

Sexuality Research and Sex Politics in 21st Century of Mainland China

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Introduction

The introduction, in 1978, of market-based economic reforms and the Open Door policy in the People's Republic of China (PRC) was accompanied by dramatic social transformations, including the fading of traditional beliefs and increasing exposure to 'Western cultures' through popular music, dance, and movies; a major increase in social mobility; and the popular use of internet and mobile phones – from the mid 1990's on-- coinciding with the implementation of policies such as the new marriage law and one child policy (Pan, 2008). Rooted in such local social changes, relationships among marriage, family, love, gender and sexuality – the elements that create people's primary life circles (Pan, 2006) – are becoming more complex and dynamic.

National survey data suggests that rapid changes are happening with respect to Chinese people's sexualities. In the decade between 2000 and 2010, for example, the prevalence of multiple sexual partnerships, extra-marital sex and casual sex increased significantly, and sexual identities, norms, and practices became more diverse among both men and women, young and old (Pan & Huang, 2013). The opening up of sexual culture in the past thirty years has also been demonstrated in several qualitative and cultural studies of urban China (Huang, 2008, 2018; Wei, 2015a; Pei, 2010; Farrer, 2002). Creative activities organized by LGBT (the English term is now widely introduced and locally used) groups, young feminists and sexuality educators who claim gender and sexual rights have also increased the social visibility of sexuality and gender issues. Hence, researchers argue that China is undergoing a 'sexual revolution' to define the rapid changes occurring at both the level of individual practices and in the wider realms of sexual culture, which contrast with the strong politicized and 'discursive silence' on sex and sexuality during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (Pan & Huang, 2011).

In response to these changes, debates surrounding sex and sexuality have exploded in public discourse in recent years. While some practices are becoming more socially tolerated than others (e.g., premarital sex),

others are more strictly regulated by the state (e.g. pornography, sex work), and a few are being advocated for (e.g. sexual health) or against (e.g. sexual violence) in the public policy arena. With the increasing visibility of sexuality and gender in public space, especially in new media -- such as blogs and WeChat -- the resistance to 'sexual liberation' has also emerged, manifested through the voices of local groups known as 'anti-sex aunties'. In parallel, the overall climate is traversed by waves of moral panic and the speech of state and non-state actors calling for moral governance and social harmony. (Huang, 2014, 2018)

In contrast to these rapid changes, sexuality research in academia is falling far behind. In a previous literature review, I have examined how sex and sexuality were addressed and research subjects between 1980 and 2007 and mainly argued that the biomedical, essentialist view on sex was still the dominant paradigm research. Besides, women were often seen as victims, as in prostitution or in the use of women's bodies in commercial advertisement. Since the 2000s, initiatives to morally control the sexuality of youth (especially college students) and promote the self-control of men (including men who have sex with men, MSM) have also emerged in reaction to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Already at that time, calls were made for the society to 'get back to tradition', to resist what was seen as the negative consequences of 'westernization'. I then concluded that an affirmative and gendered conceptual framework of sexuality is needed which is rooted in the Chinese context and that is against the background of a 'cultural flow' (Huang, 2012). This paper is based on this and other previous studies documenting sexuality research as a driver for change, but it also tries to capture both new changes, trends and tensions at work in society in relation to sexuality and continuities. It aims to enrich the knowledge on sexualities and sex politics by positioning the China case in the global context in the 21st century.

Frame and scope

Inspired by Plummer, the analyses that follow critically examine sexuality research as a form of sexual storytelling (Plummer, 1995). Within this frame publications and articles are not viewed as static products, but as reflecting the dynamic processes of knowledge production and of discursive practices on gender and sexuality in both academia and activism. This approach also takes into account historical, social and political factors at play in the context in which these stories are being told.

Millet (1970) underlined that ever since the scientific recognition of 'sex' in the 19th century, its political dimensions and meanings have been neglected. In the 1980's, Jeffrey Weeks (1981) crafted the concept of sexual encompassing the different layers of sex as politics in a variety of contexts. In respect to sexual politics

the paper encompasses three levels of analyses. The first level concerns the discursive and knowledge frames that are embedded in sexuality research. The second covers the dynamic intersections between sexuality research and political forces such as censorship and other state interventions such as anti-prostitution and anti-pornography measures, as well as other contextual dimensions as the economic environment (e.g. consumerism, funding flows), the Chinese state refutation of what it terms Western “ideology” and newly adopted regulations on international funding for research and civil society organizing. Connections and tensions between the local and the global, in particular the plurality and complexity of how ‘local’ and ‘global’ are manifested in discursive practices and knowledge production, comprise the third level. The analysis will also address the question of power imbalances and aspects relating to political strategies or tactics devised by actors involved in sexual politics.

Having these layers as the backdrop, the paper performs a brief literature review of key Chinese official publications (e.g. journals and books) as well as of relevant non-official research project reports and conference papers (from 2007 to 2016). It also scans what has been translated from Western and regional sources to document transnational and transcultural flows in knowledge production. Publications on Chinese sexualities in English have not been extensively included in the package because they are mostly “West oriented’ and already available to English speaking audiences. The exceptions are those works that have strongly influenced local scholars and activists.

Another key source of data used in the analysis comes from the observation of seminars and conferences, as privileged sites to grasp tendencies in knowledge production and understand the process through which sexuality becomes a socially legitimate topic. The Institute of Sexuality and Gender at the Renmin University (ISG) founded by Professor Pan Suiming (to which I am affiliated), is, since the early 1990’s, a key academic location for sexuality research. Since 2007, it has promoted biannual international conferences on sexualities in China and since 2009 annual sexuality workshops for Chinese participants. It is also engaged in nationwide research projects. Its platform encompasses researchers and activists mainly from mainland China, but also from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, the UK, the US and Australia. As a key sponsor of the activities promoted by the center⁵⁶ I had many privileged opportunities to observe and critically reflect on recent changes, trends and tensions in sexuality research and sexual politics. Observations on debates and processes at play in social media and the Internet more widely have also been included when necessary.

56 As a sponsor, I have reviewed abstracts, presentations and papers, but was also engaged with fund-raising (mostly from Ford Foundation) and have dealt with university politics as well as with obstacles created by state censorship.

Recognizing that it is impossible to comprehensively document in detail the vast universe of knowledge production on sexuality and to dig deeply into every corner of sexual politics, the scope of the is paper is limited to charting key changes and trends that allow for capturing signs of what is happening in the realms of Chinese sexualities in the 21st century. Departing from my previous review work of sexuality research in China for the 1980s-2007 period I will map what has happened until 2016 in terms of modalities of research, topics and research questions, theories and methodology. I will also look into the dynamics of publishing and funding (whenever data is available) and identify key actors who are producing, inhibiting or consuming sexual stories produced by research, including government agencies, university authorities, researchers of other areas, international and local NGOs, the commercial sector and the media. The intersections between politics, social norms and economics that are embedded in gender and sexuality politics as expressed in research and activism is also addressed.

2007-2016: Changes and continuities in research

Emerging gay and lesbian studies and its social-political forces

In the past ten years, sexology studies that use medical and behavioral approaches – which have prevailed in China since the early 20th century- are still numerous and tend to look into sexual and reproductive health (SRH), especially amongst young people. However, shifts can also be identified in research trends. The most significant is the increasing visibility of gay studies, which have been propelled by three combined factors: ongoing public health research in relation to HIV/AIDS that mainly focus on ‘MSM’, especially young people, usually depicted as ‘innocent’ and easily seduced by older gay men⁵⁷; the expansion of advocacy-oriented projects of LGBT groups that use research to claim visibility and rights; and a slight increase of interest on sexuality on the part of university sociology and anthropology departments. This section will look into these different strands.

State led and academic research on LGBT in the AIDS era

The 2000-2010 years have been characterized as the AIDS era in China. This was when international programs began being implemented at country level which brought with them not only funding but also international

57 Not surprisingly this line of research has often triggered waves of moral panic.

conceptual frames to guide prevention and other health interventions (e.g. a number of China-UK joint projects, the programs supported by the Global Fund, a China-Australia project, projects funded by the Gates Foundation). During this period, the Chinese government also initiated policies on HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention, and conducted comprehensive implementation work scaled up from pilot projects supported by international programs (Pan, Huang & Li, 2006).

In this context of analysis, it is also worth noting that the profile of at-high risk populations identified in China have markedly changed since the 1980s and early 1990s. While then high HIV prevalence was concentrated amongst sellers and buyers of blood, by the late 1990s and early 2000s high prevalence rates were detected amongst intravenous drug users. Presently, high rates of new infections are reported amongst MSM and it is claimed that China has now reached the stage of a 'homosexual' HIV/AIDS epidemic (Long et.al, 2017). Related to that, more recently the findings of large scale epidemiological and behavioral studies have been publicized that deploy moral judgments on the influence of 'sexual liberalism' over young people (especially college students) and call for moral and public health measures of containment.

A brief search of official academic journals published in China since the 1980s found around 4000 articles under the keyword *tongxinglian* (homosexual love, a popular Chinese term for gays), the majority of them were published after 2006 in public health journals and mostly use confusing and twisted definitions of MSM and (male) *tongxinglian*. This means that, in the name of 'science' and the governability of 'numbers' (new infection rates), increasing attention is now being given to MSM and gay groups within a medicalized frame and not much awareness exists in regard either to existing critiques of the MSM terminology or to the pathologizing effects of dominant HIV/AIDS discourse (Parker, Aggleton & Amaya, 2016).

In parallel, when compared to what happened in the past, gay studies have also gained more legitimacy in social science research. But even this trend appears to be mostly linked to state control agendas, as illustrated by the fact that few scholars have been successfully granted resources from the national social science funding to study gay sexuality unless it is related to family value and social stability agenda, in an overall political context in which stricter censorship is being implemented in relation to pornography and the policing of prostitution is escalating (Huang & Pan, 2014).

While the bulk of the existing literature is more obviously influenced by the concerns with HIV/AIDS and moral control, new lines of studies inspired by global LGBT rights movements have also emerged in academia, and

a substantive part of this literature has been produced by Chinese nationals who have studied abroad. In analyzing this cluster, I have excluded a number of psychological and educational articles because of their moral judgments and problematic research assumptions. Considering what is left, the most prevalent key words in the material I have selected are: identity, out of closet, marriage and families (eg. Wang, 2011, 2014). A few studies can also be identified that look into gay subcultures from the point of view of the transformations of the urban scenes in China (Fu, 2012; Wei, 2012), or emphasize consumer culture (Wei, 2015a; Luo, 2016), gay rights movements (Wei, 2015b). In addition, some cultural studies have been also been performed of gay literature and film production. However, studies focusing on lala (the popular Chinese term for lesbian) experiences, gender identity, family lives and social networks are very scarce (Kam, 2014; Cheng, 2018). Even fewer are the sociological studies that examine gender diversity among adolescents or the general population on the basis on randomized surveys (Pan & Huang, 2013).

Despite these limitations, four relevant books on sexualities have been published in China in the last decade. Guo's book critically analyzes Chinese law and regulations in relation to homosexuality (Guo, 2007). Fu (2012) and Wei (2012) performed in depth ethnographies of gay urban cultures. Wei (2015a) has published a second book on queer culture in Chinese cities. Few monographs on lesbians are also to be mentioned: Engebretsen's study on Lala's life in Beijing (2009), Kam's book on Shanghai Lala (2015) and Sang's (2003) on emerging lesbian cultures in the early 20th century.⁵⁸ It is also notable that Right now, there are also more undergraduate and graduate students are interested in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues.

Activism driven research under LGBT movement

The emergence of non-state led studies on LGBT issues can be tracked through project reports, presentations and conference papers produced by LGBT activists. Since the mid-2000s, support to LGBT voices and storytelling initiatives (speaking about 'ourselves') became very popular with the support of international donors (such as Ford Foundation) and global LGBT networks that have a presence at China. For example, in 2009 an oral history project began that was conducted by *Common Language*, a NGO engaged with the promotion of LBT rights through the documentation of lesbians' and lesbian feminists' histories in contemporary China. More recently, a

58 The findings of the studies on lala's lives have been translated or introduced in Chinese through blogs and WeChat in recent years. Sang's work was translated and published in Taiwan in 2015.

Guangzhou-based NGO is working on an oral history of elder gays. The feature film *Zhi Tongzhi* (Queer China), directed by a queer director (Cui Zi'en), interviewed over twenty researchers and activists to portray the history of LGBT people in China in the past two decades and has been widely shown across the country (Cui, 2008). Surveys on anti-discrimination, psychological health and situational analysis have also been initiated by LGBT groups (Beijing LGBT Center, 2014, 2017). And it is quite impressive that almost half of all abstracts submitted to the sexuality conferences and workshops sponsored by the Institute on Sexuality and Gender since 2011 are on LGBT issues (which was not the case in previous years).

The increasing number of gay and lesbian studies briefly scanned above (and even the early studies on trans issues) suggests that the field of sexuality research in China is somehow repeating the pattern observed in the development of the sex/sexuality research field in the West (Rubin, 2011). From my observation of conferences and seminars, the hypothesis can be raised that the field is shifting from general sexology studies amongst heterosexuals or the general population to become focused on gay identity, sexual and social practices with a few incursions on lesbians, transgender, and SM and other transgressive sexual practices.

Some of these studies consciously dialogue with the Western literature and explore commonalities and distinctions between the Chinese gay culture and the Western experience. They emphasize as key Chinese differentials the dominant family centered environment and the influence of Confucianism, conditions that create sharp paradoxes between coming 'out of the closet' and having the obligation to marry ('the wife of gay men' phenomena). These topics have not been addressed in the current Chinese literature and the involved researchers are trying to be 'the first ones' to study them and these research efforts are seen as a contribution to anti-discrimination struggles or greater social visibility of sexuality issues. However, they quite often lack theoretical consistency and are not in dialogue with the academia. In this strand of research focusing on storytelling, more conventional LGBT perspectives tend to prevail over novel 'queer' theoretical frames and this inclination has been criticized in some quarters. Other critical voices are also interrogating the power imbalances between academic researchers and the social subjects they study, in particular in the case of public health and mainstream social science studies that tend to objectify and even exploit the persons and groups being researched. This same line of critique explores the differences and tensions pertaining to epistemological differences between the conceptual frames of researchers and the knowledge and interpretative parameters of the persons and groups that are subject to research (Wang, 2016).

Critical sociological analysis of the current prevalence of storytelling in sexuality research in China is also raising a number of conceptual questions. For example, some voices are asking why gay and lesbian stories have emerged in the peculiar historical conditions of China today? Or else, can we say that sexuality research is becoming more wide and diverse or, on the contrary -- under the impact of global HIV/AIDS, LGBT rights and queer theorizing – it is, in fact, becoming narrower? What is being left out of studies and story-telling strands that mainly focus on identity, ‘coming out of the closet’, social attitude, marriage and family? How is sexuality positioned in these studies and how is ‘queerness’ being understood? How to further elaborate critically on global-China or West -China connections in relation to these multiple processes of knowledge production? Those who are producing knowledge are not always fully aware of these epistemological implications and spaces must still be created for these questions to be further and productively explored by all persons and groups engaged in sexuality research.

Sexuality education and the politics of youth

Since the early 20th century, when the first wave of sexology coming from the West reached China, sex education and concerns with sexual and reproductive health among the youth has been one main focus of sexuality research and, after the 1980s, this has not changed (Pan & Huang, 2011; Huang, 2012). Since 2007, 6,803 papers have been published under this rubric, most of them focusing informed by sexual and reproductive health and sexology frameworks. A recent literature review of 106 papers on adolescent sexuality -- published between 1996 and 2016 in CSSCI indexed journals -- sharply criticized the limitations of the research models used in these studies: their narrow focuses (SRH knowledge and behaviors); methodological problems (lack of solid evidence, problematic research design and sampling, absence of qualitative approaches); lack of consistent theoretical frames; the automatic use of international standards to define ‘adolescents and young people’ (15-24) without interrogating if this applies or not to the Chinese context (Huang & Zhang, 2016).⁵⁹

While much continuity is observed in terms of sequential waves of sex and sexuality education related research, this is also a domain where few changes have occurred in the last decade. For example, studies aimed at promoting sexuality education among youth are now overlapping with emerging gay and lesbian studies that

59 So as to interrogate the limits of these frames, the ISG has sponsored few seminars and published two special issues of our journal that call more qualitative methods and critical social science approaches to address adolescent sexualities (Huang & Zhang, 2016).

address discrimination and bullying (e.g. Wei & Liu, 2015). This new line of work coincides with the advocacy initiative known as *Purple my School* sponsored by UNDP, which sensitizes teachers, parents and students to be friendly with LGBT students and to create safe space for them. As greater attention is also being paid to gender based violence and related psychological effects, a new line of work that is also stimulating research is the creation of gender-friendly counseling programs, which emerge from advocacy and training provided to school teams by LGBT groups and sexuality educators (Fang, 2012).

This articulation of sexuality education and antidiscrimination programs has triggered resistance from conservative forces that criticize 'sex positive approaches' for being too open, even too liberal, in regard to sexual matters. On the other hand, the embracing of psychological approaches to sexual violence and abuses on the part of sexuality educators and LGBT groups is not without problems or risks either. Some of these approaches project a negative view of sexuality and tend to portray women and adolescents as victims to be protected and those adopting these frames are not always aware of the problematic effects they may have. In other words, the question of what does 'positive approach to sex' mean and of how to navigate between the 'dangers' and 'pleasures' of sexuality (Vance, 1984) is also emerging in China today.

Another notable phenomena in the realm of sexuality education are the initiatives aimed at transforming educators' mindset. In addition to the pilot projects among migrant children in primary school conducted by the research team of the Peking Normal University (and supported by Ford Foundation (Liu, 2008), international NGOs such as Marie Stopes International China have been playing important roles in promoting peer to peer formation programs with a more affirmative approach to sexuality and LGBT issues, as compared to the modalities prevailing in the official educational system. Sexual behaviors, identities and self-autonomy as well as protection from violence and harassment and SRH are included in the contents. These new programs comprise camps, workshops, salons, online video and WeChat interventions that are used as new forms of sexuality education. The methods are innovative and the model is participatory, implying much initiative on the part of young people themselves. These 'right-based' and 'gender sensitive' frameworks are welcome because they go beyond the classical sexology model that dominated Chinese sex education programs until recently. They manage to escape, to some degree, the conservative and bureaucratic environment of the public education system.

While it is important to recognize the passion, prompt response and the innovative spirit of these young sexuality educators, their theoretical frames and understanding of 'sexuality' are not always so clear. The politically correct perspective of these programs on youth and the politics of age-- usually seen as a force to challenge

authorities – can also be subject to critical scrutiny. The very concepts of ‘peer education’ and ‘participatory approach’ introduced by international programs since 2000s must be interrogated through questions such as: Are the young peers being influenced by the discourses of the programs they are engaged with? Can these young educators be patient enough to learn and think historically? Are they able to self-reflect on the process of knowledge production they are engaged in? Are they aware of the complexities and tensions involved in sexuality matters? Much remains to be done in relation to assessing the long-term effects of promoting positive sexualities’ views among the youth.

Young feminist paradoxical views on gender and sexuality

Another novel and significant force shaping the sexuality field in China is the wave propelled in recent years by young women known as the ‘young feminists’. They are usually activists working in women’s and LBT NGOs or university level students living in China or abroad. Since 2012, the ‘young feminists’ have called for gender equality heard in Chinese society through a wide variety of street performances and flash-mobs such as the occupation of male toilets, shaving their heads and walking around the streets with bloody wedding dresses and bold anti-sexual harassment action in subways (Wei, 2015c). They have also become widely known by global audiences after the arrest of ‘five young feminists’ who were engaged in an anti-harassment action in Beijing a day before International Women’s Day 2016.⁶⁰ Most of their activities target gender inequality between men and women and aim at increasing gender awareness and women’s status in society. But they are also actively engaged in sexuality debates, critically commenting on episodes of sexual harassment on and off campus and expressing views on sex work (Song, 2014a).

The ‘young feminist’ have developed new lines of storytelling on sexual harassment and extensively use new media technology. Differently from previous research and action conducted by academic feminist (since 1990s) they openly contest mainstream patriarchy. This new feminist wave and its active involvement in sexuality debates requires further critical attention when exploring the changing sexual politics landscape in China. In contrast with the older generation of state and academic feminists, the ‘young feminists’ are engaged in politically bold actions, they openly talk about women’s sexual autonomy and are very friendly with LBT rights.

60 The timing of the protest was highly sensitive from the political point of view as it occurred in between two major Communist Party congresses happening in Beijing (the National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference).

For example, in their new Chinese versions of ‘Vagina monologues’ the scenes of orgasm are portrayed by both cis and trans women and the same frame is used to address gender based violence. The active involvement of lesbian and bisexual women has brought a more diverse view toward gender and a more open attitude to talk about women’s sexual autonomy compared to old-generation feminists.

However, controversies and tensions have also erupted between the young feminists and the groups self – defined as promoters of positive sexuality or sexual rights advocates⁶¹ in particularly in regard to sexual harassment and violence. For instance, in 2014, the young feminists strongly criticized a sexual harassment episode involving a male professor against one of his female students and have called for strict state-led legal regulations of sexual harassment against women. Their political action, through the strategic use of social media, combined with people’s growing moral anxieties in relation to male professors teaching girls, attracted a lot of public attention. In response, a state norm, known as the ‘Red Seven Regulation’, was issued that same year that prohibits all forms of ‘improper’ sexual relationship or sexual talk between university professors and students.

Most of the young feminists supported the measure because they consider that the unequal power relationship between professors and students justifies such rigid regulation. But in practice the new regulation intensified state control over the morality of teachers and students. This development caused criticism on the part of groups who claim to be advocates of sexual rights and who think that the ‘zero tolerance (to sexual harassment)’ claimed by the young feminists is too simplistic and does not leave space for doubts and ambiguity that always exist in the real life world of sexuality. Sexual rights advocates have also pointed towards the risks of using the law as the first and foremost solution for sexuality related conflicts. The young feminists reacted by accusing sexual rights advocates of being gender insensitive and unable to understand the structural constraints of women’s sexual autonomy (Song, 2014a; Huang, 2018).

Similar tensions are at play in debates around sex work. Most Chinese feminists (both the old and the young generation) consider that decriminalization or legalization of sex work is a symptom of gender and class blindness. In their views, policy proposals in that direction fail to recognize men as dominant consumers in a patriarchy market-oriented system in which women’s bodies are systematically objectified (Song, 2014b). Most of them believe that a law punishing the clients -- as proposed by the Swedish model -- is the best way

61 There is overlapping and confusion between these voices and the sexologists.

forward to set women free from this unequal sexuality exploitative system. Massive numbers of sexual stories and related commentary articles on prostitution as patriarchal exploitation are published online these days, often linked to sexual harassment debates.

From my personal observation of ongoing debates on this particular subject, the voices that recognize women's sexual autonomy in sex work and criticize the feminist 'victimizing' discourse on prostitution are easily labeled as agents of the '(new) sexual liberalism. They are accused of being unable to perceive and understand the 'structural constraints' deriving from to political-economic factors that are what lead women to sex work. Interestingly enough, these debates that are evolving in 21st century mainland China that oppose young feminists and sexual right advocates often recall me the 1980's 'sex war' between two strains of feminists thinking on sex and sexuality in the US. These are "wars" that, at that point in time, Carole Vance described as a main expression of 'the tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure in women's lives' (Vance, 1984, p.1) and Gayle Rubin analyzed in the following terms:

"One strand has criticized the restrictions on women's sexual behavior and denounced the high costs imposed on women for being sexually active. This tradition of feminist sexual thought has called for a sexual liberation that would work for women as well as for men. Another stream considered sexual liberalization to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege. This tradition resonates with conservative anti-sexual discourse. With the advent of the anti-pornography movement, it achieved temporary hegemony over feminist analysis' (Rubin, 1984, p.301).

When we apply these lenses to China it is possible to grasp how beyond the surface of young feminists' discourses on sexual harassment, sexual violence and sex work continuities can be identified with the positions of the older feminist generation of the 1980s-1990s, which emphasized the sexual oppression of women's, therefore aligned with the second stream analyzed by Rubin. The 1980s and 1990s feminist studies and interventions have also mainly focused on the subordinate status of Chinese women vis-à-vis men, criticizing China's male dominated culture and unequal gender relationships. As I have observed in another paper this vision also had the effect of portraying 'women-as-victims' and thereby discouraging positive representations of female sexuality and autonomy. (Huang, 2012)

Feminists who emphasize women's subordination and oppression consider that those who do not radically condemn sex work are unable to recognize the 'structural factors' pushing women towards sexual exploitation.

Within such a frame, pro sex work voices are accused of being naïve because they believe in (unlimited) women's 'individual agency or autonomy'. One way to respond to this critique is to remind that no absolute and unbounded agency exists. In that respect, the question 'can the subaltern speak' raised and explored by Spivak (1988) is, in my view, too easily and quickly responded to by Chinese feminists with a blunt 'NO'. This rigid understanding of the 'structure-agency' dyad as well as of the 'sex positive' Vs. feminist views on sexuality, calls for further reflection on the risks implied in calling upon the state to regulate sexuality and protect women, or of re-emphasizing women's structural victimhood in heterosexual relationships.

These tensions and paradoxes have been critically analyzed by Josephine Ho. Based on her twenty years of research experience in Taiwan and also on observations of mainland China debates, Ho underlines the risks of a strong attachment to the binary frame that opposes 'sex positive streams Vs feminism' or even 'structural factors Vs individual' agencies, because it simplifies and exaggerates the differences and contrasts between the two poles. She examines the negative effects of positioning feminist views on power structure over and above sexual rights and individual autonomy. Last but not least, she tracks how the 'women victim' myth is embedded in and developed through a perennial story telling of sexual harassment and exploitation that has been circulating globally for more than a century (Ho, 2016).

In relation to this realm of political action and related controversies many questions can be raised. What does sex positive mean and how to interpret sexual liberalism? How to think about the relationship between gender, sexuality and power imbalances? Who are sexual conservatives in China today? What are the competing concepts inspired by the new liberal and new left streams of politics in China today? These questions and concepts are not to be taken for granted, as they often appear in feminists' commentary on sexuality matters. The calls for 'true' sexual freedom in a 'real' equal gender relationship made by some feminists is too utopian and remains at a distance from the complex dynamics of people's lives as they are.

Introducing 'Sexuality' and 'Gender/sexuality' (性/别): Meanings and limits

As observed above, quite notably a wide range of research on sexualities is happening today in China. But it is also worth mentioning that a wide range of large scale sociological research exercises are also underway, on topics such as sex and sexuality transformations in China through surveys and observations, studies of daily lives of female sex workers and male construction workers' sexual culture, the social construction of women's sexual body, the second wife phenomena , cyber dating and cybersex, wives of gay men, partner seeking and

sexual relationships of women living with HIV & aids, and methodologies of conducting research on sexual behaviors, sex work, youth sexuality; et.al.

These studies, even when they are not well known by a wider social audience, challenge the medical and commercial sexology paradigms that still prevail in China and continue to search for an experience-near approach to lived sexualities in certain cultural contexts. While inspired by the theorizing of sexuality developed in the English written social science literature, Chinese scholars have also realized the limitations of introducing and using these Western conceptual frameworks without criticism and have also searched for local and contextualized historical lenses. Since the mid 2000's, in the process of translating Western literature to Chinese, the quest for concepts of 'sexualities' that are more akin to Chinese local, historical and subjective constructive views has been extensively discussed (Huang, 2018).

In recent years, this particular line of knowledge production has been further propelled by a series of international conferences sponsored by the Institute of Sexuality and Gender (ISG) as well as by LGBT organizations. ISG's biannual conferences and annual workshops have become an important platform for the gathering and networking of researchers and activists coming from different backgrounds and different sexuality and gender communities.

In regard to these interactions, I would like to specifically mention the productive interactions with researchers such as Josephine Ho and Ning Yin-bin from the Centre for the Study of Sexualities in the National Central University of Taiwan (NCU), because they have introduced to us a theoretical concept of 性/别 (gender/sexuality) that combines historical analysis and critical reflections on how gender/sexuality frames have been constructed and deployed in Taiwanese society and how this connects with global trends⁶². The 性/别 (gender/sexuality) frame was inspired by the post 1990s historical experience of Taiwan's social movements on gender and sexuality and implies a paradigm shift that emphasizes the complex intersectionality of gender, sexuality and other social elements of differentiation. The adoption of this revised conceptual framework in Mainland China allowed for a much more productive approach to sexuality and its complexities. More importantly, the cultural similarity, the common and geographic proximity – as compared with Western societies – makes it much easier to exchange ideas with Taiwanese scholars and activists. The close interactions between sexuality research

62 Details could refer to <http://sex.ncu.edu.tw/english/about.html>.

in mainland China and Taiwan is also politically meaningful in terms of challenging Western ideologies in knowledge production and to creating a platform of regional cooperation that allows for retracing historical trajectories of Chinese sexuality cultures in articulation with other social issues.

As a result, 性/别, is becoming popular in the academic literature and debates in mainland China. However, as both Jo and Ning have pointed out, the different trajectory in terms of theorizing sexuality and in what concerns the relation between the gender and sexuality movements in Taiwan and mainland China must be taken into account carefully, not to mention the distinctions in regard to the overarching political and social dynamic of the two countries. The main challenge is how it is used and employed locally in mainland China among different sexual groups. Moreover, more Chinese local terms and concepts that are historically-related or rooted in everyday lives are remaining exploratory.

Tensions and resistances

The spread of positive visions of sexuality face more challenges today in China than a decade ago. Currently, it is much more complex than previously to map and better understand the counter-discourses and the forces confronting sexuality researchers and activists. The landscape is more unstable and the stakeholders involved have become more numerous.

Examining the changes and continuities of sexual discourses as manifested in research reports and related debates in the 2007 - 2016 period we can see that previously dominant sexology frame is increasingly challenged by critical social science perspectives. LGBT groups, young sexuality educators and feminist activists have developed more diverse sexual discourses and have pioneered contributions on promoting gender and sexual equality. However, their sexual politics of political correctness regarding age, gender and sex work is not without caveats. Furthermore, the diversity and hierarchy among young and LGBT must also be addressed and discussed. My view is that even when the sexual rights and young feminist initiatives are pioneering change, critical questions must be raised in relation to what 'sex' or 'sexuality' these groups studying and talking about. Similar interrogations must be asked about what is 'queer', as the term is becoming more and more popularly and broadly used in Chinese. Last but not least the definitions of 'positive' and 'negative sex' also need to be scrutinized.

More importantly, perhaps, to gain more social support many activists' voices are now either deliberately (or not) portraying sexuality in ways that mobilize negative perceptions. One of these streams is identified in the groups now emphasizing the 'homosexualizing of AIDS' because this discourse is triggering waves of social panic around the risk of young men being fooled into same sex relations. The other stream are feminists whose victimizing discourses and simplistic view on the primacy of 'gender equality' over 'sexuality' (or the emphasis of, 'structure' over 'individual') also project shadows over sexuality (Ho, 2016). It is also to be noted that groups now engaged in gender and sexuality debates also tend either to silence or to express negative views on 'marginal forms of eroticism' such as sex work, BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism) and other practices considered by them as promiscuous. These discourses, though imbued with progressive intentions, can also be considered as counter discourse, because, as previously seen in Taiwan and the US, they can easily fuel positions and state interventions against sexuality as a positive dimension of human life.

On the other hand, openly conservative forces -- known as the anti-sex aunties -- are also currently extremely active in China. The anti-sex aunties usually have strong religious connections and are engaged with deploying strong moral views on gender and sexual matters. For example, through their websites -- and using quite well organized on spot political interventions -- they have made their voices loudly heard against the sexual liberalism of Sexpo, which is a commercial sexuality fair that occurs in a few cities. In Xi'an, for example, they have thrown eggs and feces on the sexologists who were lecturing. They constantly post strong statements against pornography, pre-marital sex, homosexuality and multiple sexual relationships on their websites (Huang, 2014).

Although we do not yet have greater clarity in regard to how these groups are being funded and what their precise connections are with religious forces, such as Evangelicals and the Catholic Church, their actions suggest that a more robust, more visible and better articulated anti-sexuality conservatism is taking form in mainland China. The moral panic created around the fantasy of young college men being fooled to engage in MSM practices, accidentally or not adds grist to these mills of conservative sexual morality.

Last but not least, in academic circles a group that has recently emerged and self-identifies as the new (political) Confucianists is also making efforts to make their voices more widely heard, including in respect to sexual morality. Their proposals aim at improving moral and social governance through the revival of 'traditional Chinese values' that they trace back to Kang Youwei, a famous late 19th century intellectual who reappraised Confucius (Tang, 2015). This intellectual current, albeit in a different manner because it is strongly connected

with the state apparatus, also contributes to the expansion of conservative moralizing views of gender and (women's) sexuality.

Then, when the focus is turned towards state policies, censorship and anti-prostitution measures have also become more draconian in the name of social order, or social harmony. Furthermore, since 2014, more strict Internet regulation in relation to sexual content has been adopted and even academic seminars and lectures on sex work are now being targeted by state censorship.⁶³ It is also noteworthy that the interaction between the Chinese government and international actors (and processes) has also intensified with contradictory implications.⁶⁴ On the other hand, the government newly revised the Regulation on Registration and Administration of Social Organizations in 2016 that define quite strict regulations for local organizations to receive international funding. Additionally, an administrative law on foreign non-governmental organizations was approved in 2016 and began being implemented in 2017 to regulate international organizations based in China (SCNPC, 2016). These state actions will definitely impose greater state control over research and social interventions in the realms of gender and sexuality in the years to come.

At same time, global trends and forces are increasingly palpable in the shaping and timing of sexual politics in China. As previously mentioned, in addition to HIV and AIDS funding, Chinese society has seen the reframing of ideas introduced through new waves of sexuality education and the young feminist movement, the circulation of queer theories in academia and social movements and the international support for sexuality oriented programs. Today, policy debates that take place at the UN and other international arenas have increased influence over domestic Chinese debates on gender and sexuality; so although not impossible, it is hard to contain and control these global-local interactions.

A not very optimistic and inconclusive summary of the overall charting of sexuality in China offered by this article is that the intersections among various factors such as economic and funding trends, national and international politics (including ideational frames on sexuality and, more broadly left and right) and the discourses emanating

63 For example, in recent years the Institute has tried to publish a methodological book to orient research on female sex workers in China, but failed to because of the sensitivity of the topic and our position of criticizing the anti-prostitution law. A seminar on female sex workers was also canceled for similar reason in 2016. More importantly, a broad "Clean up the internet" anti-pornography action was initiated and has been implemented since 2014 on the grounds that it will 'protect the good of children'. Retrieved from <https://baike.baidu.com/item/净网行动/219681?fr=aladdin>

64 For example, the Chinese government and UN Women co-hosted the "2015 Global Women's Summit", and President Xi has made promises to promote gender equality and donated 10 million USD to UNIFEM at his opening speech.

from sexuality research have continued changing in the past 10 years. The impacts these cross-cutting forces will have on sex and sexuality in China needs to be continuously observed through critical lens.

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