

A Study of the Development of Sexual Cognition in China

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Abstract. This study aims to discuss the evolution of the existence, form and internal structure of sexual taboos in Chinese society, the current state of sexual taboos in social culture, and how sexual taboos are reflected in people's real lives and how these traces affect people by combing and comparing the development process of sexual ecology in ancient China to the present. By using a combination of data analysis and semi-structured interviews, the study concluded that although sexual culture is now being talked about more in China than ever before, the taboo parts of sexual taboos have shifted from vague concepts to more specific issues, such as gender identity, harmony in sexual relations, and gender-based violence. These taboos have had an impact on people's perception of sex and self, and society and are issues that are worth and need time to address.

Keywords: Sexual taboo, Sexual revolution, Sexual existence, Primary life circle, Sexual structure.

1. Introduction

Up to now, sex-related topics have been mentioned more often in China than ever. On the one hand, thanks to the development of information globalization, people can learn about sex through the Internet; On the other hand, the research of relevant fields, the sex education, and the active activities of LGBT groups, new feminists and other groups in social affairs have also given people more opportunities to think about the relationship between sex and themselves. (Michael,2017) Nevertheless, most scholars are currently studying more contextual fields, considering the role of sexuality in China from a macro perspective. And most previous studies have tended to focus on sexual taboos in China or reproductive patterns in China, as well as the history of strict censorship of media information in China. However, the connections between these phenomena have not been explored in depth. Therefore, there has not been much thought about how sexual expression in each era coexists with the current group or individual. That is, sex (including sexual orientation, sexual preferences, sexuality, and gender.) has not developed a clear situation in China (Chinese mainland unless specifically mentioned in this article), and sexual taboos still exist and affect people's lives and personal choices in daily situations. Therefore, this article will focus on local reality, people-oriented, and explore how individuals should more reasonably reflect on the understanding and conflict between self and cultural contradictions when they are in the current situation of sexual taboos in China. Of course, there is currently no prescriptive definition of "what can be talked about openly", and this paper only talks about relatively general feelings: Can most people express their thoughts when confronted with sex-related topics without being ashamed while asserting their rights to sexuality?

As Huang Yingying (2020) argues, when sex is discussed in China, it should be clear what sex refers to today. When people talk about sex, what exactly are they talking about? Is it the sense of conflict that sex has as a physiology, sexual intercourse, sexual orientation, or a reference in the context of gender? She put forward the triangular prism theory of sex in China, that is, the analytical framework under the "life reality-social situation-dialogue context", aiming to understand the question of "how sex is understood in China" according to different people's sex-related activities and concepts, which provides a solid reference basis for the research of this paper. According to Foucault [1990], the discussion surrounding sex is characterized by its volatile and contentious nature. He posits that sex is an instinctual biological drive subject to suppression due to complex sociocultural and political mechanisms that shape its expression. This seems to fit well in explaining China's sexual development. At present, it is not only China that is sexually taboo, but also other countries such as

India (Singh et al., 2009) and Pakistan (Iqbal et al., 2017) and other countries that have been subjected to religious or theological interference with ideology, and all the foundations discussed in this article are based only on the social and cultural foundations of China.

In the course of research, even if a group of scholars (Li, 2021; Li, 2022 et al.) indicates that the current topic of sexual association (including sexual orientation, sexuality, sexual pleasure and other aspects) has grown significantly compared to the previous and is still evolving, showing a trend that current research is more accessible than before. It sounds like it's easier to research sex topics now than ever before. However, the author does not believe that making large-scale questionnaires is an appropriate research method. On the one hand, the authenticity of the feedback cannot be guaranteed, and much ineffective energy is required to organize the questionnaire; On the other hand, the questionnaire questions are personal and may generate psychological stimulation in some people with sex-related traumatic experiences during uncontrolled transmission. Therefore, this study finally chooses the combination of data analysis and semi-structured interview methods based on the existing research data and generates in-depth communication and links with respondents as the primary purpose of the tool and main purpose, to analyze the extent and aspect of the so-called "sexual taboo" affecting the individual's understanding and perception of self. Pan (1993) studied the theme of Chinese sexuality and said that examining an act is not how many people do it but how many people generally believe in doing it. Therefore, this article raises another question: If contemporary society has developed to a moment where it is possible to talk about sex generously, why is the current mainstream discourse still liberating sex-related issues?

The research used the snowball sampling method, ten interviewees were recruited, including six men and four women, all engaged in different jobs, including university teachers, civil servants, electronic engineers, etc. The respondents were concentrated in their twenties to forties, with six male respondents aged 23, 26, 27, 29, 35 and 39; The four female respondents were aged 27, 29, 30 and 31. There is no doubt that the sample size of ten respondents looks like narrower. In addition, the results of snowball sampling led to mutual recognition among some respondents, further contributing to the need for more diversity and breadth of the sample. Li Yinhe (1996), when studying the feelings and sexuality of Chinese women, said that the depth and truth of the research may be more important than the sample size and sampling method in sociological research. However, the researcher also needs to avoid the prejudice of homogeneous groups. Therefore, the author gave great freedom to control the interview questions and the rhythm of the process, try to make the atmosphere as natural as possible, and enable the interviewees to participate in the interview as much as possible in a state of less concern. Before the interview officially begins, the investigator will contact the interviewees to sign an interview consent form to ensure informed consent for the recording. Each of the ten interviews lasted more than one hour and a half. The content of the interview involves the interviewee's sexual cognition, sexual experience, emotional experience, sex education, and views on sexual taboos. The interview will be presented below in conjunction with the ideas of this article.

2. Research on the development of sexual cognition in China over different periods

2.1 Ancient people's cognition and attitude towards sex and its causes, as well as its impact on social development

Sex is a complex construct that has been studied in China. The clash between traditional culture and modern concepts makes it very difficult to define the concept of sex in China in a simple way.

In ancient times, sex had a combination of yin and yang, but the meaning of yin and yang is also different at different times. Before the Song Dynasty, there was a concept that yin was heaven and yang was earth, and the intercourse of yin and yang (sexual intercourse) had the meaning of combining heaven and earth and giving birth to life for people at that time (Li Yinhe, 2022). However, there are more literature that shows that sex is considered impossible to discuss openly, just like the

meaning of yin in Chinese characters: "unable to see the light." Sexual intercourse is considered immoral and contrary to public order and morals. Especially after Cheng Zhu Lixue (emphasizing dogmatic morality and ethics, advocating the elimination of acquired selfish desires and human nature) began to be put forward in the Song Dynasty, more repressive claims emerged (Su, 2006). Cheng (1897) claimed that there was a distinction between "Yin" (women) and "Yang" (men), with Yang's meaning being revealed and sunny, and Yin's being interpreted in the symbolic sense of darkness, insidiousness, and illumination. Sexual desire and intercourse were largely subsumed under the conceptual meaning of Yin, and were also given a dirty and evil meaning. Sexual repression in China can be traced back to the early days when the Book of Benevolence (1897) claimed that sexual intercourse was obscene and seductive, and that fluid produced by sexual intercourse was immoral and harmful to physical and mental health.

In addition, sex as a measure is conditioned by social moral judgments. Farquhar's (2002) book mentioned the relationship between the Chinese diet and sexual desire. Since there was a period of great famine in Chinese history, it was very immoral to talk about sex at such a time when it was hard to get enough food. At the same time, Sexuality as a way of reproduction is vaguely contained in the concept of procreation in the family system, and fertility can be generously mentioned, but sexuality itself cannot be said. When Foucault (1978) talked about liberating freedom, the greatest significance of sexual intercourse in Chinese society was fertility. At this time, society repeatedly emphasized that sex must occur between family relationships, if an unmarried man or woman had sex and gave birth to a child under these circumstances, both parties faced a great deal of moral condemnation, especially women (Sommer, 2000). On the basis of the family system, sex can only be allowed to see its productive role, and cannot be recognized as desire. According to a study by Bo and Geng (1992), more than half of people have never talked about sex with others, even married couples, and they think that they cannot talk about sex with their partners. During the Ming Dynasty, the social culture with family ethics as the rise of individual consciousness impacted the norm, and literary works depicting themes related to cheating or cheating appeared, although expressed in an obscure way, but to some extent promoted the liberation of sexual culture at that time, and contributed to the challenge of individual consciousness to traditional social culture (Liu, 2018).

Sexuality is intertwined with various concepts such as family structure, mode of production, religious belief, political structure. Focusing on the pronunciation of sex in Chinese (Xing), Rocha (1994) traced the development of sex in China and posed the following question: "What does 'Xing' mean in China?" In ancient texts, "Xing" is often used as a description of a person's nature, with a meaning more akin to character. Pan and Huang (2000) have repeatedly mentioned that the Chinese character "xing" and the English word "sex" cannot be used as words with the same meaning. In ancient Chinese society, sex could not exist independently in a purely biological sense, and it was contained in a substantial primary circle of life, "just as a man cannot be separated from family existence." The ancient Chinese family system was based on the establishment of patriarchy, so the development of sex was also subject to patriarchy. Many scholars (Zhou et al.) have mentioned that sexual taboos are inextricably linked to establishing and maintaining patriarchy. The distribution of sex, blood, and means of production constitutes a framework for defining moral values by establishing family and social units. During the monopoly game, to ensure their patrilineal blood, men forbade their wives to have sexual relations with other men and restricted women's sexual selection while satisfying their polygamy. Moreover, this sexual taboo is not only a taboo for society as a subject of sexual topics but also a restriction on women's rights. For example, during the Song Dynasty, women were required to follow three virtues and four virtues, and during the Qin Shi Huang period, widows were forbidden to remarry. The economic prosperity of the Ming Dynasty promoted people's reflection on the old traditions at that time, and the sexual and cultural ecology was more accessible than in the past. Furthermore, sexual phenomena such as prostitutes, commercial prostitutes, and male style appeared, as well as some literary and artistic works dominated by female characters. However, to a certain extent, the instrumentality of sex in the authoritative relationship was aggravated. Sexual taboos in ancient China were often associated with some metaphysics, and

people believed that sex was associated with the good or bad of their fate, so they were always cautious about this matter. Women became essential in this process, and sexual taboos became taboos for women to some extent. The custom of making a cave house (finding many men to tease newlyweds) has been passed down in China since ancient times because the culture at that time regarded sexual intercourse and women as unclean things that needed to be offset by the yang energy in the man's body (Su Xiaoxing, 2006).

In general, the sexual culture of ancient China was intertwined with the family system, ethics, and religious culture, and it was forbidden to talk about it in various ways. Even if some dynasties (such as the Ming Dynasty) stimulated by the development of the commodity economy derived a wind direction from abstinence to indulgence, primarily manifested in the emergence of sex-related entertainment industries and publications, to some extent, the reason for this phenomenon pointed more to the psychosexual division of the elite group at that time and an impact on the family system, which could not be defined as the development and progress of the essence of sexual culture. During the Qing Dynasty, more attention was paid to establishing code ethics, stricter discipline was advocated in the spiritual aspect, and the development of sexual culture was naturally restricted.

2.2 Contemporary perceptions and attitudes towards sex

From 1840 to 1949, China was in the stage of revolutionary war, and it is hard to know the development of sexual culture at that stage. However, even after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the liberation of sexual discourse was relatively slow. It is even difficult to find literature on the development of modern Chinese sexual culture in CNKI. It was not until the 1980s, when China opened up to the outside world and Western culture gradually entered the country, that sexuality emerged as a free and open form for Chinese people, and various discussions about sexuality were also made (Elaine & Yu, 2012). At that time, many books on sexuality from the West appeared on the Chinese market, and there was also a scattering of books on sexuality published by the Chinese. A few universities offered courses on sex education, although they were quickly cancelled (Zha & Geng, 1992).

The signs of sexual liberation have appeared, but there are many difficulties in landing and developing. People who experienced the "asexual" culture during the Cultural Revolution experienced a massive change in their inner order. On the one hand, they needed to protect the stereotypes and traditions inherited from the previous era, and at the same time, faced the challenge of curiosity about new things.

K (31 years old, university philosophy teacher, female), born in the late 80s, said that although she had developed a more mature sexual culture system when she showed curiosity about content in her physiology class as a child, she was ignored by teachers and ridiculed by classmates. Her parents did not show understanding, and she has not shown curiosity about sexual knowledge in front of others since then.

J (39 years old, luxury industry manager, male, gay) says 90 per cent of his sex education is self-taught, and while he thinks he was born in a time with many new things, he does not think his peers can talk freely about sex. As in the past, most of them are under pressure from their parents to pass on their families. Thus, the emergence of a multi-sexuality culture has made people more accessible, but it has not shaken the enormous responsibility of sexuality in the reproductive sense.

Huang Yingying (2020) has devoted much space to discussing how modernity should be conceived in China. She argues that the 80s of the 20th century was a dividing line. Before 80s, few studies could be found that were related to sex and implemented in group life, the words and deeds of individuals are highly controlled and unified by the government while limiting the formal and conscious influence of "sexuality" in society. Pan Suiming (2008), in his study of national surveys, summarized the "desexualization culture" of sex before the 80s, saying that this phenomenon is not a complete deprivation of sexual existence, but emphasizes the reproductive purpose of sex.

Although it is impossible to deny that sex appears more dominated by reproductive purposes, Pan (1993) also argues that in the 80s, there were more structures in China's sexual existence, such as

changes in traditional sex roles and biological sex. At the same time, sexuality remains intertwined with social institutions and policies. The "asexual" culture of the Cultural Revolution made the social management methods and institutions of the 80s begin to fail. Sex-related content began to appear more in publications, with the birth of Wu Jieping's "Sexual Medicine" and Ruan Fangfu's "Sexual Knowledge" manuals in 1985 to break people's forbidden areas. The 1988 National Art Museum of China's body oil painting exhibition attracted people who were curious about sex in a more intuitive way (Huang, 2020). The new Marriage Law and the one-child policy introduced in 1980 made some people begin to reconsider the meaning of sex in marriage, and the vast repression produced social problems that needed to be solved after the release, and prostitution, homosexual intercourse, and extramarital sex became new phenomena at that time. Moreover, "The period of desexualization may be the main reason for the cognitive rupture in the subsequent Chinese sexual and cultural system." So this sexual revolution of the 80s brought more expressions of sex in the sphere of private life, evidenced by the increased sales of pornography and sexual publications. Many studies have shown that people during this period began to frantically absorb knowledge about sexuality, whether it was sexuality, sexual performance, or other subfields such as sexual orientation. Some publications also express more open-minded ideologies. For example, "Sweet Career", released in 1989, although it was to promote the family planning policy, the portrayal of free love in the plot, the promotion of gender equality, and the weakening of the idea that women are subordinate to their husbands after marriage all reflect the cultivation of sex-related ideologies in society at that time. The proliferation of research and journals related to sex education has also highlighted the importance of love in sexual relationships as people have noticed extramarital affairs and sexual experiences.

2.3 Attitudes and perceptions of sex after the 1990s

After the change in sexual culture in the 80s, scholars devoted themselves to studying sexual sociology after the 90s. As mentioned above, Chinese sexuality has always been included in the primary circle of life, and it cannot even exist only as a physiological form. Pan (1993) proposed "sexual existence" in China to more accurately express the physical, psychological and social forms of existence of sex and emphasized the relationship between sex and gender, love, marriage, life cycle and reproductive species. Fang Gang (2002) also pointed out the importance of "sexual existence" to research when analyzing the causes of male sexual disorders. People are beginning to pay more attention to the emotional and psychological value that sex brings to them, such as the harmony of partners' sexual relationships at the level of self-feelings, and the relationship between sex and marriage and childbearing.

Y (27 years old, office clerk, male): "I was born in a small city in northwest China, perhaps due to geographical location, and the elders around me who were born in the 80s felt that they could not easily talk about sex. It seems that the marriage of the husband and wife is more for the children's sake, and sexual pleasure is not discussed. As a post-90s generation, I did not receive much sex education during my school years, and the school and parents felt that it was enough to talk about learning. Happily, my current girlfriend and I both believe that sex is vital in a relationship, and we both agree that each other needs to do something to make each other's sex enjoyable."

X (23 years old, bartender, male): As much as I would love to raise a child, if my partner refuses to have children, I will respect her and consider adopting a child. I do not want her to think of herself as a fertility machine in marriage.

K (36 years old, electronics engineer, male):

Sex and self-awareness are closely related.

Our parents' generation is in a very closed state.

When the culture of an era is not free-flowing, it may be better to be closed.

However, now the situation is entirely different, so that everyone will be more open to sex than before; more precisely, maybe closed and open coexist. The consciousness of society as a whole is formed in a short period, and it will remain the same in a short time.

Despite the age gap between the three men, they also mentioned that after the 90s, people were more open to ideas about sex, marriage, and childbearing. The other seven interviewees also mentioned to varying degrees that they had more sexual options than their elders. However, they also say that most of the work of self-liberation is done by themselves and that family and school do not play much role in the process.

S(26 years old, bartender, male): "My parents hardly discussed sex with me. Only my aunt probably said less. I started working after junior high school so that sexual maturity will be earlier. I refuse to use condoms during sex, which causes my girlfriends to miscarry. It was not until I experienced this that I realized how dangerous it was to have sex without safety measures, but it had already happened."

C (30 years old, executive, female): "My mom told me about menstruation in girls but did not talk much about sex. A lot of my sexual knowledge has been shared with me by my peers, and in fact, I still cannot say that I know a lot. I have not been in a relationship yet. When I was in elementary school, I suffered verbal violence from men, which prevented me from communicating with men generally for a long time."

The Researcher believe that the current sexual development may have reached a stage where the economy and culture develop in a more open and accessible environment, and how people cope with change in their psychological state has become essential. The internal structure of sex has gradually been opened, and more topics such as gender issues, sexual orientation, sexual equality or violence have been brought to life. Two female respondents highlighted this section:

R (26 years old, Marketing Manager, female, lesbian): "We can say that the sexual culture is much more open today than in the past, but the internal structure of sex is not developing healthily. Now the sexiness in mainstream aesthetics is that men are more masculine, women are more feminine, and they are saying some free things on the surface, but in fact, they are more stereotyped. For a long time, I couldn't accept that I was not a man because I felt that there was a phallic cult in this society. So I did have a gender identity disorder for a long time, and I still cannot reconcile it with my menstruation."

M (31 years old, Office Clerk, female): "I pay attention to whether my sex life with my husband is harmonious, but I still think that women bear too much hard work in this relationship, and it is much more difficult for women to orgasm during sex than men. Moreover, because of the teaching of women's meekness and obedience since childhood, some women are unable to face up to and put forward their own sexual needs, and they still think that this is shameful. "

Women's feedback suggests that while discussions of sexual discourse are now more direct than in the past, they are beginning to face new difficulties. The patriarchal marriage system and gender patterns cannot be changed quickly, and they begin to think about how to see and identify with themselves sexually.

Throughout the research, the question of identifying with one's sexual feelings continued to arise, perhaps the most important thing that sexual discourse needs to solve now. The study initially included thirty interviewees and planned to set the age range to compare better the views of people living in different generations about sexual culture. But the truth is that finding an interviewee over 40 is challenging. A 54-year-old woman changed her mind after the interview and asked for her interview record to be deleted. She described her uncertainty and worries about some things to the researcher and said that some of her ideas may be too bold for others, which can negatively affect her later life.

Ultimately, the researcher recruited only ten respondents, the oldest of whom was a 39-year-old gay man. Nevertheless, he began to explore sexual aspects at a very young age because of his different sexual orientations, so this man could not represent the average sexual perception level of his peers. The original intention of this study was to understand how most people in society today perceive their relationship with sexual taboos. However, this ideal group of respondents would decline the invitation to be interviewed initially. In a way, the study faced unexpected difficulties: the difficulty of recruiting respondents and the fact that most of the respondents identified were motivated by their love of self-exploration (including sex). This phenomenon proves that even if society preaches that it

is now an open and conversational environment, openness only occurs among a few people. Furthermore, these few people also bear the risk of accepting that they are different from others and repeat doubts about themselves.

3. Discussion

Sexual liberation is of great importance in ancient times and contemporary times. Even though contemporary society's view of sexual culture has changed drastically compared with the ancient society, with the development of information technology and the economy, people have reached the moment when they have to face the relationship between self and sexuality. The taboos within sexual taboos may change from time to time, and how these taboos act on the individual and affect the individual's perception of self and the world determines how the individual survives. In this process, society, families, educational platforms, and cultural promotion departments should all recognize their responsibilities. Perhaps the question to ask now is How society wants sex to exist? The stage of a close connection between sex and family and fertility may already be on the way to change, so how can sex-related problems be disassembled and defined in an era when everyone is seeking self-meaning?

According to Sangren (2000), a holistic perspective is essential for understanding Chinese culture as its institutions and ideologies operate on the same logic of individuals' production and reproduction under abstract orders that are applicable in various contexts, such as community, family, and state. Sexual liberation in contemporary China seems to be most important at present, based on the internal structure of sexual existence, gradually turning to the treatment of gender issues, both large and small, in a variety of social life. Some scholars argue that sex remains a taboo subject in China, and in some ways points to the control of politics and power (Foucault, 1990; Zha and Geng, 1992). In addition to the influence of political factors and traditional culture, the censorship of sexual content on cultural propaganda platforms currently available is also unclear. These include, but are not limited to, movies, series, and social media (Tai, 2014). Bai (2013) and Wang (2007) believe that the relevant departments in China seem to be trying very hard to establish a complete and reasonable review system on sex, but in fact, the operation is very chaotic, excessively pursuing political correctness and dogmatism. The taboo on sex in China has always intersected with various political systems, including authoritarianism and moralism (Cao, et al. 2018). In the past 20 to 30 years, many new directors have been forced to screen their films on a smaller scale, or have their films cut or even banned altogether because their films contain sexual scenes that cannot be approved. Lou Ye is one of them. He refused to cut his movie and gave up his position as director of this movie (Cinema World, 2011).

In the various areas where sexuality is intersected, the conflict facing gender issues today is also reflected. Various forms of sexual violence can be seen in power relations and family relations. In some cases, sex becomes a tool of oppression, and liberation becomes difficult (Foucault, 2006). In this process, men and women may be treated differently because of their gender. Y said in the interview that he feels that the current gender conflict is that China's current economic level and social division of labour structure cannot support people to dig deep into their sexual needs, including family relationships, gender needs, men and women think that each bears a significant burden is not partly from economic pressure. Brown (2014) mentioned that although Marx's economic determinism has been attacked by many feminists, she argues that the current status quo is due to the fact that social production has not yet reached the "higher form of the family" that Marx described, and therefore gender equality cannot be achieved at this time.

4. Conclusion

In the entire history of sexual taboos in China, this study focuses on clarifying the state of sexual taboos in Chinese society today. Although it can be called a sexual taboo, the taboo that people face

today is not the same type of taboo as the taboo of the past. The current confusion about gender identity, the conflict between the traditional parts inherited from their parents, and the new ideas they face are probably the most urgent issues to address. On top of this, new sexual cognition is developed, thereby extending the other parts of sexuality: sexual desire cognition, sexual orientation, self-exploration, and turning sex into a reasonable topic of discussion that is not suppressed by external forces. As well as paying more attention to the development of sexual culture in different geographical environments and education levels, as far as possible to carry out the publicity path of combining the family and the education system so that individuals can at least know information about sex above the average, it may be more beneficial to break through taboos.

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