

everett yuehong zhang

THE IMPOTENCE EPIDEMIC

men's medicine and sexual desire in contemporary china

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MEN'S MEDICINE AND SEXUAL DESIRE

IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Everett Yuehong Zhang

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To Arthur Kleinman

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INTRODUCTION

The Impotence Epidemic in China

In both Beijing and Chengdu in the late 1990s, concern about *yangwei* (陽痿, the shrinking of *yang*, i.e., male sexual impotence) was more visible and “contagious” than it had been during the Maoist period more than twenty years earlier. Flyers on lampposts along city streets advertised clinics that specialized in curing sexually transmitted diseases and male sexual dysfunction, and commercials appeared in the media touting *zhuangyang*, herbal tonics to cure impotence. Discussions of impotence in the media and on the Internet had become common. In the early 2000s, on a television program showcasing useful gadgets, the inventor of a new type of bicycle seat with a hole in its center boasted that the design would help reduce the risk of male impotence and make a huge contribution to Chinese people’s sex lives, given that China is such a bicycle-oriented country.¹

One Sunday afternoon in late 1999, I observed an especially vivid illustration of this “contagion” in public spaces, when *Television Clinic*, a call-in show on Beijing Television (BTV), aired a special program on erectile dysfunction (ED). The program was sponsored primarily by Pfizer, the pharmaceutical company. Three nationally known urologists answered callers’ questions on two hotlines. During the one-hour program, they were inundated with calls and, unable to respond to all of the questions being raised, could only direct many callers to hospitals in Beijing where they could seek consultation or medical treatment for impotence. I observed the live broadcast from inside the TV studio. Four male assistants took the phone calls, jotting down callers’ questions and then passing them on to an employee of Pfizer’s Beijing office. He selected questions for the three urologists to answer. The four assistants later chatted with each other about their brief conversations with callers who had sounded especially eager for advice. One imitated a



Figure 1.1: Three nationally known sexual education experts or urologists answering questions about male sexual dysfunction through a hotline on the program “Television Clinic” of Beijing Television Station (BTV). The anchor person is on the far left and the two persons on the far right are taking phone calls.

caller who lamented, “My situation is bad . . . I can’t do it, however pretty she is!” Another assistant said, “Many women called in, asking about their husbands’ problems!” As the phone calls had poured into the studio, one of the three camera operators, a middle-aged man, exclaimed to me, “ED is becoming an epidemic!”

Various lines of evidence confirm the growing prominence of male impotence in post-Mao China. First, although they appeared as far back as the 1970s, the clinic flyers mentioned above had, by the 1990s, become common sights in the urban landscape. The clinics advertised by the flyers were often back-alley operations. Those who ran them were uncertified doctors, considered by many as, at best, *jiming goudao zhi tu* (those who crow like a cock or snatch like a dog, i.e., get up to petty tricks) or, at worst, *jianghu pianzi* (charlatans fooling round). A strong stigma was attached to such clinics.

They were not impotent men’s only recourse, however. Since the 1980s, *nanke* (men’s medicine), a new division of Chinese medicine that specialized in treating impotence and other male sexual problems, had emerged in hospitals throughout the country. By the end of the 1990s, *nanke* had become



Figure 1.2:
An advertisement
for a zhuangyang
patent capsule. The
central lines read:
“Taking only three
pills, you could get
it up.”



Figure 1.3:
An advertisement
for a clinic on
a lamppost in
a back alley in
Beijing, touting
rapid efficacy of
curing impotence,
premature ejacula-
tion, and sexually
transmitted
diseases.



Figure 1.4: An advertisement for a clinic in Beijing.

a widely established specialty, bringing the concern about impotence out of back alleys and into mainstream hospitals.

A second line of evidence involves literary representations of impotence. In the early 1980s, the well-known novel *Half a Man Is Woman*, by Zhang Xianliang, portrayed a political prisoner's experience of impotence in the Maoist period. Since then, such portrayals have proliferated. In movies such as *Furongzhen*, *Qiuju daguansi*, and *Ermo* and in novels such as *The Rabbit in the Grassy Ground of de Gaulle International Airport*, *The Defunct Capital*, and *Shanghai Baby*, impotence is evoked as a symbol not only of damaged masculine capacity but also of the crises experienced by different groups of people during the post-Mao reform, indexing the shifting social context in which impotence has occurred.

A third line of evidence is the marked increase in sexual joking, or *kouyin xianxiang* (the phenomenon of the lustful mouth, i.e., intensely erotic conversations). The sharing of erotic jokes has in recent years become a veritable fad thanks to cell phone text messaging. The joking often focuses on impotence. For example, one private entrepreneur joked, "Xianzai shi wanshang ying bushui, zaoshang ying buqi" (Nowadays, men just do not want to go to bed in the evening and have difficulty getting up in the morning). "Getting