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Studies on Women's Sexuality in China since 1980: A Critical Review

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Over the last 20 years, women's sexuality has become one of the most written about and intensely debated subjects in sexology, sociology, and women's studies in mainland China. From these studies, one can trace the development of academic discourse on women's sexuality through three distinct phases: from a predominantly medical discourse, to the use of survey methods to investigate women's real experiences, and finally to a phase in which Western theories have become increasingly influential. Each phase features a distinct stereotype of woman. The implications of this review for sexual research in China will also be discussed.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, women's sexuality has become one of the most written about and intensely debated subjects in sexology, sociology, and women's studies in mainland China. However, there have been relatively few academic studies on the subject, and these studies have been, until recently, mostly medical in their orientation. This paper reviews the most important of these studies, which are vastly different in their perspectives on women's sexuality, their methodological approaches used to gather data, and their construction of the images of women. The goals of this meta-analysis are to trace the process of development of a generative typology, which started with certain gender stereotypes that were later questioned, revised, supplemented, or displaced by competing typologies and classifications. Various academic disciplines (e.g., medicine, social sciences, humanities, and law) have introduced complementary and yet competing discourses on sex. This analysis shows how sexuality has been constructed and developed in academic discourse in China, assesses the contribution of the reports and papers reviewed, and addresses key issues concerning research on women and sexuality in China.

Methodology

This review of sexuality studies in China is presented in two parts. In the first section, the researchers use a content analysis approach to examine the main databases of research published in China since 1980. In the second part, the works of prominent scholars are critically reviewed for their analyses of female sexuality.

Four key Chinese databases have served as the main sources of the first part of our research.

1. CJN (*China Journals Net*), which contains full-text articles from 5,000 reference journals and the titles of articles from 6,600 journals published in China since 1994.
2. RUC (*Renmin University of China Database*), the most comprehensive database for the subjects of social science and humanities in China. It contains all full-text articles from 3,500 journals since 1995 and the indexes of 2,300,000 articles published since 1979.
3. CDMD (*China Doctoral Dissertations & Master's Theses Full-text Databases*), which has a collection of 300,000 Master's and PhD dissertations submitted since 2000.
4. CPCD (*China Proceedings of Conferences Database*), which contains proceedings from national and international conferences and seminars on the latest research from academic associations, industrial organizations, governmental agencies, and international bodies in China.

Together, these four databases include virtually all the reference journals published in China. There are four main disciplines used in the construction of the databases:

1. Medicine/hygiene (MED)
2. Social Science/education (SOC)
3. Literature/history/philosophy (LIT)
4. Law/economics/politics (LAW)

Using a content analysis approach, the researchers searched the databases electronically, generating a lexicon of key terms and identifying frequently occurring

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key terms.¹ Using these key terms as search words, the researchers sorted out the articles by category, discipline and period, and were thus able to trace the development of different disciplines in the area of sex research. The works of prominent, influential scholars who have published frequently were then critically examined for their analysis of female sexuality.

Results

The total number of articles and the five most frequent key terms in each discipline are listed in Table 1 (see Table 1). It shows that the volume of articles on sex research greatly exceeds that of other categories or disciplines.

The researchers have chosen to track the developments in each discipline by comparing the number of articles on a 5-year basis from 1980 to 2000, and on a year-to-year basis from 1994 to 2004. The reason for using this method is that annual comparison is appropriate for more recent years, following the rapid proliferation of publications, but for earlier periods when there was a smaller volume of publications, it seemed sensible to look at five-year periods. We used 1981 as the starting point of the comparison because there were no articles on sex in the RUC before that year.

Table 2 reflects identified developments in sex research outside the medical area, with social sciences and education dominating the sexual research field (see Table 2).

Table 3 depicts the trends of sex research in China over the past 10 years (see Table 3)

Figure 1 indicates that there has been a progressive increase in the number of academic publications on sex and sexuality in China over the last twenty years, and that such publications were rare before the mid-1980s (see Appendix, Figure 1). Medical articles were the first to be published and they have continued to represent the majority of publications over the last two decades. There is, nonetheless, a new phase characterized by increased input from the social sciences and humanities, which begins in the 1990s. It seems that growth has been uneven across these disciplines.

¹It should be noted that Chinese characters have special meanings and connotations which are different from their equivalents in English. "Xing" usually means "sex" in Chinese, but when the researchers used it as the search word to search the databases, not all the results were related to sexual issues. That is because the character "xing" has other meanings as well (for example, it means "quality" in some contexts), so the researchers have had to use other key terms related to sex as search words. The way to identify the key terms has been to 1) use "xing" as the search word to search the databases; 2) examine whether the titles of the articles are related to sexual issues; and 3) count the number of key terms in the articles related to sexual issues.

Table 1. *Number of Articles and Key Terms Related to Sex (Retrieved by CJN, RUC, CDMD, and CPCD)*

Database	Number of articles	Top 5 key terms
MED	6277	AIDS, STDs, sexual dysfunction, sexual precocity, sexual behavior
SOC	1626	Sexual education, AIDS, sexual psychology, gender, sexual knowledge
LIT	788	Sexuality, sexual psychology, sexual culture, AIDS, sexual description
LAW	498	Rape, AIDS, prostitution, sexual crime, sexual harassment

Articles retrieved by RUC published after 1994 have not been included because most of them are covered by CJN. For practical reasons, the researchers have chosen to identify the first 5 key terms in each discipline instead of the first 5 key terms in all articles. The researchers have not created these key terms but have picked them from the databases.

The kind of crude quantitative data presented above gives a general picture of the trends in the number of studies in different disciplines. Looking more closely at the content and stance of the publications on sex and sexuality published in the last 20 years, a number of developmental stages can be identified. The first or early stage of academic publication on sexuality (1980–1985) was characterized by medicalisation, privileged as an objective, scientific, and therefore politically "uncontroversial" discourse, which was tolerated by the authorities in the eighties when political stability was of critical significance. These medical publications continued to be cherished under a dominant discourse valuing whatever was seen as "scientific" and "modern." The introduction of social sciences and humanities theories and research marked another stage of development (1986–1995), during which sexuality was framed as a social or human phenomenon, not only a medical or biological fact. The involvement of the social sciences and humanities contributed to the development of a multi-disciplinary domain of study, sometimes labeled sexology, representing another stage (1996–2003) of development. This stage witnessed an increase in the number of academic disciplines involved (e.g., sociology, history, law, etc.) as well as the number of perspectives (e.g., feminism and the idea of original indigenous voices). Whereas medical and social science articulations in the first two stages were often presented in an authoritative voice, in the third stage there was a shift towards pluralistic articulations, critical engagement and contestation. It should be noted that the stages do

Table 2. *Number of Articles on Sex from 1981–2000 (Retrieved by RUC)*

	1981–1985	1986–1990	1991–1995	1996–2000	Total
SOC	6	22	28	49	105
LIT	6	17	19	13	55
LAW	1	11	4	5	21
Total	13	50	51	67	181

Table 3. Number of Articles from 1994–2004 (Retrieved by CAJ)

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004.1–4
MED	295	300	404	341	408	506	597	680	772	891	220
SOC	44	51	67	65	83	131	137	185	219	219	62
LIT	29	30	22	27	47	63	46	73	75	88	23
LAW	43	31	41	27	29	38	80	54	65	94	34

Articles for 2004 are included up to April 2004 only.

not mark discrete periods of historical development, but only indicate the time of introduction of additional types of discursive voices to the field.

These very general observations suggest that there has been a shift of emphasis over the past thirty years, from a very narrow focus on the medical aspects of sexuality towards a more broadly based discourse, to which scholars from non-medical disciplines have contributed more frequently. This shift is discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Discussions

Stage I: The Medicalization of Sex

During the Cultural Revolution, which lasted for 10 years and ended with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, any suggestion of sex in fiction, poetry or drama was enough to have “the offending work removed from circulation and its author punished” (Evans, 1997, p. 7). Even when associated with “a critique of feudal forms of exploitation,” sex could not be mentioned in public (Evans, 1997, p. 7). After the Cultural Revolution, there was a revival of publications on sex. Some scholars, especially members of the medical profession, began to publish translated books or edited texts from Western studies on sex-related issues.

With the introduction of China’s economic reform and the “Open Door” Policy of the 1980s, there came more dramatic social changes, including what appeared to be a liberalization of social and sexual mores (Pan, 1993; Zha & Geng, 1992). From the early 1980s, sex-related topics have no longer been a taboo. At that time the press began to feature debates on the pros and cons of sex education. Since the conservatives were concerned that “public exposition of sex-related

issues would encourage promiscuous behavior” (Honig & Hershatter, 1988, p. 53), these debates tended to rely on scientific sex knowledge and focus on sexual health rather than on issues related to sexual morals and pleasure. Experts, almost all from medical schools, thus appeared as authorized sex educators who could teach scientific sex knowledge to the masses and provide consultations on sexual problems so that people could improve their “sexual health”. Western works, such as the *Textbook of Sexual Medicine* coauthored by William H. Masters, Virginia E. Johnson, and Robert C. Kolodny (1979), were translated into Chinese (this particular work under the title *Sexual Medicine*), and were regarded as basic text books or the foundation works of sexual education in the 1980s (Ruan, 2001).

Hu Tingyi’s edited book *Sexual Knowledge*, published by Jiangxi Science and Technology Press, and Ruan Fangfu’s edited text entitled *Handbook of Sexual Knowledge*, published by Scientific and Technical Documents Publishing House, appeared in 1985. These publications broke China’s former implicit ban on sex-related topics in academia and had a great impact on society in general. Though these publications were not empirical studies of women’s sexuality, they contained imported sexual knowledge based on Western medical science, and triggered a series of local research studies and publications on the topic of sex and related issues, such as Ruan Fangfu’s column *On Sexual Education*, published in *Required Readings for Parents* magazine in 1985, and Liu Dalin’s *Sociology of Sex*, published by Shandong People’s Publishing House in 1988. At about the same time, several sexology institutes and academic societies such as Shanghai Institute of Sex Education, Shanghai Center for Sociology of Sex Studies, and Guangdong Institute of Planned Parenthood and Sex Education were formed.

At this stage, empirical studies focusing on sex were still lacking, making writings by the medical professionals the dominant ones in the area of sex research, and these established the de facto framework for the discussion of sex-related issues and have dominated it until today (e.g., Huang, 1996; Rong, 2000). Within this theoretical framework, men were the predominant subjects, while women were practically non-existent. When women were not totally ignored in these writings, they constituted a passive element in the predication of human sexuality, as discussed below.

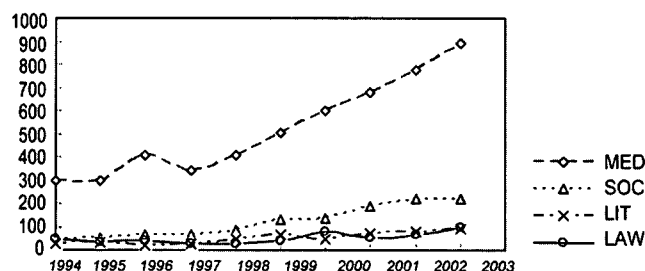


Figure 1. Trends in sex research areas 1994–2003.

Portraits of Women

(1) As Passive Sexual Partners or "Normal Wives"

In the academic discourses of this stage, women often appeared as either passive sexual partners or "normal" wives. This is perhaps unsurprising given the medical background of the major authors such as Wu Jieping, Ruang Fangfu, and Ma Xiaonian. These authors were given relative freedom to promote "sex knowledge" in China because (1) youth needed sexual education before they got married and (2) sexual problems needed to be solved, especially those of married couples (Ye, 1985). As a result, most sexual discourse at that time in China was distinguished by the marital context and problem-solving orientation. This kind of analysis gives rise to certain stereotypes of men and women: men are fast and women are slow in their sexual arousal; men almost always initiate sexual activities while women are on the receiving end of these initiatives; men easily obtain sexual pleasure while women have a more difficult time (Ruan, 1985). These stereotypes, framed according to medical-science premises, result in the construction of women as passive sexual partners. It is interesting to note that there are numerous texts which focus on methods of identifying and handling a wife's "sexual coldness" and arousing a wife's "sexual desire" (Ruan, 1985). Women are "sexually passive" because they are anatomically different from men (Cheng, 1988). Such an interpretation was not only popular but widely accepted.

This type of characterization can still be found in numerous contemporary studies. For example, Dai and his colleagues (1996) found that 73.33% of female undergraduate students, compared to 26.46% of male undergraduate students, did not need "sexual satisfaction". They went on to conclude that male students' sexual needs were much stronger than those of female students (Dai & Zhou, 1996). That the female students might have been reluctant to speak out on their needs for sexual satisfaction was a possibility the researchers did not admit to. In a similar vein, Hu and his colleagues found that about 25% of married women, from a sample size of 4,700, suffered from "sexual coldness" (Hu & Zhang, 1994); Cao emphasized the differences between male and female undergraduates in sexual psychology. Males, for example, are active while females are passive in sexual expression; males are enthusiastic and bold while females are reserved and timid (Cao, 2001). Ma (2000) gave many reasons for the "negative" feelings women experienced after making love; yet he failed to look closely at the particular situations that might have caused them.

(2) As the Embodiment of Innocence and Emotionalism

Another recurring theme of the academic discourse on sexuality of this period is the "innocence" of women:

women emphasize "love" more than "sex" and are not as open in their sexual attitudes as men. Echoes of this theme can still be found in contemporary studies: Sun thinks that "compared with males, the emotions of females in their puberty are weaker and more tender." (Sun, 1996); Luo declares that "women's dissatisfaction with men is not due to men's inability to satisfy them physiologically but spiritually. Apparently, women care more for their emotional satisfaction and romantic love than for their sexual satisfaction" (Luo, 1995). Wang thinks "emotional weakness" is one of the primary reasons for women's entry into the sex trade (Wang, 1998). In short, it is assumed that women are more emotion-oriented while men are more sex-oriented. Very often, these "women-specific" emotions were viewed as problems that needed to be solved, rather than presented as issues worthy of discussion and further understanding. Despite the apparent differences in how men and women experience and express their sexuality, women's emphasis on emotion is given a greater moral value, implying that sex is a basic need or drive while emotion is a need of a higher order. Accordingly, women are thought to be more capable of making the "correct" sexual choices than men because of their capacity for self-control.

In the early stage of sex research, medicine was used to give sex research more credibility and a scientific aura. However, portrayed as a passive object of male sexual desire and more emotional than men, the female and her sexuality become subjugated to and defined by a hegemonic male sexuality. Under the heavy influence of this medical orientation, even the most recent sex-related research supports a popular view of normative heterosexuality based on distinct biological differences between men and women (Huang & Xu, 1998; Luo, 1995; Ma, 2000). Despite the increase in both the quantity and diversity of sex-related research, women's sexuality is seldom examined as a gender-based issue embedded within the power relations between women and men.

Stage II: Sexology as Social Science

Since the late 1980s, sex and related issues have become research topics outside the medical school. In social science, and especially in sociology, sexual attitudes, sexual behaviors, sexual choices, sexual satisfaction, sexual morals, and sexual culture have all become increasingly common topics of research. Studies from sociology schools have added new perspectives to the field, especially with the advent of surveys using pre-designed questionnaires.

In 1989, Liu Dalin and his colleagues conducted the first-ever nationwide survey of the sexual attitudes of Chinese people. The results were published in 1992 in *Sexual behaviour in modern China: a report of the*

nation-wide "sex civilization" survey on 20,000 subjects in China (Liu & Ng, 1992). The work was regarded as a "Chinese Kinsey Report" by *Time* magazine; and established Liu as one of the few experts on sex in China. In a way, this study has also helped promote the popularity of scientific surveys and quantitative research on sex-related issues in China. It challenges the stereotype of women as passive sexual partners by addressing their sexual rights, especially in marital relationships, pointing out that "women have little right of self-determination in connubial sex life and are sometimes even forced to engage in sex by their husbands; this is an important indicator that they are losing the battle in sexual struggle and is one of the most essential reasons for the dearth of sexual feelings in women" (p. 213).

Sociology as a social science discipline was banned in China in 1953 because it was claimed that it was unnecessary, since a socialist society has no social problems. The rebuilding of sociology departments in the early 1980s is often understood to mean that many social problems emerged as a consequence of economic reform (Zheng, 2005) and as demonstrating the government's willingness to do something about them. Sex research under sociology and other social sciences and humanities has become more important because of the growth of sex problems such as pre-marital sex, divorce, and prostitution. Social scientists began to use "scientific" methods to legitimize the status of their findings. Survey methods, imported from Western sociology, were the best available tools to get to know what people thought and what they did in a "scientific" way. The government found it useful to know more about people's behaviors and views in order to help solve social problems. As Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977), social science knowledge is important for the management of the population.

Nevertheless, with the development of sexual medicine in recent decades and the increase in interdisciplinary communication, more researchers from the medical schools (Guo & Ng, 1999) seem to be aware of the need to depart from the operative negative stereotypes of women (and men). In their research on the sexual satisfaction of married couples in Shanghai, Guo and Ng talked about the diversity of sexual satisfaction of women as wives and placed the emphasis on the social dimensions of women's feelings (Guo, Ng, & Chan, 2004). Still, some researchers were keen to create categorizations (e.g., normal and abnormal) and tended to overlook how those categories and standards of normality are formed. For example, they labeled certain groups "deviant" and suggested ways of "treating" their ailments (Wang & Zhang, 1994; Yao & Wang, 2000).

Accompanying these changes was the emergence of new research subjects, such as married persons, college students and adolescents. The issues faced by these individuals, however, were still framed as social problems—extramarital behaviors, premarital behaviors, and

prostitution were viewed as problematic sexual behaviors that warranted concern and study. What was new in this alternative focus was that women were finally being treated as subjects in their own right.

Following the studies by Liu Dalin and Pan Suiming, the interest of social science in sexological research began to gather momentum. At the same time, their studies began to gain media attention. Indeed, both Liu and Pan have come to position themselves as "sexologists", and both have made a considerable contribution to the foundation and development of sexology in Mainland China.

Portraits of Women

(1) As Members of a Monolithic Group

During this period, women were regarded in the sociological surveys as a monolithic group despite the differences in their demographic characteristics such as age, education and marital status. It should be noted that most of these surveys were targeted at college students or married women (Liang, 1998; Pan, 1996; Pan & Zeng, 2000; Xu, 1997; Zhu, 2000) whose diversities were seldom attended to. Women within each category were often described as making similar choices on issues concerning premarital sex, abortion, and sexual practices. This assumption was largely a result of generalizing from the findings of restrictive studies. Women were portrayed as having similar sexual attitudes and experiencing similar levels of sexual satisfaction, both vastly different from those of their male counterparts.

(2) As Problems and Cases

Women, whether prostitutes, criminals (Feng, 1995; He, 1994; Wang & Zhang, 1994; Zhang & Yang, 1993), divorcees (Xu, 1987, 1994), pregnant but unwed mothers (Hu, 1992), or "old mistresses" (i.e., those who were past the legal age for marriage but were still unmarried) (Yu, 1985; Zhang, 1989), were chosen by researchers who took it for granted that they had sexual "problems." It was feared that, if unresolved, these problems could become social problems. Not content with seeing these women as "problem women", some researchers even tried to discover common biological characteristics among them (Wang & Zhang, 1994; Zhang & Yang, 1993).

As we have seen, the survey method was a scientifically viable tool used by social scientists to counter the dominant voice of the medical profession. However, researchers did not pay enough attention to the actual life experiences of the people involved, and they failed to examine what these people actually do to make meaningful sense of their own behaviors. It is also worth noting that though some of the researchers claimed to

have adopted scientific research methods, their studies often lacked theoretical rigor, especially when compared with later studies. For example, most of the studies in the 1980s were done at a descriptive level without a rigorous and multidimensional understanding of complex underlying issues. Therefore, while they resisted the prevailing dominant medical approach, they nonetheless reinforced the existing gender stereotypes in their own arguments.

Stage III: Contemporary Theory-Driven Exploration

After the resurgence of sociology and women's studies in the late 1980s in many universities and institutes, women and their sexualities became one of the most important themes in sex-related research. Though medical publications continued to dominate numerically, researchers from other disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, philosophy, arts, literature, history, law, education, economics, and communication studies, began to participate in the discussion of sex-related topics. Some research studies, particularly those in the sociology or women's studies disciplines, had a particularly strong impact on women's sexuality research (e.g., Liu & Ng, 1992; Pan, 1999, 2000; Li, X. J. 1997; Li, Y. H., 1998).

Women's studies grew rapidly in the 1990s, peaking with the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing. During this time, an increasing number of female researchers turned to Western feminism for conceptual frameworks in their analyses of gender (Jin, 2000; Li, 1998; Li, 1989, 1997, 1998; Li, 1997; Liu, 1996, 1999, 2001; Wang, 2001), especially immediately after the FWCW.

With the Chinese economy booming and increased communication with the world, such as through joining the WTO and the ongoing preparations for the Olympics (to be held in Beijing in 2008), China's international view and sense of place within the world community were being redefined. One example from the academy is the influence of western scholarly ideas such as feminism, which became well known as female Chinese scholars pursued links with overseas universities. Some scholars who were familiar with such theories, such as Du Fangqin and Jin Yihong, held that gender is a powerful tool for framing discussions of women's and sex issues, though not all of them supported their ideas with empirical research. Most female researchers who had close academic and personal relationships with western feminists had joint projects with them, translating their works into Chinese, visiting western universities and having exchange programs with them. Scholars like Li Yinhe were educated outside China and, on their return, did pioneering studies on women and their sexual experiences using case interviews and other qualitative methods.

In short, the forces of the market economy, consumerism, urbanization, migration, education, employment, openness to the outside world and the explosion of the internet all contributed to the proliferation of sex discourses in contemporary China.

Portraits of Women

1) As Modern Women with Modern Femininities

In the 1980s, in order to deconstruct the Maoist political discourse which had dominated China's political, social and intellectual life for much of the 1960s and early 1970s and which had measured and judged women largely according to men's standards, prominent Chinese scholar Li Xiaojang and other Chinese intellectuals advocated the studying of "sex differences based on biology and psychology" (Li, 1989). This created an essentialism of femininity through biology and science.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the commercial world found femininity, broadly defined, to be a good commodity. With the development of the market economy, the Chinese media saw an explosion of images of so-called "modern femininity" (Li, Zhu, & Dong, 1994, 1997; Li, Zhu, & Dong, 2000; Wang, 2002). With the increasing power of the mass media, modern femininity became rapidly commoditized.

This commodification had already begun to overshadow the previous Maoist discourse in the 1990s. Though this new portrayal of women continued to retain male centrism at its very core, it alerted many Chinese women scholars to the need for a new conceptual framework to counter the prevailing concept of femininity, and to transcend the limits of the Maoist discourse on women. Thus, during this period of the 1990s, a shift in the "power to define," from the state to the market, became evident (although the precise mechanisms of this shift are beyond the scope of this article).

2) As Victims of Abuse

As gender issues became the focus in women studies, women's life experiences, such as divorce, marriage, and employment, became questions of increasing concern (Jiang, 1999; Wang, 2000a, 2000b). Nevertheless, women's sexual experience *per se* remained a sensitive topic (Rong, 2000). It is only in the context of discussions of topics such as rape, domestic violence, and prostitution that women's voices could legitimately be heard. Therefore, research that claims to focus on (all) women's sexuality was actually carried out on certain groups, such as rape survivors and victims of sexual violence or sexual harassment (Cai, 1995; Cao, 2001; Jiang, 1999; Pu, 2002; Rong, 1996; Tang, 1995; Xu & Liu, 1996). Women were constantly cast in the "victimized" role in studies of their sexual experiences,

and they continued to be marginalized as researchers tended to focus on the negative social, economical, physical, and psychological impact of sex on them.

Such studies, however, served to reinforce the perception that women are weak and lack control of their own lives, bodies and sexuality. As a result, female stereotypes remained firmly rooted and constructed in a male-centered culture, and their self-initiated choices ignored, their resistance interpreted as a challenge to the predominant values in culture and society. Women's pleasure, desire and autonomy, topics central to contemporary feminist discourse, were still searching vainly for their language of expression.

3) As Asexual Beings Who Lack Enthusiasm for Sex

Women's lack of enthusiasm for sex and the lack of sexual expression (Li & Wang, 1999; Song & Cheng, 2002; Zhu, 2000) are implied in a lot of research on women's sexuality. Within sexological discourse, women were required not merely to submit to the sexual desires of their husbands but to be sexually responsive within a phallogentric heterosexuality. This stereotype of female "frigidity" further deprived women of their sexual choices. There is thus no emancipatory discourse of female heterosexual desire, and women have no language of their own with which they can express an active, desiring and powerful sexual subjectivity.

4) As Women Who Can Talk about Their Sexual Experiences and Create Sexual Knowledge

One of the few studies to focus on women's sexual experiences in contemporary China, Li Yinhe's pioneering work has gained a lot of attention from academia as well as society at large. Li conducted case interviews and recordings as primary data, and analyzed the data using content analysis (Li, 1998). By allowing her interviewees to express themselves in their own language, Li Yinhe painted a vivid picture of women's sexual experiences, such as menstruation in early girlhood, masturbation, premarital cohabitation and trial marriages, induced abortions, post-marital contraception and birth, and sexual life beyond the female menopause, and also traced the difficulties in sexual learning, perplexities, feelings, harassments, and violence experienced during women's lives.

However, while Li suggests that her interviewees' attitudes to sex and their behavior were determined by Chinese culture, she did not examine the political, social, and historical contexts that might be equally relevant. Li observed that the attitudes of her interviewees to sex changed according to their age, but she did not account for the possible connections between these changes and the social upheavals that plagued China during the second half of the century, during which time these women were growing up. Therefore, there remains much

more to be done to encourage the sharing of sexual experiences.

Fang (2005)'s *The Investigation of Chinese with Multiple Sex Partners* is a qualitative research that explores men's and women's multiple sexual relationships in contemporary China. In interpreting these people's life experiences of multiple sexual relationships, Fang argues that social control from the *danwei* (work unit), family of origin and neighborhood has loosened up in the current Chinese market-oriented society and so there is now more space for women to articulate alternative sexual practices and intimacies. Although he notices how men like to boast the number of their sexual partners in order to present themselves as "romantic," "intellectual," and "successful" (p. 28), he has not explored in depth women's situation from a gender perspective.

5) As Women Who Can Use Sex to Gain Power

Pan Suiming, a professor at the Institute of Sexuality and Gender of Renmin University of China, Beijing, conducted numerous interviews, questionnaire surveys and observations on sexual attitudes and sexual behaviors in China. In his later works, his attention shifted to commercial sex and the ordinary lives of female prostitutes (Pan, 1999, 2000). With abundant data obtained from in-depth-interviews, long-term observations and community research, he analyzed the many aspects of these women's lives, including their backgrounds, reasons for entering the sex industry, their everyday experiences, economic situations, loves, emotions, and expectations of the future. By analyzing the stakeholders, he draws a very vivid and comprehensive picture of women in the sex industry. Unlike his predecessors, he does not regard his research subjects as a special group, but emphasizes that prostitutes are autonomous persons, despite their low social status. This makes his research one of the most creative and valuable studies of female sex workers in China. However, the absence of gender analysis in his study might have prevented Pan from further elaborating on the autonomy of these women.

6) As Subjects and Agents of "Chinese Sexuality"

Recently, some overseas Chinese researchers and Western scholars have expressed concern over the application of Western theories to Chinese culture by questioning the "cultural literacy model" first proposed by Dyche & Zayas in 1995 (Dyche & Zayas, 1995; Farquhar, 2002; Ho, 1995; Ho & Tsang, 2005; Ho & Tsang, in press; Ho, Wong, Cheng, & Pei, 2005; Tsang, 2001; Tsang, Irving, Alaggia, Chau, & Benjamin, 2003). They argue that in the context of Chinese society, Western theories about Chinese culture and the latter's relationship with behavior may be very much dominated by a cultural literacy approach which assumes that most

Chinese people think, feel, and act in typically Western ways. Farquhar (2002) cautions us against such "cultural imperialism" and the possible danger of adopting Western theories without attending to local cultural contexts (p. 232).

Some Chinese researchers, such as Pan Suiming and Liu Dalin, tried to explore "Chinese" sexuality without adopting theories from the West. For example, Liu Dalin (Liu, 1993, 2000) showed his interest in traditional Chinese sexuality through the re-evaluation of Chinese traditional sexual philosophy. However, his book *Sexual culture in ancient China* has been criticized as being "rich in sources but limited in analytical contributions" (Guo, 1996). While Liu attempts to provide some historical contextualization for each of the so-called stages in the development of Chinese sexual attitudes and practices, he fails to take into consideration the different viewpoints rooted in the sexual cultures of different dynasties. He may also have overemphasized the significance of economic factors in determining the evolution of sexual culture. His is a study of the sexual life of the elites, not the sexual life of the ordinary people. As Guo rightly points out, one of the major oversights of the book is its lack of concern with the history of the Chinese family.

While insisting that concepts such as "yin" and "yang" have deep roots in the history of Chinese culture and society, both Liu and Pan over-simplified these concepts. Worse still, their understanding of sexual differences as being biologically determined reinforces the conception of gender as a distinctive, biologically predetermined category. They fail to lay bare the socio-political forces underlying the construction of gender differences.

From this short summary of important studies, it appears that there are still limitations in Chinese scholarly work on women's sexuality. However, one should not be too critical or dismissive of the studies described above, particularly considering the socio-political context of an emerging China from which they have sprung and the strong hold which the government still holds over many forms of public and academic discourse. The studies should be recognized as contributing to a process of development which bears strong similarities to that which took place in the West, albeit at an earlier time (see below).

Summary and Conclusion

The above analysis provides an overview of recent development in the academic study of women's sexuality in China. A number of substantive issues (e.g., gender stereotypes, women's sexual roles) have been examined in order to elucidate the discursive forces that shape the production of knowledge in these areas. Taken together, the efforts of the researchers in China have helped re-center women in the public discourse and put gender back on the agenda of academic discourse, especially in recent years. In these studies, we see an

increased awareness and recognition of the role that the process of social construction plays in women's lives. In the public discourse on women, there is also a proliferation of new categories related to capitalism, its ensuing notions of consumerism and materialism, and the connection of these latter with the generation of new categories of sexual deviance. Further studies in the area are obviously needed.

However, this essay has reviewed only the relevant studies conducted in mainland China. A large amount of work has been done on the same topic in other Chinese communities, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, and by overseas Chinese groups. A review of these studies, especially in comparison with those from the mainland, should shed more light on the positions of Chinese women in different settings.

Finally, there seem to be some striking developmental parallels between sexuality studies China and the West, although these have occurred a century apart. Beyond the apparent parallels, there are subtle nuances and unique local realities (e.g., the Cultural Revolution, the influence of Maoist thinking and subsequent Chinese socialist agenda, one-child policy, etc.). There is therefore scope for more in-depth comparative studies which might shed light on the influences of Western ideas on China's sexual discourse and, more broadly, on discourses surrounding its social development. However, we believe that comparative analysis should avoid uncritically superimposing Western theories on Chinese realities, and should resist the temptation to "exoticize the Orient." What might be helpful is ongoing attention to the processes of social construction within academic discourse.

Given its relative short history, academic research on sexuality in China is still in the process of finding its theoretical anchorage and is still negotiating with multiple methodological orientations. The move beyond survey methods to more in-depth narrative explorations, for instance, can be seen as one of these attempts. In addition, critical engagement with established knowledge claims has not been supported by an intellectual tradition of theory building and debate similar to that in the West. What is encouraging, nonetheless, is the increasing number of academics involved in research, and the corresponding production of indigenous articulations, often involving non-academic participants. Such developments, and their wash-back effect on academic women's studies, will no doubt continue, as China continues to negotiate its place in the world.

Implications for Sexual Research and Sexual Health in China

The above review has implications for the future of sexual and sexual health research in China. First, it demonstrates that women today in China do not invariably see themselves as good wives; asexual beings and/or

victims of abuse. Many of them, for example, identify with the so-called "beautiful women writers" like Wei Hui and Mian Mian, who are both feminine and successful, or with the "super girl" who is charming but androgynous (Shi, 2003; Pei & Ho, 2006; Zhou, 2005). The construction and deconstruction of these female icons, who embody the dramatic social and cultural changes which have taken and are taking place in China, will shed light on the changing lives of women in its fast-developing cities. As mentioned above, special attention should be given to how these women have managed to trespass the boundaries of proper womanhood by fashioning their images as (1) modern women with modern femininities, (2) women who can talk about their sexual experiences and create sexual knowledge, (3) women who can use sex to gain power, and (4) subjects and agents of "Chinese sexuality." The blurring of the boundary between "good girls" and "bad girls" should be noted.

In today's China, women's lives are changing and there are new dimensions to note if we are to understand their sexuality and desire (Ho & Tsang, 2005). This should include the behaviors, attitudes and practices of women regarding gender and sex, and their choices of sexual orientation, identity and alternative forms of intimacies. It is important to examine the diversified ways in which women deal with their relationships with their bodies, especially with regard to how they perform their gender in public space and use their bodies instrumentally to accumulate social and sexual capital for personal advancement and the re-claiming of public space (Michael, 2004). There are also different ways women pursue pleasure and leisure in the context of the growing affluence of China. We should look at how women create new syntheses of identity and strategies of being by making use of the personal and cultural resources available to them to fulfill their needs and aspirations.

Finally, this review also has implications for the future of sexual health research in China. There is a need to broaden the definition of the concept of health from the physical, psychological and social (WHO, 1947) to encompass other dimensions such as the spiritual and the political (Tsang, 2002). Women's sexual health and well-being include a diverse range of issues related to women's identity, agency, public life, goal attainment, meaning construction, political participation, and relationships with themselves, their families and community, as well as their existential, aesthetic and spiritual pursuits.

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