

SEXUALITY in CHINA

CLASSICAL CHINA

Classical features. Though there were some earlier precedents, Chinese civilization began to take shape in the centuries after about 1200 BCE. From that point until the fall of the Han dynasty (220 CE) Chinese society developed a number of distinctive characteristics, many of which would persist into later periods as well. In general terms, these were the centuries in which China developed its strong emphasis on a well-organized central state, under imperial leadership; unified its core territory; and developed signature cultural systems including Daoism and, above all, Confucianism. Under Confucian guidance and its emphasis on hierarchy, a social structure emerged headed by a “scholar-gentry” class at the top, with a large peasantry and, by the standards of the time, substantial cities.

China was, and is, a large and diverse society, so it would be misleading to claim that some single basic approach to sexuality emerged during this formative period. On the whole, however, particularly with the rise of Confucianism, the Chinese approach to sexuality tended to emphasize a certain caution or moderation: strong emphasis on the importance of family and social stability pushed in that direction despite the absence of any sweeping religious sanctions. This tone combined, however, with a vigorous differentiation between the genders, that created far wider range for acceptable male behaviors that that available to respectable women; and the moderate tone was complicated by a number of practices and institutions devoted to sexual pleasure. All of this operated within the general sexual framework of agricultural society.

Sex manuals. Materials from the early Zhou dynasty emphasized interest in sexual pleasure. China generated the first known sex manuals, which graphically described relevant body parts and compared orgasm to the bursting of a cloud. Some pornographic works were written as well, both for men and for women. And at some point a custom developed of giving explicit sexual pictures to a couple as a wedding gift. Much of this applied mainly to the upper class, for among other things literacy was not widespread, but it established interesting precedents.

Polygyny. Early on as well, many Chinese families practiced polygyny – a pattern that would persist in some ways into the 20th century. Multiple wives might be taken to augment the family labor force, or to try to assure the birth of sons, or to help with child care; but clearly sexual pleasure, or at least male sexual pleasure, could be part of the picture as well. At various point the imperial government issued laws trying to regulate the practice, sometimes seeking to protect the position of first wife, but they also frequently regularized supplementary concubines. At the level of the imperial household, hundreds and sometimes thousands of women would be available as concubines, and some emperors developed complex schedules to keep up with the supply. Officials were sometimes employed to keep track of the visits, noting the superior status of women whom the ruler favored most frequently. In the upper classes more generally, wealth could be demonstrated through the number of concubines a man maintained. Brothels were established during the Zhou dynasty, regulated and openly available; and here, some upper-class women participated as well, taking advantage of the services of male prostitutes. Many brothels, often called “houses of singing girls”, featured music, food and other entertainment beyond sexual activity; and occasionally a favored prostitute might rise to the position of concubine.

Constraints and the double standard. These various practices were qualified, however, at least in respectable culture, by a number of reservations, aimed particularly at women. Again during the Zhou period the influential *Book of Songs* warned against premarital sex for women, arguing that it would jeopardize the all-important success of the family later on. In subsequent centuries, Confucian emphasis on the orderly family added further elements, including strong warnings against deviant acts such as incest. Confucius was concerned about the disruptive potential of sexuality – particularly, female sexuality – and urged careful regulation. Respectable families worked hard to maintain the virginity of daughters, vital to qualify for marriage; and as was common in many agricultural societies, women often married quite young, to husbands 10- to 15 years their senior, frequently with prior sexual experience of their own.

But while disproportionate attention was devoted to women's constraints, Confucianists and others, including doctors, had warnings for men as well, not so much in terms of fidelity but because of the physical dangers of overindulgence. Undue expenditure of semen was a risk to male vitality and health.

Arranged marriage. As in many agricultural societies, marriage arrangements normally had little to do with sexual attraction. Girls, most obviously, were contracted into marriage by their parents; some imperial daughters were even sent to be wives of "barbarian" leaders in central Asia, as conciliatory gifts, often to their loud dismay. But men, also, normally had little choice in a union designed to combine appropriate economic assets for successful family life. These practices help explain why, particularly in the upper classes, other sexual outlets were sought so often.

Sexual orientations. Homosexuality was widely if not loudly accepted. Many emperors had male as well as female concubines, and poems were written to the joys of love affairs between men: "sharing the peach" became a symbol for anal sex. Lesbian relationships received less attention, but they occurred fairly openly as well, and were often recorded in erotic art.

Eunuchs. Imperial China became one of several societies to create an important group of eunuchs, men who were castrated in order to qualify for certain kinds of public service. Most obviously, eunuchs played a vital role within imperial households, because they could be trusted not to violate royal wives and concubines. Under the Zhou, the practice was probably introduced as a response to acts of treason, since given the emphasis on male prowess the punishment was dire. But with time, the constructive potential of the practice became clear as well: trusted eunuch could achieve great informal power. Under the Han dynasty, the imperial household supported as many as 5,000 eunuchs – recruited from all regions of the empire, sometimes deliberately castrated and sold into service by parents eager to see these boys advance in status.

Parental strategies. The complexity of Chinese sexual norms could create dilemmas for some lower-class parents, particularly in the cities. On the one hand, respectability could seem vital for family formation and preservation. On the other hand, economic pressures, amid high birth rates, might prompt some parents to train children, particularly girls, in entertainment skills and other graces, hoping that they might be taken into some wealthier male household.

Conclusion Overall, classical China developed a rather complicated balance between regulation and family respectability, on the one hand, and a variety of sexual outlets on the other. Religious considerations introduced few complications: Daoism, China's main contribution to spirituality, accepted sexual activity as a spiritual practice. Daoist texts described a number of sexual acts under the heading of "joining energy" or "joining the essences", appropriate for good health and spiritual advancement. Ultimately (a few centuries after the classical period), Confucian moderates actually sought to dampen Daoist enthusiasm in the interests of public moderation and decorum.

Questions:

1. How did Chinese emphasis on strong distinctions between men and women show up in sexual ideas and practices?
2. What were some characteristic Confucian concerns about sexuality?
3. How did the considerable acceptance of homosexuality fit the larger sexual culture of classical China?
4. Did the development of the eunuch class suggest a belief that abstention from sex was morally preferable?

Further reading:

Sexuality in China: histories of pain and pleasure. Ed. By Howard Chang (University of Washington Press, 2018).

The Culture of Sex in Ancient China. P.R. Goldin (University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

Sexual Life in Ancient China: a preliminary survey of Chinese sex and society from c. 1500 B.C. until 1644 A.D. By R. H. Gulik (Brill, 2003).

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Major parts of Asia, though heavily involved in the trade patterns of the early modern period, were not substantially affected by global influences when it came to sexuality. This was certainly true for China, which carefully limited contacts with European traders and missionaries. Several important developments affected Chinese sexuality at this point, but they were internally generated, particularly from efforts to expand the functions of the imperial state.

Key traditions. Several characteristic sexual patterns had already been established, and simply expanded during the early modern period. This included the extensive array of concubines available for use by the emperors – to assure the production of sons as well as to provide pleasure – and, at more modest levels, for other upper-class men as well. The expansion of Chinese cities had also furthered the development of houses of pleasure, some of which provided a variety of entertainments as well as sexual services. As before, some courtesans could gain considerable prestige. The emphasis on footbinding as a feature of female beauty also continued to gain ground particularly in the cities, affecting the preparation of girls for marriage and sexual attraction.

Greater moral emphasis: chaste women. Confucian morality won growing attention in a number of ways, though the impact on actual behavior is hard to estimate. A growing literature assessed the periodic decline of imperial dynasties in sexual terms: a dynasty began to falter when the emperors themselves abandoned discipline and became increasingly licentious. The same could occur within families. This admonitory approach extended to increasing praise for “chaste” women (less attention was given to male behavior). Thousands of women were given public commendations by the state for their strict morality, through court testimonials (*jingbiao*) and even government-financed plaques and stone archways: “faithful maidens” and chaste widows gained the greatest honors. Correspondingly, attacks on widows who tried to remarry increased, for they were not remaining faithful to their husbands. Criticism of other women who failed to measure up became more intense.

Rape. The Qing dynasty attempted to refine some of the legal framework for sexuality. Definitions of rape and the evidence needed to prove it became more precise, making it in fact more difficult for women to press charges because it would require public admission of loss of virtue and because the punishments for false accusation became more severe. It was often argued that suicide was the best recourse for raped women, and the government began to cover funeral expenses and even establish plaques to commemorate the devotion to honor.

Over the span of several dynasties laws concerning same-sex male behavior were also refined, mainly to assure that liaisons would not involve violations of social boundaries or lower the status of upper-class men. There was no disapproval of same-sex activity in itself – another earlier tradition maintained.

Adjustments, not major change, describe the main features of Chinese sexuality in the early modern period. Despite the array of actual behaviors and arrangements, the rather stern Confucian tone was noteworthy, along with the various signs of gender differentiation in moral commentary. There is little question that the imperial state took more interest in sexual issues than any other premodern government.

Study questions:

1. How did Confucianism encourage commentary on sexual behaviors?
2. What were the main ways the imperial state became involved in sexual matters? What might the motives have been?

Further reading:

Sexualities in China: histories of power and pleasure. Ed. By Howard Chiang (University of Washington Press, 2018).

Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History. By Susan Mann (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

19TH CENTURY

The 19th century featured huge upheavals in Chinese history, due in large part to growing Western interference. In sexuality, however, while Western criticisms included some of the now-familiar staples, perspectives were somewhat more moderate than was the case for places like India or the Middle East, and Chinese adjustments were less disruptive as well. The Confucian framework had already generated a cautious strand in discussions of sexuality, and this could now be carried further.

Two related factors suggest a partially distinctive context. First, many Western observers were more concerned about undue submissiveness in Chinese women than about excessive sexuality, and this highlighted a different set of targets. Second, Chinese traditions already included high levels of concern about regulating sexual passions, and the Qing dynasty had been trying to heighten the emphasis on family-based, reproductive sexuality since the 18th century. It may also have been significant that while Chinese imperial traditions included an assortment of concubines, nothing quite as elaborate as a harem existed to provide a target for foreign comment.

Criticism and reform. Westerners certainly noted what they saw as the effeminacy of Chinese men, along with their indulgence in sexual pursuits. But while foreigners were certainly aware of prostitution (not infrequently taking advantage), they offered fewer sweeping criticisms of female sexuality. Rather, attention focused on the unfairness of practices like footbinding. Indeed, the efforts of Protestant missionaries soon combined with internal Chinese reform efforts, and this traditional practice began gradually to ease – a major change in gender relations but not centered primarily on sexuality. On another front: while average Chinese marriage ages were lower than their counterparts in the West, at 21 for men, 17 for women, they were actually rising a bit in the 19th century due to population pressure, and blatant practices such as extensive child marriage were less salient. Missionaries, but again also local reformers, did attack the tradition of concubinage, which like footbinding began to recede.

Public culture. The Qing dynasty increasingly attempted to regulate public culture, banning a large number of books that dealt with sexual themes. Over 150 titles were outlawed in the 18th century, the books burned along with the printing blocks used to produce them; and stiff penalties were threatened for anyone selling erotic materials. The measures were not terribly effective, particularly because the government itself steadily declined in capacity; but the efforts did unintentionally help limit Western criticisms of this aspect of Chinese culture.

Homosexuality. The Qing also moved against homosexuality, again beginning in the 18th century. The new regulations on publications included homoerotic materials, but the government also outlawed homosexuality in practice, for the first time in Chinese history – not only to discipline morality but to emphasize reproduction. This was another area where official steps muted Western complaint, though there was some additional pressure by the later 19th century. In practice, however, the measures had little impact on same-sex practice, which continued to be widespread, even within the imperial household. After the fall of the empire, these persistent patterns would however lead to a new debate during the 1920s and 1930s, with nationalist modernizers developing a new argument: that homosexuality was contrary to the needs of a vigorous, virile modern nation.

Study questions:

1. What distinctive factors affected Western commentary on Chinese sexuality?
2. Why did the Chinese government undertake new regulations even before significant Western influence?
3. Was the 19th century a period of much real change in Chinese sexual patterns?

Further reading:

Obsessions: male same-sex relations in China, 1900-1950. By Wenqing Kang (Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

Western images of China. By C. Mackerras (Oxford University Press, 1999).

20TH CENTURY

COMMUNIST SOCIETY : CHINA

Maoist China. Much the same scenario took shape after the communist revolution in China, and particularly during the 1960s Cultural Revolution phase. Communism did unseat parentally-arranged marriages, in favor of choice by young people themselves. But officials frowned on sexual dalliance and at points even banned dating in many settings. Even more than in the Soviet Union, Chinese communists touted standardized, rather drab styles of dress, another sign of the hope to avoid provocative behavior; one woman recalled that no choice was available, because “fashionable clothes...were regarded as bourgeois”. Girls were encouraged to cut their hair short, to avoid any emphasis on femininity. Even more than with the Soviets, outside Western influence was fiercely opposed. Sex was seen as a potentially disruptive force in many ways.

Public culture. Approved drama and fiction shunned romantic relationships and even much depiction of marriage. Government censors deleted any movie scenes that smacked of sex or love. No sex education was provided, and the topic was simply taboo. As one man recalled, “We did not have any knowledge about sexuality. Our parents never talked about it. Every kid around me experienced a frightening and confusing puberty.” Pre-marital sex was shameful – though of course it did sometimes occur as young people experimented despite, or sometimes because of, their lack of knowledge.

Homosexuality. Homosexuality was rigorously proscribed, despite earlier Chinese traditions. It was taken to represent the “decline and evil of Western civilization.” Severe punishments were levied for sodomy, particularly during the Cultural Revolution.

Reform. Only at the end of the 1970s, parallel to the huge change in population policy, did the Maoist influence ease. No longer was reproductive sex the only authorized form. A few Western movies were allowed, with even animated Disney films offering a startling contrast to previous fare – for after all, *Sleeping Beauty* is kissed on the lips, something many Chinese teenagers had never seen (a revelation that drew shocked comments from remaining Maoist purists).

The strictest communist approach to sexuality was, obviously, bounded in time, and by the 1990s seemed an increasingly distant memory. It stands however as an intriguing facet of 20th-century history, a reminder that the global history of sexuality remains varied and complex.

Study Questions

1. Were there any significant differences between the Maoist and Soviet approaches to sexuality?
2. Why did the change in population policy in the late 1970s shift the context for sexuality?

Further reading:

“Secrets Revealed: sex talk under Mao’s Communist Puritanism.” By Huai Bao. In *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* (10:1, Feb., 2020).