYS	<i>Jiating yisheng (Family doctor)</i>
MZYFZ	<i>Minzhu yu fazhi (Democracy and the legal system)</i>
NXYJ	<i>Nüxing yanjiu (Women's studies)</i>
NYZX	<i>Nüyou zhixin (Women's friend)</i>
XDJT	<i>Xiandai jiating (Modern Family)</i>
ZGFN	<i>Zhongguo funü (Women of China)</i>
ZGQN	<i>Zhongguo qingnian (China youth)</i>



# Contents

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<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Bibliographical Abbreviations</i>	x
<b>1 Introduction: Discourses of Sexuality Since 1949</b>	<b>1</b>
The political and ideological contexts	4
Materials of the discourses of sexuality	11
Dominant discourses and their readers	15
Derivations	20
Chinese women's studies and the terms of analysis	26
<b>2 The Scientific Construction of Sexual Difference</b>	<b>33</b>
Sex and scientific education	34
Sex and reproduction in 1950s perspective	41
Sexual difference	44
Reformist constructions of sex and reproduction	49
<b>3 Advice to Adolescents</b>	<b>56</b>
Definitions of adolescence	60
Menstruation and female weakness	65
'Evil habits' and the dangers of excess	70
The moral and social supervision of adolescence	75
<b>4 Pre-Marital Preoccupations</b>	<b>82</b>
Courtship and 'dating': the historical and social context	83
True socialist love	88

vi Contents

Approaching love in the 1980s	95
Pre-marital passion	99
The female standard of pre-marital sexuality	104
<b>5 The Monogamous Ideal</b>	<b>112</b>
Wives and sexual harmony	113
The natural mother	121
Sex and the older woman	126
Monogamy and marital fidelity	129
Clothing the female body	134
<b>6 Healthy Bodies</b>	<b>144</b>
Reproductive health	146
Superior births	151
Abortion	156
Sexually transmitted diseases	160
<b>7 Sex and the Open Market</b>	<b>167</b>
Women for sale	168
Prostitution	174
Yellow materials	179
Rape and sexual violence	182
<b>8 Sexualities under Suspicion</b>	<b>189</b>
Virgins and victims	191
Adultery and the female 'third party'	195
The unnatural woman	202
Homosexuality	206
<b>9 Conclusions</b>	<b>216</b>
<i>Notes</i>	221
<i>Bibliography</i>	238
<i>Index</i>	263

# 1 Introduction: Discourses of Sexuality Since 1949

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Sex is a prominent feature of public life in China. Images of beautiful women in erotic poses cover the magazines found on corner news-stands and gaze down on passers-by from street billboards. Advice columns in local newspapers and weekly journals contain detailed information on topics that range from how to recognize the symptoms of the menarche to old people's need for sex and romance. Huge numbers of guides for newly-weds, self-help pamphlets on reproductive health, text-books on sexual hygiene, and encyclopaedic manuals on the management of modern family life testify to a flourishing market for publications about sex, catering for a diverse range of needs. After decades of exclusion from the classroom, sex education is commonly found on high school syllabuses; a 'scientific' understanding of sex is considered essential to the healthy development of the nation's future. Romantic scenes with erotic imagery are a recurring feature of literature and film, despite the watchful eye of the censors. More sensationalist materials, including pornography, often imported from abroad, are also widely available.

The view that sex has 'taken off' in China in the last decade appears to be borne out by the contrast between the liberalization of the 1980s and the constraints on sex-related discussions during the Maoist decades. Chinese and Western scholars commonly promulgate the idea that 'sex was a taboo subject during the period 1949-1980', when 'any materials relating to sex . . . were strictly forbidden' (Zha Bo and Geng Wenxiu 1992, 2). Attention to matters of love and sex was for decades treated either as the shameful expression of a warped mind or as

## 2 Introduction

evidence of bourgeois individualism and detrimental to collective welfare. Throughout the 1950s, principles of hard work, frugality, and collective enthusiasm for the 'new China' dominated images of marriage and family life. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the slightest suggestion of sexual interest was considered so ideologically unsound that gendered tastes in hairstyle and dress were coerced into a monotonous uniformity of shape and colour. A kind of androgyny, a sexual sameness, based on the defeminization of female appearance and its approximation to male standards of dress, seemed to be the socialist ideal. By contrast, the current diversity of representations of sexuality in China suggests the explosion of a topic hitherto hidden from public view.

The argument that sex was a taboo subject in this period ignores the considerable range of materials published on sex-related issues during the 1950s and early 1960s (Evans 1991). Many articles and pamphlets focused on the requirements of the Marriage Law, introduced by the communist government in 1950, which outlawed arranged and venal marriages and ratified monogamy based on the free choice of partner as the only legal form of marriage. Between 1950 and 1953, numerous publications sought to educate the public about the new law, with particular emphasis on its importance for women, oppressed for centuries by the traditional system of arranged marriage and concubinage. With titles such as 'Establish a correct perspective on love' (*Jianli zhengque de lian'ai guan*) and 'Talking about my view of love' (*Tantan wode lian'ai guan*), articles devoted lengthy discussions to the meaning of love, now considered the necessary basis for the new model of conjugality (Cheng Jinwu 1950; Lei Ji 1950). Most issues of the official journals for women and youth, *Zhongguo funü* (Women of China) and *Zhongguo qingnian* (China youth), published in the 1950s and early 1960s, carried short pieces, often accompanied by readers' letters, on a particular aspect of sexuality, whether it was adolescent hygiene or women's anxieties about contraception. Some detailed the biological aspects of sexual difference and reproduction, for example, 'The hymen and love' (*Chunümo yu aiqing*) and 'Talking about the age of marriage from a physiological point of view' (*Cong shengli shang tan jiehun nianling wenti*) (Li Yang 1956; Lin Qiaozhi 1957). Others addressed the moral implications of sexual relationships outside marriage, as in a debate carried in a number of consecutive issues of *Zhongguo funü* in 1956, initiated by an autobiographical piece entitled 'Why did our marriage break down?' (*Women fufu guanxi weishenmo polie?*; Liu Lequn 1955). Written by doctors, lawyers, students, adolescent schoolchildren, teachers, young wives and

mothers, these articles provided a regular public forum for discussion about a wide range of sex-related questions.

The pre-Cultural Revolution discourse on sexuality brought to the official vision of ideologically correct behaviour a code of normative sexual and gender expectations legitimized by so-called scientific authority. Medical experts claimed the authority of modern science to expound the view that biological differences in reproductive and sexual development determined all major distinctions between women and men in sexual and social behaviour. Experts also gave scientific status to opinions about sexual difference which reflected social and moral concerns as much as medical interests; the 'scientific knowledge about sex' legitimized practices that supported the state's interests in controlling young people's sexual conduct (Wang Wenbin, Zhao Zhiyi and Tan Mingxin 1956, 1). Equated with a 'modern', 'rational' and often Western-oriented approach to explanations of sex, 'scientific' knowledge produced and disseminated by the experts was widely contrasted with the mystifications of feudal superstition and popular distortions of the facts (Wang Peng 1993, 1-2).<sup>1</sup>

Discussion of sexuality since the early 1980s has encompassed a diversity of topics not included in the 1950s discourse. Recent writings make few direct references to the debates of the 1950s and tend to treat them as little more than the highly didactic and moralistic precursor of the later, less unified discourse of the reform period (Honig and Hershatter 1988, 6-7). However, despite what seem to be immense differences, the questions asked in the later period echoed many of the concerns of the former discourse. The 1950s approaches established the epistemic foundation grounding the assumptions, perspectives and parameters of the later debates. Indeed, the continuities between the two periods are sometimes so direct that the views of the 1950s are replicated almost verbatim in the later texts. For example, except for slight differences in wording, the warnings against masturbation in Shen Wenjiang's *A Manual for Young People's Hygiene* are identical to those of Huang Shuze's 'What should I do to get rid of the bad habit of masturbation?' (Shen Wenjiang et al. 1987, 22; Huang Shuze 1955). While in the changed social and intellectual climate of the reform period the more diverse tone of public discussion obscures many of the similarities between the different discourses, the assumption that women's gender characteristics are inseparable from their reproductive function and the use of science to legitimate fundamentally hierarchical gender relationships are as notable in contemporary approaches to sex-related issues as they were in the 1950s. Elucidating the discursive concerns of the 1950s, therefore, indicates the point of departure for the study of sexuality in China in the 1980s as well as

## 4 Introduction

some of the major assumptions and preoccupations informing the orientations of later debates.

This book analyses the dominant public discourses of sexuality produced since 1949 in the People's Republic of China in order to identify meanings associated with female gender that do not emerge from an analytical focus on socio-economic or political issues. Through such examination it identifies the discursive techniques which inscribed biologically determined sexual differences with hierarchical gender characteristics. It examines a range of narrative and some visual representations of women's sexuality publicized since 1949 with reference to distinct themes, outlining women's responsibilities and attributes in sexually implicated contexts and relationships. In exploring these themes, the book seeks to elucidate the tensions, contrasts and continuities between the apparently very different discourses of sexuality of the revolutionary and reform periods.

Some of the themes discussed in the pages that follow have been a consistent feature of official discourses since 1949; matters concerning adolescence, pre- and extra-marital relationships, marriage and divorce disappeared from public view only with the ban on women's and youth publications during the Cultural Revolution. Other themes have come to prominence in the last fifteen years; discussion about the commercial use of women's bodies, about the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS, and about homosexuality clearly corresponds with the current context of marketization of the economy. Many sections of this book reiterate hopes and fears which would be familiar to any reader of *Elle* or *Seventeen*; the debates about adolescent sex education, parental responsibilities for children's sexual understanding and behaviour, teenage pregnancy and the links between explicit sexual images and sexual violence are all familiar features of the contemporary Western media. Others touch on fundamental questions of women's human rights – questions which a book on discourses of sexuality cannot treat adequately. In formulating the terms of my analysis, I have attempted to identify the main themes and parameters of the dominant discourses of sexuality produced since the early years of the People's Republic.

### The political and ideological contexts

Before the radical changes that spread through China's cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a patrilineal system of inheritance and power governed matters concerning marriage and sexual

conduct. The dominant form of marriage was arranged and patrilocal, contracted through negotiations between parents and marriage brokers.<sup>2</sup> Though uxorilocal marriages were quite common, they were generally a last resort in cases of extreme poverty or when the lack of sons threatened continuity of the male line of the bride's natal family. Female virginity was indispensable to the negotiations of marriage for its symbolic value as a signifier of sexual and reproductive ownership. The young wife entered her husband's household as a stranger, legally removed from the controls formerly exercised by her natal family and valued principally for her potential to reproduce male descendants for her husband's patrilineage. She had no rights of divorce or inheritance, even though she might receive some property via the dowry as a 'premortem inheritance' (Watson 1991a, 353–4), and ideally was not allowed to associate with men in public. So high a premium was attached to female chastity in the early Qing period that the 1646 rape law could compel the victims of rape 'to defend their chastity with their lives' (Ng 1987, 65). On the other hand, a man could have a number of wives or concubines, and enjoyed rights of divorce and free mobility. In formal terms, the husband and his family were the principal arbiters of a wife's fate.

As new social, economic and cultural forces began to alter urban family structures in the early twentieth century, social reformers increasingly identified free-choice monogamous marriage as the indispensable first step towards dismantling the system of oppressive patriarchal authority. Consensual unions became common practice for the educated urban elites in the early twentieth century (Dikötter 1995, 18–19). The Nationalist government's new Family Law of 1931 and the Communist Party's 1934 Constitution of the Jiangxi Soviet Republic both gave legal recognition to free-choice monogamous marriage, even though the formal procedures of the new form of marriage were far from offering an institutionalized alternative to parental arrangement, particularly in the rural areas (Croll 1981, 130–4). With the promulgation of the new Marriage Law in 1950, free-choice marriage became the main formal expression of the Communist Party's commitment to women's struggle for sexual equality. The model of marriage ratified by the law described a relationship between equal companions who shared responsibility for childcare and domestic tasks and who were 'in duty bound to love, respect, assist and look after each other' (*Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China* 1950, chapter 3; Meijer 1972). Combined with new rights of divorce, the right to choose a marriage partner now empowered women – in theory if still not in practice – to challenge the gender hierarchy on which patriarchal authority was premised. Disseminated



## 6 Introduction

through the media, women's and youth organizations and the education system, and folk operas and other dramatic forms revised to publicize the new communist message, the law received extensive coverage as the expression of the new form of marriage. By implication, it also indicated standards of sexual behaviour commensurate with the new model of monogamous marriage. Indeed, one main purpose of state intervention in debates about sex-related matters was to ensure that young people were educated in the principles of sexual morality deemed necessary for the successful implementation of free-choice marriage.

The social, moral and sexual requirements of the new Marriage Law thus established the immediate context for the 1950s discourse of sexuality. Free-choice monogamous marriage was publicized as a positive step to protect women from male abuse. It was presented as a means of empowering women to take control over their own lives and destinies, as the central pillar of the party's explicit goal of sexual equality. However, the law was premised on a naturalized and hierarchical view of gender relations that, by definition, limited the extent of the challenge that women could launch against the patriarchal system. Monogamous marriage was 'dictated not only by the physiological difference between the sexes, but also by the perpetuation of the species' (Chen Jianwei 1959). As the sole legitimate expression of a naturalized construction of heterosexuality, the monogamous relationship indicated clear boundaries of sexual behaviour, women's transgression of which signified a potential threat to female fertility as well as family stability. Monogamy was also represented as the wife's obligation to support her husband's interests and service his needs, whether as the self-sacrificing manager of his domestic affairs or as his moral guide. Women who went too far in questioning the implied gender constructs by postponing marriage, by 'refusing to see their husbands' for fear of becoming pregnant, or by spending too much time trying to acquire an education were described as the equivalent of gender deviationists – women who through betrayal of their proper gender attributes brought disruption and conflict to their marriages (Evans 1991, 176–80). Monogamy thus signified an emancipatory step away from the rigid controls of the feudal system at the same time as it reasserted hierarchical gender boundaries.

Within this context, official discussion marked the texts, themes and representational practices through which knowledge about sexual matters was produced and controlled – the nexus of knowledge and power – as a means of legitimizing certain values, practices and their exponents (Foucault 1984, 92–102). The official discourse regulated



sexuality through the projection of norms and sanctions to accompany the more formal control of sexual conduct – for example, in matters of adultery or rape – exercised by the state's legal and political institutions. Discursive identification of a range of sexual practices offered a distinct technique for establishing mechanisms of control over the individual, exercised not by authoritarian denials but, as Weeks put it, by 'imposing a grid of definition on the possibilities of the body' (Weeks 1981, 7–8). Sanctions and rewards, associated with notions of physical and psychological health, indicated the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable sexual conduct. The development of an official discourse of sexuality testified to the deployment of party-state power over individual, and particularly female, behaviour through the creation of uniform, normative standards of sexual conduct.

The materials that constituted the official discourse transmitted a view of sexuality and sexual difference as a set of biologically determined binary opposites that governed gender behaviour. Highly selective and explicitly didactic in its distinctions between right and wrong, normal and abnormal, this discourse aimed to regulate sexual practice in support of the project of social control and economic development formulated by the new government. Under the programme of national reconstruction in the 1950s, individual energies were to be channelled into working for the collective benefit. Expressions of individualistic interest in appearance or romance, for example, were to be contained by an ethic that stressed the superiority of selflessness and collective commitment.

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, any suggestion of sex in fiction, poetry or drama was enough to have the offending work removed from circulation and its author punished. Even when associated with a critique of feudal forms of exploitation, sex could not be mentioned in public. For example, the revision of the famous play *The White-Haired Girl* as a model revolutionary ballet contained no reference to the rape of the girl by the landlord's son.<sup>3</sup> Of course, the sexual attitudes and practices of many young people during the Cultural Revolution had little in common with the stringent standards of the official discourse. As personal accounts by women and men of the Red Guard generation have revealed, many young people found themselves free of parental supervision for the first time in their lives and able to explore sexual experiences that ridiculed the moral and ideological values of the time. Salacious stories were frequently copied out by hand (*shouchaoben*) and passed around clandestinely, giving many people their first introduction to descriptions of sex.<sup>4</sup> Fictional accounts of life as a student sent down to the countryside also suggest