

Sex and The State: The Impact of State Policy on Sexual Expression in China

The ideologies of powerful entities such as state and national governments, media, or industry infiltrate public consciousness and alter cultures, often unbeknownst to the population. As the will of these dominant forces are articulated, these notions become internalized and further perpetuated by the population. China has seen significant cultural and political changes over the past century. These are largely the result of differing responses by the population to state-implemented policies, particularly regarding matters of sex and sexuality. Within the past forty years, sexuality has become far more acceptable in China when compared to the sexually-repressive Cultural Revolution prior. Many refer to this shift as a “sexual revolution”: Chinese couples are affectionate in public spaces, sex shops are prevalent in Chinese cities, prostitution is tolerated, sex and sexual pleasure have entered public discourse, and contraceptive use is widely accepted, and even enforced through the One-Child Policy. This cultural shift is due, in part, to the state’s relaxed response to matters of sex and sexuality in the post-Mao era. In contrast, the Cultural Revolution (1966 — 1976) was a time of strict sexual repression, and the state, led by Mao Zedong, made efforts both explicitly and implicitly to construct a largely asexual nation. Political attitudes during Mao’s China, as opposed to post-Mao China, shaped notions of sexuality in the Chinese populace during these periods. These responses are illustrated most clearly by the state’s responses to vocabulary used to describe romantic love, the popularity of erotic texts, and population control during these periods. The ideological shift in the political administration from repressive socialism to tolerant free-market economy highlights the causal relationship between governance, economy and the sexual revolution.

AIQING: ROMANCE OR REVOLUTION?

A clear example of the ways in which China's economic and nationalistic ethos of the time changed Chinese understandings of love and sexuality is the disappearance of the term *aiqing* (romantic love) during the Cultural Revolution, and its resurgence in the post-Mao era. As Everett Yuehong Zhang notes in Chapter Three of *Deep China: The Moral Life of The Person* compiled Arthur Klienman, prior to the Cultural Revolution, the phrase *aiqing* referred exclusively to romantic love. By the time the Cultural Revolution was in full effect in China, however, *aiqing* had disappeared altogether from the public vernacular (59). What took its place during the Maoist era was the word *ai* (love). This word, however, did not refer to romantic love, but was "modified by terms such as *revolutionary* in order to stress the proper link between passion and collectivism in the Communist ethos... *Ai* more often referred to one's dedication to the Party, socialism, and, ultimately, Chairman Mao" (59). During the Cultural Revolution, the central government defined love as collective enthusiasm for the state. This created a paradigm where expressions of love and desire for the purpose of self-fulfillment were framed as selfish, and even anarchistic. Hence, the sole justification of sex was for reproduction, and of course, it was only acceptable for married heterosexual couples to reproduce (58). By changing the meaning of *ai*, the state effectively changed how love was understood and practiced on the national scale as well as on the individual scale.

Although the expression of affection or "romantic love" was never explicitly outlawed by the central government, such displays in socialist China were considered bourgeois and ran counter to the goals of the Party. In "Socialist Sex: The Cultural Revolution Revisited," Emily Honig notes that desexualization was implicitly enforced by "institutions such as the work unit system, which all social aspects of live were organized around" (153). Sexual expression—whether conveyed through terminology used, public displays of affection, sexual imagery, or

erotic text—endangered the foundation of the socialist country, and therefore required severe repression. There are harsh psychological consequences of this type desexualization. In *The Gender of Modernity*, Rita Felsky argues that “sexuality emerges as a fundamental marker of identity and a key to the truth of the self” (175). Using this logic, desexualization inhibits holistic self-expression. In being desexualized, the Chinese living under Mao’s regime were unable to form an authentic identity.

After the Cultural revolution, however, the phrase *aiqing* and its original connotations returned to public use. This resurgence was due to the shifting economic goals of China; the Cultural Revolution slowed Chinese economy to a trickle, and as a result, the central government wanted to re-invigorate the economy and make China a competitive world power by the 21st century. The introduction of the free market meant that lower and middle class Chinese could work to earn more and move up in class. The focus of the state and society shifted from class struggle to economic development, and with this shift came the rise of self-determinism: the actions of one’s self are now determined by themselves alone. When thought of in terms of sex, what was once viewed as only a means to increase the workforce and population became a source of pleasure for pleasure’s sake. Due to the free market, the Chinese now had the ability to more easily make money to support themselves and afford the things they desire, a type of economic self-affirmation. This view of self-affirmation similarly transferred to sexual pleasure, which was now perceived by the Chinese people as having its own “ontological value of affirming life” (Zhang 59). The slackening of the state’s ideological grip over sexuality, coupled with the introduction of the free market, created an environment where *aiqing* could flourish. The resurgence of the language of love allowed the Chinese to express their desires without shame and thus reaffirm their identity.

EROTIC TEXTS: FROM SHAME TO FAME

The state's reaction to the popularity of handwritten erotic texts during the Cultural Revolution affected Chinese understandings of sexuality by stigmatizing and reprimanding those who obtained such texts. In the mid 1970's, a handwritten and anonymously authored novel called *The Heart of a Young Girl* was clandestinely passed through middle schools, against the wishes of the Party. Because the novel contained explicit descriptions of sex, it represented danger to the socialist status quo. During the Mao era, notes Wendy Larson in "Never This Wild: Sexing the Cultural Revolution," "the image of the sexualized modern person... was virtually demolished" because it conflicted with the goals of the state (430). Investigations to learn who had read the novel were launched, and those found "guilty" were stigmatized by their peers and punished by authorities (Zhang 50). These punishments created a society where the expression of personal desire was criminalized. Thus, the Chinese were entrenched in a culture of shame, forced to repress any expression of "dangerous" desire.

This response by the state reified a culture of shame already present within East Asia, heightening it to new levels by creating tangible punishments for selfish or "bourgeoisie" behavior. "Shame culture...came to be regarded as a feature of Eastern civilization," Hu Ping writes in his book *The Thought Remolding Campaign of the Chinese Communist Party-State*. Ping argues that shame cultures are effective because they "rely on external sanctions for good behavior" (128). By punishing perceived "bad behavior," in this case, reading erotic texts, the state also enforces their behavioral ideals—someone who reserves their desire for fulfilling the goals of the Party. Thus, descriptions of sexual contact in *The Heart of a Young Girl* were in clear opposition to the desexualized ideals of the Cultural Revolution, so much so it was perceived as a political threat (Zhang 50). Desire was at the heart of the text, and the state was

concerned that the reader would be inspired to seek fulfillment of their own individual desires rather than work collectively toward the desires of the state. Thus, by criminalizing readers of *The Heart of a Young Girl*, the state repressed any burgeoning sexual desires, and reinforced an asexual society.

What is interesting, however, is that *The Heart of a Young Girl* served as more than simply an erotic escape for a repressed population. These types of clandestine novels were often the only form of sexual education available to the Chinese during the decade of the Cultural Revolution. The article “Sexual Revolution?” by Yuankai Tang points out that during this era “no mass media referred to sex, and people were deprived of access to sexual knowledge” (24). Men that grew up during the Maoist period “recalled learning about the physical exigencies of sexual intercourse by reading the illicit *The Heart of a Young Girl*” (Zhang 52). In the government’s strict ideology of collective struggle for the state, there was no room for individual pleasure, and this repression of pleasure was so severe that it left the population completely in the dark about their own bodies. The shame the state created in their response to the popularity of *The Heart of a Young Girl* required the Chinese to discipline both the outward expression of their desires, as well as hide their internal longings. This left the Chinese both externally and internally repressed; if a person publicly verbalized their desire, they were shamed by peers and faced humiliating punishment by the state, but by stifling natural sexual thoughts and desires, this shame became internalized, creating an inner sense of dishonor, regret, or even disgust.

In Post-Mao China, the central values of the state changed from “collective dedication to class struggle” to “private passion for financial profit,” and this shift in values is illustrated clearly in the state’s response to an extremely popular and sexually explicit Chinese blog. The blog, called *Forgotten Love Letters*, was written by Muzi Mei, a magazine staff writer in her

mid-twenties living in the city of Guangzhou in 2003. In *Forgotten Love Letters* Mei “describes in detail the bodily sensations she felt during her exploratory sexual experiences,” and at its height, the blog generated so much traffic that the website temporarily crashed (Zhang 51). Although the state still did not approve of such overt expressions of sexuality, and even banned the publication of her work in print media, it did not criminalize online production or consumption of Mei’s work. The reason for this lack of response sheds light on the changing values of the state after the Cultural Revolution. Many of Mei’s readers were part of a growing class of white collar professions with economic and political influence, and the state realized that creating laws that impeded on this group’s personal lifestyle choices and newfound freedoms would only lead to backlash. With the onset of free market reforms, “seeking sexual pleasure was no longer seen as an impediment to achieving success; rather it became fused with success as both means and end” (Zhang 50). Furthermore, Mei provided an alternative view of sexuality that was not available to the Chinese population during Mao’s era; sexual pleasure was not shameful or selfish, but a celebration of life (51). In the popularity of *Forgotten Love Letters*, we are able to see the ways in which sexuality was becoming an inseparable part of what living in post-Mao China looked like.

Just as *The Heart of a Young Girl* was a source of sexual education, the internet ushered in a new era of sex education for the Chinese, albeit an incomplete source. Ling Lu writes that “young people [in contemporary China] have easy access to sexual images, but insufficient knowledge about sexuality.” Erotic narratives like Mei’s, while an expression of sexual freedom, can become problematic when they are not supplemented with information about healthy sexual expression, consent, and basic sex education. Young people who consume erotic texts without the tools to understand them within a broader context receive a one-sided perspective of sex

framed solely in sexual release. This can lead to harmful misconceptions about sex and sexuality. Despite the freedoms that the sexual revolution in China have allowed, and the institutionalization of sex education in China's schools, there is still much work to be done. Lu notes, "at present, most schools in China aren't able to offer up-to-standard sex education," due to a lack of qualified teachers as well as a lingering discomfort of talking about sex and sexuality (22). China's teens seek the sex knowledge they are not receiving at home or in school on the internet, and "classmates who watch pornographic videos are [the youth in China's] greatest source for sex knowledge" (Lu 21). Although Chinese youth have access to more resources of sexual education, and are becoming more comfortable with sexuality, the resources available are inadequate. It is significant, however, that the younger generation of Chinese want to learn more about sexuality and feel comfortable expressing their curiosity, something that would not have been permitted in Mao's China. This comfort signifies the acceptance of once-taboo sexuality, and the waning of the shame culture that defined the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese are now able to express themselves holistically as sexual beings.

PROPAGANDA, POLICY, AND THE JUSTIFICATION OF SEX

During the 20th century, China had a turbulent history of population control. The policies implemented from the 1950s to 1970s have been catered to the needs of the state, but as the state's needs shifted, so too did both the propaganda implemented as well as the effect this propaganda had on the populace. In 1955, China's growing population began to take a toll on the nation's food supply (Fitzpatrick). In response, officials promoted birth control, but these efforts had little impact. Despite a dwindling food supply, during the Great Leap Forward in 1958, Mao's pressure to convert China into a modern industrialized state emphasized a larger population to support workforce growth. At a national conference of youth work representatives

in 1958, Hu Yaobang, the secretary of the Communist Youth League, proclaimed, "a larger population means greater manpower...the force of 600 million liberated people is tens of thousands of times stronger than a nuclear explosion" (Fitzpatrick). This sentiment is illustrated in the propaganda of the time.

A propaganda poster created during the Mao-era in 1959 (see figure 1) shows a smiling adolescent girl harvesting abundant vegetables. The slogan underneath reads "The vegetables are green, the cucumbers plumb, the yield is abundant." This image is significant because in it the reader can clearly see the message from Mao's regime: our bounty is plentiful, our children are happy, and a growing population will support our growing industries. Through these images, the government encouraged married couples to have sex in order to create more devoted socialists and a productive workforce that could fulfill the needs of the state. The doctrine of the Communist Party "enveloped sexual behavior and desire first within the context of statist goals, second in its reproductive aspect, and rarely or never as a necessary component of a modern life as a unique and revolutionary pleasure" (Larsen 430). Sex was not viewed as life-affirming or as a means of affection, but instead singularly framed as a biological means for an increased population. The illustrated propaganda of the time highlights that fact that the statist ideology which informed acceptable sexual practices was made explicit through visual means.



Fig 1. Meisheng, Jin. “Cailü Guafei Chanliang Duo: 'The Vegetables Are Green, the Cucumbers Plumb, the Yield Is Abundant.'” 1959. International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. *International Institute of Social History*, hdl.handle.net/10622/30051000761053?locatt=view:level3. Accessed 20 Nov. 2017.

The scenes depicted in these posters, however, contrast with the grim reality of the time. In China’s efforts to industrialize, many communities converted from farming to steel production, which resulted in the food supply falling behind population growth. This ultimately led to a famine from 1958-1961 that caused over 30 million people to starve. In the aftermath, a

major shift in governing ideology occurred. In 1970, the population exceeded 800 million, and China still struggled to provide for the population. Propaganda campaigns to limit population growth were implemented, and government officials popularized the slogan "Late, Long and Few" which encouraged couples to have one child, and urged them to have no more than two. This sentiment led to the implementation of the one-child policy (Fitzpatrick). Although the reliability of China's self-reported population statistics is in dispute, it does appear that the one-child policy did have the result the state intended. The one-child policy resulted in a reduction in China's fertility and birth rates after 1980, and the fertility rate dropped below two children per woman in the mid-1990s (Pletcher). In the span of a relatively short amount of time, the Chinese were subjected to two opposing messages from the state. Initially, they were encouraged to use their sexuality and nationalism to support the state by bearing children. Not long after, they were told to show their patriotism by limiting the number of children they had. In both instances, however, sex was framed as a biological imperative, and not a means to fulfill one's romantic or sexual desire.

What is especially interesting about state policy during this time is that the acceptance of sexuality grew as the one-child policy gained traction. In 1979, the Communist party declared that couples should have no more than one child, and a new marriage law mandated that couples were obliged to practice family planning, which limited each family to having only one child. These two policies are significant because they changed the framework of sex; now, the pursuit of sexual pleasure was permissible. The government mandated one child policy became a way for the Chinese to rationalize sexual desire through legal means. Although the state overtly discouraged sex for procreative purposes, embedded in this message was the more subtle suggestion that the state would tolerate non-procreative sex (Tang 24). The concrete evidence of

this tacit acceptance of non-procreative sex was the unprecedented availability of contraceptives. Condoms were distributed via vending machines put in neighborhoods and even on college campuses, creating visual markers that encouraged non-procreative sex. Again, we see the way in which state policies not only inform and shape behaviors but also how, when they are taken up by the individual, one can convey their patriotism by upholding those policies. During the Cultural Revolution, to bear children was the show your allegiance to Mao's view of China. After this period, one showed their citizenry by limiting the number of children they had. Zhang writes, "having more than one child became a violation of the law...doing otherwise was construed as a positive example of how responsible citizens should serve the interests of the nation in connection with the state-led effort to modernize" (60). Although the wills of the state are often conveyed in implicit ways, the one child policy affects Chinese culture, society, and the individual in tangible ways. As sexuality became more permissible via policy, it allowed the Chinese to understand and express their desires.

CONCLUSION

Human phenomena such as sexuality shape one's perception of themselves. While governing bodies are often viewed as benevolent structures, by inhibiting or even criminalizing such phenomena, they have the power to alter the beliefs and behaviors of their respective populations. The fact that states hold this power is not a matter of opinion but rather a undeniable truth, observable throughout history. This is especially evident in the China's contrasting responses to sexuality during the Cultural Revolution and during the post-Mao era. By examining the state's responses to vocabulary used to describe romantic love, the popularity of erotic texts, and population control, the causal relationship between governance, economy and the sexual revolution becomes clear. The state's shifting agenda allowed for freedom of sexual

expression among the Chinese and ultimately prompted the sexual revolution, which illustrates the fact that governing bodies can impact core elements of the population's identity.

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