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Sex in China (book review)

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Sex in China. By ELAINE JEFFREYS with HAIQING YU. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015. ix, 232 pp. ISBN: 9780745656144 (paper).

Sex in China introduces readers to various aspects of contemporary Chinese sexual culture since the 1980s. In the introduction of the co-authored book, Elaine Jeffreys and Haiqing Yu make it clear that they aim to challenge the “sexual revolution in China” narrative, which “suggests that sex was repressed by the Communist Party-state during the Mao era,” but “the ‘natural’ desires of the Chinese people are now being liberated as a result of the loosening of the government controls and the introduction of modern western influence” (p. 4). Arguing against the essentialist understanding of preexisting “natural” sexual desires, the authors want to situate “China’s changing sexual culture, and the nature of its governance, in the socio-political history of the PRC” (p. 9), and contend that the recent “government policies, whether intentional or not, have played a significant role in promoting a new model of sex for leisure and pleasure in China” (p. 8). However, as the book is focused on the reform period, it does not give much attention to the thorny issue of sexual repression in the Mao era.

Chapter 2 supports the book’s argument well by using four stories to show how the government’s policies, especially the one-child policy, and state economic decisions came together with conventional social norms to shape heterosexual marriage and parenting practice in China: Jeffreys and Yu discuss the marriage of a “leftover woman” (p. 37), a

“cooperative marriage” between a gay man and a lesbian (p. 39), a false divorce to avoid newly imposed taxes, and co-habitation among widowed elders.

Chapter 3 traces various stages of the recent sexual revolution by focusing on the youth culture, and employs the term “performative sexuality,” supposedly an extension of Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity, to describe the sexual and gender personas of controversial celebrities and instant media sensations Li Yuchun, Wei Hui, and Mu Zimei. The authors argue that the new gender images created by the commercialization of sex have not always challenged the conventional gender and sexual norms, but the meaning of “performative sexuality” remains confusing.

Chapter 4 introduces the emerging queer culture in contemporary China, focusing on films, media, and the Internet, and attributing the change to “the increasing influence of transnational and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) cultural and commercialization” (p. 68). It is commendable that Jeffreys and Yu make an effort to put the recent change in a historical perspective, but the history provided here needs better sources. For example, they write, “Cultural tolerance of homosexuality began to be replaced by intolerance in the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912) ‘as a result of a more stringent application of Neo-Confucian rhetoric regarding the family’ and imported Manchu concepts of sexuality” (p. 71). In fact, however, recent scholarship has disputed and complicated the idea that “homosexuality” was tolerated in China until the coming of the Manchus. Moreover, the chapter would have provided a better perspective if it included the queer community-building and activist work happening in China today.

Chapter 5 fulfills its goal of challenging the claim “that prostitution in China is a taboo topic” (p. 96) by providing a clear discussion of the post-reform-era spread of sex work, the government control policies, and the public debate over legalization and decriminalization. The authors argue that “although some women are forced into prostitution by severe economic hardship or physical coercion, many women enter prostitution voluntarily as a response to underemployment and limited opportunities for upward mobility” (p. 100).

Chapter 6 discusses the issue of public health, focusing on government policies related to HIV infections. The authors present a clear account how of the Chinese government changed from its failure to respond to the AIDS crisis to its adoption of the United Nations’ protocol.

Chapter 7 provides a history of sex studies in recent China. Jeffreys and Yu make a convincing argument that Chinese sexuality research has its own agenda by introducing the important works of major sexuality scholars such as Pan Shuiming, Li Yinhe, and Huang Yingying.

Sex in China utilizes much of the existing scholarship on sexuality in China, and thus introduces readers to a selection of works on the topic. Unfortunately, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether Jeffreys and Yu are making their own arguments or reiterating those of other scholars, and it is equally unclear whether they agree with the arguments they summarize. For example, when discussing the cooperative marriage between gays and lesbians in chapters 2 and 4, the authors point out the conforming nature and the negative effect of the practice (pp. 40–41, 92), but in the conclusion, the book simply endorses a positive evaluation of the new phenomenon.

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