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SEX WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS: SEXUALITY RESEARCH IN/ON 21ST CENTURY CHINA

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SEX WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS:

SEXUALITY RESEARCH IN/ON 21ST CENTURY CHINA

Abstract

This article examines the changing contours of Chinese sexuality studies by locating recent research in historical context. Our aim is to use the literature we review to construct a picture of the sexual landscape in China and the socio-cultural and political conditions that have shaped it, enabling readers unfamiliar with China so understand its sexual culture and practices. In particular, we focus on the consequences of recent changes under the Xi regime for individuals' sexual lives and for research into sexuality. While discussing the social and political regulation of sexuality, we also attend to the emergence of new forms of gendered and sexual subjectivity in post-socialist China. We argue throughout that sexuality in China is interwoven with the political system in a variety of ways, in particular through the tension between neoliberal and authoritarian styles of governance. We explore normative and dissident sexualities as well as forms of sexual conduct that are officially "deviant" but nonetheless tolerated or even tacitly enabled by the Party-state. In particular we highlight the dilemmas and contradictions faced by China's citizens as they negotiate their sexual lives under "socialism with Chinese characteristics".

Key words: China; sexuality; Party-state; gender; inequality

SEX WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS:

SEXUALITY RESEARCH IN/ON 21ST CENTURY CHINA[1]

Introduction: Aims and Scope

The social transformation China has undergone in recent decades has had a major impact on many aspects of everyday life, including sexual life. Since China's economic reform and "opening up" to the rest of the world, there has been a gradual relaxation of the previously very restrictive sexual morality accompanied by changes in sexual conduct, especially among younger generations (Pan, 1993; Farrer, 2002; Pan & Huang, 2013; Jeffreys & Yu 2015). These developments have been variously characterized as a sexual revolution (Pan, 2006; Zhang, 2011), and as indicative of the emergence of new forms of sexual subjectivity (Rofel, 2007; Wong, 2016; Zhang, 2015). In this context it became easier to conduct research on sexuality in China. Furthermore, the increased openness to outsiders facilitated exchanges of intellectual ideas between Chinese and foreign academics, which widened the scope of what it was possible to research. The result has been a burgeoning of publications on sexual issues in recent years, from both indigenous and overseas scholars.

While China's opening up created some degree of academic freedom within the country, there are signs that Chinese sexuality (and other) scholars are now facing renewed constraints on their work. There have always been differences between work published within the PRC and that produced by scholars based elsewhere, including those in Hong

[1] The title is a play on the Chinese Party-state's designation of its post-Mao system as "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Our use of the tag "with Chinese characteristics" is not original, but is often used playfully or ironically by scholars writing on China. For example, David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) includes a chapter entitled "Neoliberalism with 'Chinese characteristics'" and Lisa Rofel's *Desiring China* (2007) has a chapter on "Cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics."

Kong and Taiwan. Those working outside China tend to be more critical and more influenced by western theoretical traditions and are, of course, not subject to the censorship of the Chinese state. While some within China have been pushing the boundaries of what can be said and adopting more radical stances (Ding, 2016; Li, 2008; Pan, 2009; Wang, 2017), the extent to which they will continue to be able to do so is now in doubt given the tightening of state control and censorship under Xi Jinping's presidency (see Ringen, 2016; Yuen. 2015).

It is clear from existing literature that the political ordering of sexuality is central to making sense of Chinese sexual culture. The politics of sexuality in China is, therefore, a central theme of this review, not just in the narrow sense of state regulation, but also in terms of gender and sexual politics and the broader context of socio-economic inequalities. Our aim is to construct a picture of the sexual landscape in China and the socio-cultural and political conditions that have shaped it. We seek to enable readers unfamiliar with China to understand the particularities of its sexual mores and practices and especially the tensions and contradictions faced by its citizens as they negotiate their sexual lives under "socialism with Chinese characteristics." In so doing we draw attention to the connections and disjunctions between official ideology, political control and actual sexual practices on the ground.

In critically reviewing recent work on Mainland China and Hong Kong, primarily the former, we have not attempted to cover anything and everything published about sex in China. Given the extensive literature in the field we have had to be selective. We have elected to address issues that have received considerable scholarly attention and then to focus on the research that offers the greatest insight into those issues, while referencing

other contributions in passing. In some cases, where certain studies are particularly significant and perceptive, we have discussed them in some depth. Since we are centrally concerned with the contemporary sexual scene in a rapidly changing country, we concentrate attention on work published in the last decade, while contextualizing this in terms of longer term trends.

We begin by explaining how China has changed since the Mao era, how this has impacted on individuals' sexual lives and how research on sexuality developed during this period. Alongside this we chart the development of sexology in China, which can be seen as contributing to the construction of a new ideal sexual subject in China (Wong, 2016). We then move on to consider literature on the socio-cultural, economic and political factors shaping individual sexual lives, taking in normative and dissident sexualities, the emergence of queer communities in China, commercial sex and then the broader sexual economy and sexualization of culture. Finally we raise issues about the conditions facing scholars and activists in China today, what this presages for the future of "sex with Chinese characteristics" and how researchers might respond to the challenges facing us.

Socio-political context: the changing parameters of gender and sexual lives in China

Sexual lives are always lived within wider social contexts. There is a tendency, in both Chinese and western cultures, to think of sexuality as a natural human attribute and a uniquely private area of life, insulated from wider socio-cultural influences. Critical scholarship has challenged these assumptions, drawing attention to the sociality of sexuality, to the cultural shaping of sexual desires and practices, the non-sexual

motivations that may influence sexual conduct, the social conventions governing sexual relationships and, overall, the way the sexual is embedded in everyday life (Jackson & Scott, 2010). Of particular significance to a sociological understanding of sexuality is that it is always gendered: gender and sexuality intertwine in complex ways, in particular in the institutionalization of heterosexuality (Jackson, 2006). In the Chinese context this is further complicated by the political control of sexuality and the political uses to which it has been put.

The 1970s were a pivotal decade for the development of both Hong Kong (then still a British colony) and Mainland China. For Hong Kong it was a time when the colonial administration began to take the wellbeing of its inhabitants more seriously, often seen as a result of serious disturbances in 1967, representing a "watershed" in Hong Kong's governance (Cheung, 2009). In China, the 1970s saw the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the accession to power of Deng Xiaoping in 1979, signaling a radical change of direction in China's policies. It was Deng who initiated China's economic reform and "opening up" to the wider world.

The changes in Hong Kong were less dramatic, but were significant. In the 1970s access to education was widened, some limited welfare provision was established and old patriarchal practices, notably polygyny, were abolished (Lee, 2004). It was then that Hong Kong began its progress towards being the wealthy "world city" it is today, albeit one with appallingly stark inequalities between rich and poor (Goodstadt, 2015). A distinct sense of a Hong Kong identity also began to emerge (Tsang, 2004), which has survived Hong Kong's handover to China in 1997; indeed it has been strengthened by

China's recent intervention in Hong Kong's affairs and by a more generalized resentment of "mainlanders," who are now present in Hong Kong in increasing numbers (Kwok & Chan, 2017). Hong Kong retains some autonomy under the handover agreement, crucially far greater freedom of speech than in China, although there are fears that this might be further eroded. These developments have taken place against the backdrop of major transformations in mainland China.

At the end of the 1970s China's new regime had begun the process of replacing a centrally planned economy with one based on market principles. The subsequent rapid economic development and social change under Deng's and subsequent administrations have had a significant impact on personal life as well as the overall structure of society. In the first place they reduced direct party-state control over individual lives. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 its leadership has been concerned with regulating the sexual and intimate lives of citizens. Part of Mao's revolutionary project was to raise the status of women. In addition to mobilizing women into the labor force, measures were introduced to improve women's position in marriage. The Marriage Act of 1950 prohibited arranged marriage and abolished polygyny (notably well ahead of colonial Hong Kong). Marriage was now supposed to be founded on mutual affection and companionship, though in rural areas arranged marriages were still common (Yan, 2003). While the Mao era is often seen as one that minimized gender difference, differences between men and women continued to be seen as "natural", including in relation to their sexuality (Evans, 1997) and women workers received lower pay than men (Liu, 2007). While there is no doubt that Mao's reforms improved women's

position relative to men, it also exerted considerable influence over their intimate relationships.

In the Mao era the CCP and its associated state bureaucracy operated at every level of society from the top down to local communities. In urban areas the *danwei* (work unit) system worked as an effective means of control. The *danwei* was far more than a workplace: it also provided a range of welfare and other services, depending on its size, including pensions, housing, health care and child care. Thus people both worked and lived within *danwei* and its leadership (party cadres) oversaw every aspect of their lives. In her study of women who had worked all their adult lives in *danwei*, until being laid off in the early 2000s as a result of the economic reforms, Jieyu Liu (2007) paints a vivid picture of how this system controlled personal lives and relationships. The *danwei* leadership found marriage partners for women workers, pressured them to marry politically suitable men, allocated marital homes (to the husband if the couple were in different *danwei*) intervened in marital disputes and after the introduction of the one child policy, enforced it ruthlessly. Because women lived in the *danwei*, at close quarters with their colleagues or husbands' colleagues, privacy was difficult to maintain. Any family dispute or difficulty, any breach of propriety or morality, was likely to come to the attention of their leaders and thus lead to further intervention in their personal business. The *danwei* system also affected individual's relationships in other ways. Zhang (2015) draws attention to the problems of couples who worked in different *danwei*. Because it was close to impossible to change one's workplace if a couple worked at some distance from each other they were effectively kept apart for long periods.

This system gradually declined over the reform era as state owned enterprises were either privatized or abandoned many of their former functions in order to remain competitive. State-owned enterprises and government organizations, including universities, continue to have a party-secretary who monitors conduct at work, but individuals have become much freer from direct Party surveillance in their private lives. As the system of job allocation gave way to a capitalist style labor market, individuals applied for their own posts. While this reduced job security and increased competition for jobs, it also gave individuals some choice (within the limits of the market and their qualifications) and made it easier to move between posts and occupations.

The situation in the countryside was different. Women in the countryside in the Mao era still lived within traditional patrilocal and patrilineal families, and while they contributed to production had little financial independence (Gao, 1994). In the reform era the de-collectivization of agriculture and the growth of a market economy led to the development of rural industry. This gave some rural women the chance of employment and thus an independent income; it also "lessened their dependence on the household and their husband, and increased their autonomy" (Gao, 1994, p.85). Most were, however, still restricted to rural areas by the *hukou* (household registration) system, introduced in the Mao era to classify the population into rural and urban and prevent migration to the cities. While still in place today, the *hukou* system has been gradually relaxed to allow (technically temporary) migration to cities to provide labor for expanding market production. Beginning in the early reform era, when the first Special Economic Zones were set up, migration has increased rapidly. At first most of this migrant labor force comprised young single people, men working in construction and both men and women,

especially the latter, in factories. Young women workers (*dagongmei*, working sisters) thus escaped the patriarchal control of their families and communities and, despite grueling working conditions, could dream of a freer life (see, e.g. Pun, 2005). Some of these young women turned their back on long hours and low pay to work in the sex industry and capitalize on the economic and social opportunities this afforded them (Ding, 2016). More recently whole families have been on the move, with consequences for their negotiation of gendered expectations of work and care (Choi & Peng 2016), while China's booming cities are creating new demands for workers, including as domestic servants and nannies for the expanding middle class (Gaetano, 2015). Urban populations have also become more mobile as people moved in search of educational, career or social opportunities. This more mobile population is far less susceptible to state control, as well as family and community surveillance, than was once the case. A further consequence of greater geographical mobility is the physical separation of different generations within a family, which has contributed to increasing the independence of young people, strengthening the autonomy of nuclear families among younger generations and a renegotiation of the norms of filial piety (*xiao*), with less emphasis on the tradition of obedience to elders and more on reciprocal and emotional bonds (see Liu, 2016; Zhang, 2016).

As economic reform progressed, rising living standards and the growth of consumerism helped engender a new sensibility among more affluent Chinese citizens, in which the frugality and collective norms of the past gave way to the individual pursuit of consumption and pleasure, including sexual pleasure (Rofel, 2007; Zhang, 2015), which also began to inspire the aspirations of those less privileged (Gaetano, 2008, 2015). In her

influential work, *Desiring China*, Lisa Rofel (2007) analyses this new sensibility in terms of the construction of "desiring subjects." Through her conversations with young women and men, she observed the emergence of a new idea of human nature emerging in China in the 1990s and early 2000s, which had "the desiring subject at its core: the individual who operates through sexual, material and affective self-interest" (p.3). The desiring subject marks a turn away from a class based subjectivity towards becoming cosmopolitan transnational subjects. Whereas in the 1980s, people she met still positioned themselves in relation to political transformations in China, the younger generation, with no memory of the Mao era, were uninterested in politics and more concerned with expressing their feelings and pursuing their own desires and ambitions through consumption, sexual practices and relationships, making money, and travelling. They aspired to become cosmopolitan, transcending their locality, but with some uncertainly about how to inhabit this desiring subjectivity appropriately. Rofel makes it clear that this subjectivity was not constructed in opposition to the state but was part of a reconfiguration of the relationship between government and citizenship and was constructed through individuals' engagement with public culture.

This new subjectivity is gendered, reflecting a repudiation of Maoist gender politics, "which is said to have emasculated men, masculinized women, and mistakenly equated the genders" (Rofel, 2007, p.117). It is thus associated with new forms of femininity and masculinity. In discussing how young heterosexual women negotiate this new subjectivity and the cultural landscape that gives rise to it, Rofel recognizes the potential heterogeneity and instability of individuals' negotiations of the socio-cultural changes they are living through. She nonetheless sketches some key elements of shared desire

these subjects embody. She highlights how they distance themselves from their mothers' imagined past in the Mao era, which they see as a time of frugality and deprivation, of sacrifice and constraint. They see themselves "as having within their grasp the possibility of becoming free from all constraints" (p.118), and envision themselves as freed from both political control and a selfhood embedded in kinship. This reconstructed past, derived from films and novels rather than their mothers' own experience, involves "structured forgettings" of the gains women made in the Mao era – for example freedom to choose their spouse and the ideal of companionate marriage (p.123). They also depict the Mao era as one of sexual repression, bemoan the sexual conservatism of their parents' generation, and present themselves as being savvy about sex. Yet they also worry "about how to be a sexually open woman and maintain respectability" (p.127). While seeking romantic love and hoping for modern marriage and affectionate husbands, these single women are aware of the constraints that married women face. And so they should be. More recent research suggests that Chinese wives are still expected to take responsibility for housework, childcare and maintaining filial obligations towards parents and in-laws (Cao, 2017; Cheung & Tang, 2017; Du et al., 2015; Zhang, 2016). It is thus entirely probable that these "free" young women's future would be less rosy than they imagined.

While young women seek a transcendence of locality through consumer identity, Rofel (2017) argues that they also undergo "a domestication of cosmopolitanism by way of renegotiating China's place in the world" (p.111). This raises the question of how they could be simultaneously Chinese and cosmopolitan. These young women embody a tension between "transcendent desire" and "protective Chineseness." Their Chineseness is manifested through being positioned as the ultimate and "proper consumers" (p.112)

within China's rapidly developing consumer culture. Being Chinese also comes to the fore in their attitude to foreigners. While consuming western culture as a sign of their cosmopolitanism, the young women Rofel met were also critical of western, and particularly US, culture as inferior to Chinese civilization. They also saw sexual liaisons with or marriage to westerners as problematic, potentially exploitative, and carrying with them overtones of ethnocentric or racist attitudes to Chinese women.

In the decade since *Desiring China* was published, the PRC's consumer society has grown exponentially as the middle class expanded so that many more Chinese citizens are drawn into the aspirational culture and subjectivity that Rofel describes. The reaffirmation of a supposed "natural" femininity and its distinctiveness from masculinity has also persisted and is manifested in many of the issues we will discuss. It remains the case in China, we would argue, that "the cosmopolitan self one should embody is both implicitly non-gendered and easier for men to achieve" (Rofel, 2007, p.117). Certainly, the greater sexual freedom the reform era has brought with it offers more opportunities to men, with fewer costs. Not only do men not have to worry that sexual activities and sexualized consumption will damage their reputations, but sex can actually express a man's status and *pinwei* (good taste), as Song & Lee (2010) reveal in their study of men's lifestyle magazines. Most of these magazines are Chinese versions of western titles and marketed to wealthy men. They "equate the consumption of luxury items and women with the embodiment of cultural capital" (Song & Lee, 2010, p.117). Of particular note are the soft porn magazines, such as the Chinese version of FHM (For Him). This magazine is seen in the UK, where it originated, as a "lad's mag", read mainly by young working-class men. In China, however, its partner publication, *Nanren Zhuang*, "is

categorized as an upscale, high quality commodity", with its images of scantily clad "sexy" women serving to demonstrate to the reader "what he could have if he adopted the lifestyle of high-level consumption" (p.215). That this magazine can become a marker of good taste *(pinwei)* and status, it is suggested, indicates that "in China hyper-male sexuality is constructed as a privilege of the rich" (p.216).

Further insight into the construction of masculine subjectivity in the reform era, and the importance of sexuality within it, is provided by Everett Zhang's (2015) study of China's apparent "impotence epidemic." Like Rofel, Zhang sees the aspirations generated by China's market economy as producing particular kinds of subjectivity to which desire is central. In contrast with the Maoist era in which collective goals were promoted, individual desire, including sexual desire has been promoted. The desire for sexual enjoyment can now be articulated and, moreover, sexual potency is seen as central to manhood. It is in this context that impotence, Zhang (2015, p.15) argues, is to be understood, as signifying "an ontological shift in human existence in China from downplaying desire to promoting the desire to desire."

While China's consumer culture has provided a market for sexualized commodities and given rise to new subjectivities, there are other reasons for the changing the sexual behavior of the populace in the reform era. One issue is increased geographical mobility, freeing many young people from parental surveillance. Another, and important, contributing factor in the liberalization of China's sexual mores, noted by numerous researchers and commentators, is the one child policy, introduced in 1979 (Jeffreys & Yu, 2015; Pan, 1993, 2006). This has recently been modified to a two child policy in order to deal with the population imbalances, especially the ageing population and skewed sex

ratio, associated with the original policy. The origins and consequences of China's population policies, however, are complex and not unidirectional.

Alongside the concern with limiting population growth – which had existed among elements within the CCP even in the Mao era – was a longstanding concern with the quality of the population (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005). The 1950 Marriage Act prohibited marriage if either of a couple suffered from any of a diverse list of medical conditions, including a catch-all provision "any other diseases regarded by medical science" as making individuals unfit for marriage (McMillan, 2006, p.70). This provision, which has remained in altered form in later versions of the Marriage Act, was intended to ensure the birth of healthy children and was backed by a compulsory pre-marital medical check-up but, according to Winckler & Greenhalgh (2005, p.63), attempts to impose it were abandoned because the health service found it impossible to implement. In addition to the one child policy the Deng and subsequent administrations have also given renewed attention to the quality of children and to educating the population on maternal and infant health. Pre-marital health checks were made compulsory under the 1994 National Eugenics Law, later renamed the Law on Maternal and Infant Health. Couples required a certificate confirming they had no conditions disqualifying them from marriage before they were permitted to marry. New regulations made this voluntary in 2003 (McMillan, 2006). MacMillan describes the system in a Beijing maternity hospital in the late1990s as involving a battery of tests marked 0 for normal and 1 for abnormal; thus "marriages, families and futures [were] being decided on the basis of binary logic" (2006, p.71). In addition, women underwent an invasive physical examination of the vagina, vulva and anus, presumably, as McMillan comments, to see if anything might interfere with

childbirth. While such practices, in addition to the compulsory limitation of births to a single child, could involve intrusive policing of women's bodies, the ultimate consequences for women have been more mixed. The concerns about the "quality" of children are not limited to maternal and child health, but affect all aspects of child-rearing, for which women remain largely responsible. More positively, the one child policy has reduced the pressure on women to have numerous children, which is welcome to many. The urban Chinese population seems to have accepted having an only child, no longer needing compulsion to ensure compliance (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005).

The policy has also affected the gendered expectations of the only children born as a result of it, the oldest of whom are now having children themselves. This cohort of children became the "only hope" of their parents (Fong, 2004), which meant that children of both sexes received unprecedented levels of investment from their parents, intensifying as China's marketizing economy became increasingly competitive (Zhong & Li, 2017), thus contributing to raising their "quality." Since girls no longer had to compete with brothers for parental attention and investment, this undermined the past privileging of boys so that their educational and career opportunities were enhanced. This generation grew up accepting the one child policy and thus free from the pressures to have large families, which had been a feature of China's patriarchal lineage system.

The one child policy meant that sex could no longer be seen as primarily procreative. Pan (1993, 2006) views this as providing the basis for a "sexual revolution" in China with a new emphasis on sexual pleasure and fulfilment in marriage. The separation of sex from its reproductive function, combined with the economic independence of the younger generation, also made it possible for young urban adults to envisage and practice pre-

marital sexual intimacy. This change in sexual mores became evident in major urban centers such as Shanghai from the 1990s (Farrer, 2002, 2010, 2011) and has since apparently become widespread (Farrer, 2014; Jeffreys & Yu, 2015; Pei et al., 2007; Zarafonetis, 2017). Many young heterosexual women, however, contemplate engaging in sexual intercourse only with a future husband and the Chinese still place a premium on female virginity (Wang & Ho, 2011; Wang, 2017), leading some to continue to defend their virginity (Xie, in press; Zarafonetis, 2017). The de-coupling of sex from reproduction has been seen, in western contexts, as creating the preconditions for sex as recreational and ultimately, with many shifts over a century or making possible an acceptance of alternatives to heterosexuality (Giddens, 1992; Seidman, 2003, 2015). We cannot assume that China will follow this same path. Same-sex relations are still stigmatized in China, even in Hong Kong (Kong, 2010, 2012, 2016; Suen, 2015, 2016; Tang, 2011, 2014b). China's family centered morality and its Confucian underpinnings make it unlikely that alternatives to heterosexual marriage will be accepted in the foreseeable future. Political developments since 2000 have, if anything, strengthened the emphasis on the family and its role in upholding socialist morality.

As China moved towards a market economy it lost much of its socialist rationale, although the reformed system has been characterized as "socialism with Chinese characteristics." This concept, a means of "tethering economic reform to neoliberal capitalism" (Rofel, 2007, p.111), was initiated and defined in the report of the Seventeenth Congress of CCP in 1982 (Cheung, 2012; Solé-Farràs, 2008). As the market reform progressed further, Marxism lost much of its salience as a means of legitimating economic marketization as a route to true socialism. It was in this context that, at the

beginning of the 21st Century, Confucianism was revived as a valued part of China's cultural heritage (Bell, 2008, 2010) and deployed as a key element of "Chinese characteristics." Disavowed under the Mao regime and attacked as a feudal remnant during the Cultural Revolution, Confucianism began to be rehabilitated under Hu Jintao's presidency. In a speech delivered in February 2005, Hu noted: "Confucius said, 'Harmony is something to be cherished'" (Bell, 2010, p. 9); a few months later he instructed party cadres to build a "harmonious society" (ibid). Confucianism has also featured in China's self-representation to the wider world. It was very prominent, for example, in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which "highlighted Confucian themes, quoting the *Analects of Confucius* at the opening ceremony and in booklets handed out to visiting journalists" (Bell, 2010, p.ix). Confucius Institutes were set up in many countries from 2004 onwards to promote Chinese language and culture and are also widely seen as a means of increasing China's soft power, if not necessarily effectively (Hartig, 2012; Lahtinen, 2015; Yang, 2010). Confucianism, it has been argued, "provides new discursive resources for continuing authoritarianism" (Cheung, 2012, p.205; see also Wu, 2014; Xu, 2017). Central to this is the emphasis on harmony.

The idea of "harmony" or "the harmonious society" became increasingly prominent in the Party-state's political rhetoric and has also been used by the Hong Kong government. This emphasis on harmony makes it difficult for those subject to authority to question it: they are then disrupting harmony. We have elsewhere characterized this ideology as "hierarchical harmony" (Ho, Jackson & Kong, 2017), since it inculcates subservience in both the public sphere and the private sphere of intimacy, limiting what it is possible to say and do. Confucianism is gendered at its core in that male authority starts with the

family and permeates every level of the societal hierarchy until it reaches the center of political power, be that the Emperor or President (Sung & Pascall, 2014). The family was, within Confucianism, considered "the foundation of the state" (Mencius, as cited in Guo, 2010). Although the expectation that women will be subservient and obedient within the family has been challenged since the founding of the PRC, the idea of the family as a fundamental source of social stability, and of women's responsibility for maintaining harmony within it, has persisted and has arguably been strengthened during the reform era and reaffirmed within CCP propaganda. This is exemplified by a 2006 Party organized campaign to find China's "10 Outstanding Mothers", who should demonstrate a range of wifely and motherly virtues, be successful career women and be patriotic and loyal to the CCP (Guo, 2010, p.49).

The family in contemporary China is seen as the "cell" of society, the basis of society conceived as a living organism (Sigley, 2002, 2006). As Sigley argues, from this perspective Chinese society can only remain healthy if "all its constituent elements function properly;" hence family stability "lies at the heart of the…concern of China's elites with the issue of social stability" (Sigley, 2006, p.49). This goes some way to explaining why sexuality should be seen as politically important in China, in combination with "the Party-state's doctrine on socialist spiritual civilization" (Sigley, 2006, p. 47). Hence the Party has sought to promote monogamous marriage and control any sexual relations that might threaten it and thus also threaten social stability though what Sigley (2006, p.47) terms "the policing of virtue." It is clear, however, that recent trends in sexual conduct indicate that the endeavor to keep sex within the confines of heterosexual monogamy have not been successful. In opening up and promoting economic growth

China has adopted forms of neoliberal governance that allow for innovation and for the construction of new enterprising, aspirational and consumption oriented desiring subjects (Rofel, 2007). The consequences of this for the sexual choices these subjects make has been a source of disquiet among conservative elements in the Party. In turning its "socialist subjects into capitalist consumers," and thereby creating profitable business opportunities (Sigley, 2006, p.54), the Party-state has faced certain dilemmas. The cultural industries, which the leadership sees as important to promoting "spiritual sustenance" and enhancing morality are a case in point. Sigley (2006, p.55) quotes a 2001 State Council document that reaffirms the importance of the cultural market but laments the existence of content that is "vulgar" and "pornographic," which is deemed to harm social stability. These pronouncements clearly reveal the tensions between a neoliberal market economy and the Party-state's more paternalistic and authoritarian attempts to guide and control its population, already evident in the early 2000s. This tension has heightened with the growth of the internet and new social media, so that more and more cultural production – and also activism – has been taking place beyond Party-state control. In the context of the current Xi regime in China, the conservative forces within the CCP, which Sigley describes, have come to the fore, with tightening controls over those seen as disruptive of social harmony (Fincher, 2016; Yuen, 2015).

Since Xi Jinping assumed office as the General Secretary of the Communist Party and President of the PRC in 2012, the regime has become more authoritarian and has been described as "a perfect dictatorship", that is "relentless, determined, and unforgiving" (Ringen, 2016, p.ix). Xi has dealt ruthlessly with political opponents and cracked down on real and imagined oppositional forces with brutality. In some ways it may be seen as

harking back to the Mao era with increased use of overt propaganda and a cult of personality around Xi himself. Xi's concern with strengthening his own control of the Party and the Party's control over the populace has been seen as deriving from a number of factors; these include his aspiration to put the CCP on a firm footing for the future as it approaches its centennial, his perception of external threats to China and a determination to restrict foreign influences, for example through NGO activities and the internet, that potentially challenge the Party-state's authority and disrupt social stability (Lampton, 2016; Womak, 2017; Wu, 2014; Xu, 2017). With the growth of internet activism in China, campaigns for democracy in Hong Kong, the pro-independence movement in Taiwan and continued unrest in Xinjiang and Tibet, all of which have received extensive and sympathetic global media coverage, Xi's repressive moves make some kind of sense.

The increasing authoritarianism in China is beginning to have consequences for those campaigning around sexuality. In 2015 five young feminists were arrested in Beijing for planning to distribute stickers protesting about sexual harassment on public transport. They were subject to criminal detention (though they have since been released). While their action posed no obvious threat to the Party-state, it occurred against a backdrop of a general crackdown on "security risks", which apparently now include feminist and sexual rights activists (Fincher, 2016). NGOs affiliated with or funded by international organizations have also come under tighter control, including those providing support for sexual minorities or services such as abortion for unmarried women. Some have been forced to close because they cannot conform to new regulations that severely curtail their activities (Yuen, 2015). Sexual slurs are also being used against political dissidents, some of whom are being forced to "confess" to sexual misdemeanors on state television as a

means of shaming them and subjecting them to moral condemnation (Zeng, 2016). In an online article, feminist and political dissident Zeng Jinyan comments: It is not safe to engage in community work or collective actions to fight for sexual freedom, individual rights or the rights of the community groups that one is in … One has to be cautious about sex lest one produces truths about oneself that can be converted to political capital useful for political oppression by the authorities. (Our translation from the Chinese original).

Sexuality research in China

The beginnings of academic interest in sexuality in China date back to the Republican era in the early twentieth century when intellectuals began to engage with western scientific ideas (Chiang, 2010; Kong, 2016; Sang, 2003; Wong, 2016). The foundation of the PRC along with the turbulent events preceding it – war with Japan and civil war – did not foster further development of these early explorations. There were some publications on sexuality in the Mao era, mostly emphasizing the "natural" basis of male and female sexuality (Evans, 1997), but it was in the reform era that the field of sexuality research began to be developed further. After China's opening up, science and technology were promoted as central to progress and the state's modernization program. In this climate a sexual science began to emerge (Kong, 2016; Wong, 2016). At first this research was dominated by a bio-medical model of sexuality in the interests of promoting "healthy" sexual development and relationships and combatting sexual ignorance. The first survey of the sexual habits of the Chinese population was conducted in 1988-9, since when others have followed. More generally, survey methods have continued to dominate sexuality research within China.

A central problem with such surveys is the lack of ethical governance in Chinese social science research, so that research subjects often receive no assurances about anonymity and confidentiality (Huang & Pan, 2009). Huang and Pan argue that this situation, combined with a "culture of conformity", impacts on the results of research. They use the phrase "culture of conformity" to refer to the dominant cultural norms that prompt Chinese individuals to comply with the mainstream in terms of surface attitudes, which are probably not in accordance with their actual experiences (Huang & Pan, 2009). This, they suggest, is not merely a strategy of self-protection, but also a form of "collective unconscious" shaped by cultural mores and by Confucian ethics, which stress the maintenance of harmony within personal relationships and social interactions (Huang & Pan, 2009). As a result, participants are highly likely to respond to survey questions according to their imagined normative answer, which casts doubts on the validity of much Chinese research.

In addition, concerns about censorship may lead researchers to play safe, to present superficial findings and avoid being too critical, especially when dealing with potentially politically sensitive issues. Perhaps for this reason, work published in China tends to take a "problem and solution" approach (e.g. Liu, 2012; Ding & Zhang, 2014; Sun & Mei, 2011), thus aligning research with government agendas. For example, Zhai (2013) defines sex-work as a social problem, discusses the potential for legalization then suggests that rights for sex workers should be combined with social control in the interests of greater social stability and harmonious development. Qualitative research, which might lead to less conformist conclusions, is underdeveloped. The potential of qualitative research to break through cultural conformity is revealed by the work of one

of the pioneers of qualitative sexuality studies in China, Li Yinhe. She has managed to breach the conventions of conformity in gathering detailed, and often colorful, accounts of participants' sexual lives. Her published work, however, seems to present only the raw data – fascinating stories but with little analysis (see, e.g. Li, 2008).

Given the longstanding concern about sexuality as a source of social instability, along with contacts between Chinese and overseas sexuality activist and researchers, it is sadly not surprising that the intensification of authoritarianism is affecting those engaged in sexualities research. Whereas Sigley (2006) noted that the debates over sexuality in the early 2000s had afforded space to more radical voices, such as those of Li Yinhe and Pan Suiming, that space now seems to be rapidly contracting. In October 2014, under the headline "sexologist punished for swindling research funds", the *China Daily* (a Party paper) reported than Pan Suiming had "received an administrative penalty for swindling State scientific research funds," had been demoted and would be made to retire early. The only "swindle" mentioned was his "failure to provide invoices of payments to sex workers during interviews" (Yang, 2014, n.p.). Our colleagues in mainland China tell us that censorship is tightening up so that they struggle to have their work published, that funding sources, especially those from overseas are no longer accessible to them, that controls on what they can teach have been tightened and that a number of events based upon sexualities research have recently been cancelled or held clandestinely.

The limitations Chinese scholars have faced over the years explain why it has been Chinese scholars based overseas (e.g. Liu, 2016; Zheng. 2015), along with foreign, Taiwanese and Hong Kong researchers, who have conducted most analytical and critical inquiries into sexuality in China (see, e.g. Chen 2017; Farrer, 2002, 2010; Kam, 2013;

Rofel, 2007). Hong Kong scholars' contribution to the field has been significant. They have enjoyed greater access to mainland China since the handover, yet work under very different conditions from mainland scholars. Hong Kong's university system dates back to the colonial era and was based on a British model. This included the academic freedom essential for critical inquiry and for potentially contentious fields, such as sexuality studies, to flourish. It took some time, however, for the study of sexuality to become established in the humanities and social sciences here, beginning in the 1990s and growing since then. The relatively late start may, in part, be attributable to Hong Kong's rather conservative sexual culture reinforced by a strong Christian influence – a heritage of British colonialism (see e.g. Ho & Hu, 2016). There are now, however, a number of leading scholars in the field based at Hong Kong's universities working on both Hong Kong and China (see e.g. Choi, 2011a, 2011b; Choi & Luo, 2016; Ho, 2006, 2008, 2014; Kam, 2010, 2013, 2014; Kong, 2010, 2016; Suen, 2015, 2017; Tang, 2011, 2012, 2017; Tsang 2017; Yau, 2010). Some NGOs have also been active in conducting surveys, for example the Association for the Advancement of Feminism's survey on women's sexual desires and experiences (Chan, 2008) and The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong's (2014) regular surveys of youth sexualities. Scholars in Hong Kong have also worked with activists. For example, despite hosting a queer film festival and an annual pride march, there are no rights for same-sex couples or protection from discrimination for sexual minorities. Academic researchers are providing some of the necessary ammunition for campaigns for such rights (Wong, 2006; Tang, 2009; Suen, 2015, 2016, 2017). Some sexuality researchers report still feeling marginalized relative to the mainstream of their various academic disciplines. There are also signs that Hong Kong's

academic freedoms as a whole may be under threat as China becomes more interventionist in Hong Kong's affairs, which does not bode well for critical academic work of any kind (Carrico, 2018). For now, Hong Kong scholars continue to play an important role in representing China's sexual culture to the wider academic world. A central feature of that culture is the concern with "normality."

Normative and dissident sexualities

Being "normal", behaving "normally", or like everyone else, is crucial to the Chinese. This is reflected in the title of a recent collection on same-sex sexualities in China; *As Normal as Possible* (Yau, 2010). This way of thinking has deep roots in Chinese cultural traditions, associated with the Confucian emphasis on harmony and fitting in to one's allotted place in a hierarchical social order. Since the establishment of the PRC, normality has been defined politically and enforced, to greater or lesser degrees, by the Party-state. Sexuality has not escaped such regulation, but how sexual normality has been defined has changed over time while remaining highly heteronormative. The Mao era could be said to be one that was profoundly anti-sexual, with tight censorship severely restricting any open representation or discussion of sex. In seeking to raise the status of women and guard against western bourgeois sexual ideas and anything that might seem "decadent", sexuality was subject to rigid controls, confined to marriage and not even a fit subject for scientific enquiry. The ideal socialist citizen of this period was largely asexual. Since the reform era, however, new versions of normality have emerged.

In her insightful analysis of the development of Chinese sexology, Day Wong (2016) discusses how, since research on sexuality resumed in the reform era, it has been dominated by a bio-medical model aimed at producing the ideal socialist citizen. While drawing on western scientific ideas, Chinese researchers were careful to screen out elements of western sexual culture seen as "decadent" or "excessive". The promotion of sexual health and sexual knowledge was seen as part of China's modernization project, countering the sexual ignorance and silence of the Mao era and eradicating "feudal, irrational ideas about sex" (Wong, 2016, p.72; Kong, 2016). Sexual pleasure was promoted as essential to a harmonious marriage. Chinese sociologists promoted an indigenous Chinese concept, *xing fu* (sexual happiness, 性福), a pun on "happiness' (*xingfu*, 幸福), to enable people to make sense of their sexuality. In the past, marital partners were expected to provide each other with *xingfu* ('happiness'). Now, they are obliged to provide sexual happiness (*xingfu).* As Pan & Huang (2007) have pointed out, in Chinese culture, *fu* ('happiness') does not simply refer to pleasure, but to having *fu* or bliss, a state of contentment that can be associated with fortune, harmony, spiritual abundance, and relief from anxiety.

This deployment of sexual science also drew on notions of civilization, quality (*suzhi*) and progress. "The process of becoming civilized required the acquisition of scientific knowledge about sex, which helps improve not only marital relations but also the quality (*suzhi*) of the population" (Wong, 2016, p.72). Wong argues that this new sexual science produced a new ideal sexual subject by creatively blending two apparently contradictory discourses. On the one hand, the construction of a socialist spiritual civilization calls on people to embrace collectivist values such as devotion to the nation, and to cultivate the

core values of a harmonious society: self-restraint, harmony, and balance. On the other hand, in China's reform era a more neo-liberal discourse of self-reliance has emerged, within which individuals are expected to master their own lives and advance themselves through their own efforts, rather than living the largely pre-destined and egalitarian life promoted in the Mao period. "The ideal form of subjecthood is to incorporate both the qualities of a scientifically minded, enlightened subject and the communist-collectivist values of a socialist subject" (Wong, 2016, p. 79).

The ideal sexual citizen is supposed to exercise self-restraint in avoiding sex outside marriage and seek harmony and balance within marriage. The only fully legitimate form of sexual expression in China is heterosexual, marital and monogamous. In actuality, however, pornography and prostitution are widespread despite being technically illegal. This is perhaps surprising given the power of the Chinese state, implying that it is ineffective in its regulatory efforts. As we will discuss later, the picture is more complicated, with state agencies themselves implicated in sustaining supposedly deviant practices. In some other respects the state is very effective in regulating its citizens' intimate lives, as was the case with the one child policy. As the privileged only children created by this policy reach adulthood, they expect to have more autonomy in their lives than previous generations. They can be seen as desiring subjects (Rofel, 2007), influenced by the neo-liberal discourse of self-reliance and relative freedom of choice in daily life. They have also been seen as leading China's purported "sexual revolution" (Zhang, 2011).

The idea that China has undergone a "sexual revolution" is popular among both Chinese and Western scholars (Pan, 2006; Burger, 2012) but can be misleading. First, it should

not be taken as implying a "freeing" of sexuality from "repression", or the resurgence of "natural" sexual proclivities. This essentialist understanding of sexuality has been rigorously critiqued from a variety of perspectives among scholars of sexuality (Foucault, 1981; Gagnon & Simon, 1973, 2004; Jackson & Scott, 2010; Jeffreys & Yu, 2015). What we are witnessing is the construction of new forms of sexual subjectivity and changes in sexual mores which are not necessarily liberating. In evaluating the changes that have occurred, it is particularly important to recognize the persistence of gender inequality in China and that, in some respects, it has been exacerbated by the shift to a post-socialist society (Hong-Fincher, 2014; Liu, 2015). While educated young women have more choices and opportunities open to them, the Maoist emphasis on gender equality has been abandoned in favor of promoting forms of femininity that increase women's vulnerability to exploitation and reinforce their traditional roles and responsibilities within their families (Hong-Fincher, 2015; Liu, 2007, 2015)

One of the most striking features of Chinese society is the centrality of marriage and family. The Party-state emphasizes the importance of the family as the foundation of social stability and harmony (Sigley, 2002; 2006; Guo, 2010; To, 2013, 2015). Unsurprisingly, then, a central aspect of China's "culture of conformity" is the pressure to marry. Marriage is near universal; only a tiny proportion of Chinese citizens never marry (Jeffreys & Yu, 2015). There is some concern, on the part of both the state and parents of young people, over rates of marriage. The number of new marital unions contracted fell by 9.1% between 2013 and 2015 (Jeffreys & Yu, 2015). In part this decline simply reflects the lower proportion of young unmarried people in the population due to the one child policy. It is also a result of a skewed sex ratio, with far more men of marriageable

age than women and a rising age at first marriage. Although many young people are delaying marriage until their late 20s and early 30s, few choose not to marry at all. The 2010 census revealed that by the time they were 34, 93.6% of men and 98.2% of women in the PRC had been married (UNDP, 2012). This situation is peculiar to the PRC; the comparable figures for the Hong Kong SAR from the 2006 census were 70.8% and 77.4% respectively, closer to the pattern in other East Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan (see UNDP, 2012). In China it may even be seen as preferable to have been married and divorced, especially if a child resulted from the marriage, than never to have married at all. Certainly most of our mainland Chinese graduate students find the choice to remain single unimaginable – even when they are writing doctoral theses emphasizing the patriarchal nature of Chinese marriage!

Since marriage "is culturally understood as *the* rite of passage to adulthood" (Kam, 2013, p.6), remaining single carries with it social stigma for both the individuals concerned and their families. This stigma is not gender neutral: China is unusual in having a form of state-endorsed stigmatization of unmarried women, through the propagation of the idea of *sheng nü*, or leftover women (Hong-Fincher, 2014; To, 2015, Zheng et al., 2016). Although men are at greater risk of being left single than women, especially poorer and rural men, it is women who face most social disapproval. The official definition of *sheng nü* promulgated by the Chinese Ministry of Education (2007) is "urban professional women who are over 27 year- old who have high educational level, high salary, high intelligence, and attractive appearance, but also overly high expectations for marriage partners, and hence are 'left behind' in the marriage market" (To, 2015, p.1). The most significant aspect of the 2007 official definition, which has been endorsed by the Chinese

government and continuously propagated by the CCP's All-China Women's Federation, was that the single women themselves were to blame for being unable to find husbands: they overemphasized their career ambitions and professional goals to the detriment of their "personal happiness", understood as requiring marriage and motherhood. In line with China's paternalistic culture, the government's critique of single professional women served as a "benevolent warning" for them not "leave it too late" to find a husband and to have children (To, 2015). The *sheng nü* discourse circulates throughout the Chinese media and increases the pressure on women to marry. Men also face pressure to marry. Indeed, Confucian norms of filial piety prescribe marriage and fathering children as the most important of filial obligations (Evans, 1997). Unmarried, childless men and known as "bare branches." The difference is that an urban man with a decent income remains marriageable for far longer – he could still be considered a "catch" into his forties.

Women, however, lose their value in the marriage market once they are past their youth – particularly after the age of 30. Since women cannot legally marry until they are aged 20 and women in higher education are often discouraged from dating until they finish their studies, young educated women have only a small window of opportunity in which to find a partner. There is also an expectation that they will have their first child before they are 30, as it is considered too dangerous to do so later, certainly after the age of 35. This concern reflects the emphasis placed on producing a "high quality" child (Zhu, 2010). Motherhood is also virtually compulsory: "Childlessness is not read as choice, but as pathology: either she or her husband is too sick, too old or just 'too weak'" (Evans, 2002, p.348).

The ideal sexual citizen, then, does their duty to their family and nation by marrying and producing a child, or now possibly two children – and the vast majority of mainland Chinese citizens comply, although this by no means indicates that their sexual relations are confined within monogamous marriage. Much sexual activity goes on outside marriage, whether in the form of pre-marital sex, same-sex relations or commercial sex.

Sexual Diversity and Sexual Minorities: Chinese *Tongzhi* and *Lala*

One effect of the greater freedoms afforded by China's opening up has been the emergence of *tongzhi* and *lala* communities in major cities, increasingly visible since the 1990s (Kam, 2013; Kong, 2016; Rofel, 2007, 2012). The literal meaning *tongzhi* is "same will," the Chinese rendition of "comrade", and thus has political connotations. The term was used by the founding father of the Republic of China, Sun Yat Sen to refer to comrades in the republican movement, and by the CCP up to the end of the Mao era. It has since been appropriated by Hong Kong and Chinese gay activists as a label of self-identification. *Tongzhi* can also be used of lesbians, sometimes feminized as *nütongzhi*, but lesbians in mainland China more often describe themselves as *lala* (collectively in English usage, *lalas*). These forms of identification are seen as less stigmatizing than the alternative, *tongxinglian*, homosexual (Lau et al., 2017).

The emergence of these identities, and of same-sex desires as the basis of communities and activism, is relatively recent in China but same-sex practices, here as elsewhere in the world, have a history. Interpreting such histories is problematic, not only because of limited resources, but because of the danger that we read history (whether European or

Asian) through our own modern understanding of sexual identities (Sang, 2003; Chiang, 2010). We cannot, therefore, claim that there *were* lesbians or homosexuals in the past since those terms would have had no meaning: these categories were relatively modern western inventions with consequences for identities individuals constructed for themselves (Chiang, 2010; Foucault, 1981); similarly, we cannot assume that same-sex desires and practices have the same meaning and same implications everywhere in the world (Kamano & Khor, 2006; Rofel, 2007); we certainly should avoid any "ahistorical desire to project the Chinese onto a the world map of universal sexuality" (Sang, 2003, p. 37).

Bearing in mind these caveats, there is some evidence of the acceptance of same sex eroticism in China, at least among men, up to the 19th century (Hinch, 1990; Louie, 2002). Some traces of sexual encounters between women have been found in late imperial literary and documentary sources, although there is some debate about whether women would actually have had the opportunity to pursue such liaisons (Evans, 1997; Sang, 2003). It is generally argued that same-sex eroticism was not condemned in China provided individuals fulfilled the filial and patriarchal obligation to marry and reproduce (Hinch, 1990; Louie, 2002). The introduction of western science in the early 20th century and the translation of early sexological works, especially those of Havelock Ellis, imported the concept of heterosexuality into China (Kong, 2016; McMillan, 2006; Wong, 2016). Howard Chiang (2010) argues that this was not a simple appropriation of western ideas, but involved much discussion and contestation associated with what he calls "epistemic modernity", an apparatus through which, and at a particular historical moment, "a new science of sexuality gained epistemological grounding in China"

(p.631). Unlike those, including Sang (2003), who maintain that homosexuality was not, in early 20th century China, seen as the basis of individual identity and those who place the origins of a Chinese '*scientia sexualis'* in the postsocialist period, Chiang convincingly demonstrates that both emerged in the Republican era. He thus places the creation of the homosexual, as a category of person, earlier than many other scholars and offers a detailed analysis of the conditions that gave rise to it. His conclusion, however could be endorsed by many, even if their time frame differs: "as little as a century ago, the question of sexual identity did not even fall within the parameters of Chinese thinking – for in China there is no such thing as homosexuality outside epistemic modernity" (p.650).

Homosexuality has never been categorically illegal in China. In the Mao era there was no official mention of homosexuality; "it was assumed not to exist", but "official silence masked a widespread view of homosexuality as a violation of the natural heterosexual order" (Evans, 1997, p.206). In the post-Mao era, homosexuality continued to be understood in terms of the biomedical model. In 1978 it was defined as a sexual disorder in the first version of the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders (CCMD). Gay men and some lesbians were vulnerable to arrest and administrative detention under the catch-all crime of "hooliganism" (*liumang zui*). Homosexuality has since been implicitly de-criminalized by the deletion of hooliganism from law in 1997 and de-medicalized by being removed from the list of mental illnesses in 2001 (Gao, 1995; Kong, 2016; Wu, 2003).

The revival of science and social science in the reform era did make it possible to begin research on homosexual life. The earliest studies of homosexuality in the reform era (e.g.

Li & Wang, 1992) were of male homosexuals only and conducted from a biomedical framework, positioning homosexuals as "other" to both authors and readers (Kam, 2013; Kong, 2016). Increasingly, with the official recognition of the existence of male homosexuals in 2003 due to the AIDS epidemic, biomedical approaches were increasingly reconceptualized within a public health framework, with gay men being seen as an 'at risk' and risk engendering group (Kong, 2016; Wong, 2016). In associating homosexuality with HIV/AIDS, the state's public health agenda further stigmatized homosexuals and provided a rationale for authorities to arrest and harass them (Kam, 2013; Wong, 2015). It also, however, led to funding for NGOs providing support services, while organizing around HIV and AIDS helped build a *tongzhi* community. This effectively retained the focus on male homosexuals, privileged them in terms of funding relative to lesbians and also contributed to the lesser visibility of lesbians.

The development of queer communities and activism from the 1990s, along with the production of queer film, literature and other cultural productions (e.g. Bao, 2015, 2016b; Chan, 2017; Sang, 2003) began to attract attention from a new generation of scholars. These researchers, influenced by western social and cultural theory and qualitative methodologies, were less concerned with seeing homosexuality as a problem and more interested in understanding the everyday life experience of lesbians and gay men. More sociological literature has explored the development of gay and lesbian identities lifestyles and the wider sociocultural context in which particular sexualities are constructed (e.g. Kam, 2013; Rofel, 2007; Zheng, 2015). Gay male behavior, however, continued to receive far more attention than that of lesbians partly, but not only, because of its association with HIV transmission. Much of this research has been undertaken by

gay male overseas Chinese and Hong Kong scholars (e.g. Cho, 2010; Kong, 2010, 2012, 2015, 2016; Suen, 2015, 2016). Although *lala* lives are less well documented, there are now ethnographical works on *lalas* in Shanghai (Kam, 1993) and Beijing (Engebretsen, 2014) and lesbians in Hong Kong (Tang, 2011).

Within mainland China, the scope *lalas* and *tongzhi* have for organizing and meeting is narrow. While they can make creative use of public space using dramatic strategies such as staging "gay weddings" (Bao, 2016a), sexual minority communities are generally only tolerated if they keep a low profile and do not engage in overt activism. Although gay men and lesbians have created new sexual spaces for themselves, these spaces are always under surveillance and are often raided and closed down (Kong, 2011; Rofel, 2010). Although the public health concern had opened up political space for LGBTQ groups, their services concentrate heavily on health-related programs and their scope of freedom is strictly delimited by authorities (Cao & Guo, 2016). In order to gain legitimacy, they have to adopt a "non-confrontational" approach and strategically collaborate with the government (Cao & Guo, 2016, p.507).

As part of the Party-state's moral agenda (Sigely, 2006), public display of homosexuality is seen as potentially destabilizing. In 2004 the CCP launched "a campaign to clear violent and sexual content from the media" (Tu & Lee, 2014, p.984). Homosexual topics were banned because they were seen as being "against the healthy way of life in China," and "[i]n 2009, more than 10 gay web sites in China reportedly were forced to close or had their accounts deleted by their server hosting companies due to pressure from the authorities" (Tu & Lee, 2014, p.984). A worrisome recent development is that the new NGO law introduced in 2016 has further restricted NGOs' capacity for political

resistance. Now foreign NGOs must "register with the Ministry of Public Security and allow the police to scrutinize all aspects of their operations, including finances, at any time" and "must not undermine or damage China's national interests" (McBride, 2017, n.p.).

The potential for political activism is also hampered by inequalities within LGBTQ communities. LGBTQ individuals differ in terms of their origins, class, and lifestyles, and then group themselves in accordance with these demarcations (Wang, 2015). For example, urban *tongzhi* differentiate themselves from rural *tongzhi*; middle class *tongzhi* differentiate themselves from "money boys" (male sex-workers); young *tongzhi* differentiate themselves from old *tongzhi*. The intersectionality of these identities (e.g. a rural money boy who has low social status and education) can result in exclusion even within LGBTQ communities for those seen as "bad gays" (Wang, 2015, p.111). Moreover, sexual minorities are not always non-conformist. LGBTQ identities can be complicated by the political differentiation between respectable and bad citizens (Wong, 2015). The idea of *suzhi* (quality) refers to such a hierarchy, as those who restrict their performance of LGBTQ identities to the private sphere and yet behave publicly as a respectable citizen can gain a certain degree of tolerance (Wong, 2015). Rofel reports that the term *suzhi* (quality) was widely used among the gay men she met to distinguish themselves from less educated and cosmopolitan gay men, in particular money boys from rural origins who were seen as "polluting" their culture (Rofel, 2007, p.104).

As this contempt for money boys indicates, sex work is one manifestation of inequalities within the *tongzhi* community. Working as a money boy provides a means by which a young rural gay man without resources can move to the city in the hope of opportunities

for sex with men and finding a community of like others (Kong, 2012; Rofel, 2010; Zheng, 2015). The clientele of money boys are wealthier privileged urban men. Zheng (2015) found that red-collar (party member) and gold-collar (rich) *tongzhi* preferred commercial sexual transactions with money boys to forming sexual-romantic relationships with other men, which they saw as placing them at greater risk of disclosure and social disgrace. Zheng links this phenomenon, and the differential privileges among *tongzhi* on which it depends, to the neoliberal ethos of modern China rooted in the state ideology that "prizes economic profits, individual responsibilities, and free choice" (p. 97). Through buying sex on the one hand and forming a heterosexual family on the other, these successful wealthy or powerful *tongzhi* manage to construct themselves as normal postsocialist subjects in accord with the neoliberal logic (Zheng, 2015). Gold and red-collar *tongzhi*, as the beneficiaries and positive models of the postsocialist neoliberal ideology, reinforce their grasp on power through the capitals they possess. Money boys, at the other end of the hierarchy, experience inequalities but also hope to become "normal citizens" by providing sexual services. In between the two, the gradated internal stratification of *tongzhi* community is also visible through different levels of leisure venues and gay bars (Rofel, 2007; Zheng, 2015).

The desire to achieve "normality" to be "as normal as possible" among both *tongzhi* and *lalas* is understandable given the constraints they face (see Yau, 2010). This has given rise to two key issues for academics, activists and *tongzhi* and *lalas* in general. The first of these is the extent to which "global" (generally western-led) gay strategies and identities are applicable in the Chinese context. The second is dealing with the pressure to marry. The two are interrelated in that they are a response to the importance of the filial

obligation to marry and how this affects the relationships gay men and lesbians have with their natal families.

Managing the marriage problem

"Coming out" to friends, colleagues and especially family is an important part of the gay life narrative in western societies (Plummer, 1995). This is often seen as essential to being "true to oneself", honest and authentic. It may therefore not be a move of such importance in a society with a more relational understanding of selfhood. It is also sometimes seen as too confessional and confrontational to be appropriate in Chinese societies (see Chou, 2000; Kong, 2016). While it is important to recognize the cultural specificity of Chinese societies and avoid assuming some universal gay identity and community into which *tongzhi* might fit, there are problems with a non-confrontational adaptation to the status quo, particularly if it contributes to the invisibility and silencing of those with non-normative sexualities (Kam, 2013; Liu & Ding, 2005). This approach has been characterized as "reticent politics" (Liu & Ding, 2005) and more scathingly "the politics of public correctness" (Kam, 2013 p.89).

One influential and controversial proponent of this political stance is the Hong Kong scholar Chou Wah-Shan. Chou argues that in Chinese societies "coming home" is more appropriate than "coming out" (Chou, 2000). He refers to a Chinese tradition of silently tolerating, rather than openly accepting, same-sex sexuality; this tradition, with its emphasis on harmony is said to be quite distinct from the virulent homophobia evident in western societies. It now, he maintains, enables *tongzhi* to introduce their partners into the family circle and have them accepted without fully acknowledging the nature of their

relationship. While Chou might be correct in identifying certain forms of homophobia as peculiarly western, there are a number of problems with his argument. First, as Liu Jen-peng & Ding Naifei (2005, pp.32-33) note, it collapses thousands of years of Chinese history into a homogenous "tradition" and, moreover, "claiming to enlarge the space of survival for queer persons in the present by invoking a homophobic free site in some idealized pre-colonial past…too easily slips into the service of residual disciplinary forces" and serves to maintain the "normal order."

The picture of the harmonious, tolerant Chinese family that Chou (2000) presents is contestable; some Chinese families, no doubt, do extend tolerance and acceptance to their LGBT members, but most do not do so. It is argued that, even if it exists, silent tolerance constitutes a form of symbolic violence whereby the existence of *tongzhi* and *lalas* is erased (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013; Liu & Ding, 2005). Writing primarily of Hong Kong and Taiwan, Liu & Ding (2005) argue that it condemns sexually dissident individuals to the shadowy spaces of what they call "the socio-familial continuum" and allots them "the responsibility (at their expense) for the upkeep and of the wholeness and harmony of the very continuum wherein they do not have a place" (p.32). In mainland China the forces that keep *tongzhi* and *lalas* in the shadows are much stronger.

Lalas and *tongzhi* do need some way of managing their relationships with both lovers and their wider families. Given that conformity and fitting in are so central to Chinese culture and that marriage is virtually mandatory, many *tongzhi* and *lalas* marry, either in a heterosexual marriage or a what has been variously termed a "nominal", "contract", "cooperative" or "performative" marriage in which a lesbian and gay man contract a marriage to maintain a public facade of heterosexuality while continuing with their

alternative lifestyles (Choi & Luo 2016; Engebretsen, 2017; Liu, 2013). In Chinese, this is usually referred as a "marriage of convenience" or "x*inghun*" (Liu, 2013, p.495). Such marriages have been facilitated not just by the existence of *tongzhi* communities in Chinese cities, but by the internet, which has become increasingly important in connecting sexual minorities in China (Liu, 2013; Wong, 2015) and providing a platform for advertisements for marriage partners (e.g. Tianya.cn) (Liu, 2013).

One of the main reasons for entering into such a marriage is to please parents. This is not simply a matter of parents' personal desires; as Choi & Luo (2016) note, parents face gossip and disapproval from others in their family and community if their offspring remain unmarried, which intensifies the pressure on their lesbian and gay children. Among the Shanghai *lalas* featured in Kam's study, marriage was the single biggest source of stress in their lives. Many were already married and most considered marriage unavoidable – there simply was no option. Those who were unmarried experienced constant pressure from parents and mostly agreed to matchmaking and blind dates organized for them in order to appear heterosexual. Those who were married faced other problems: they found themselves leading double lives and had difficulties making time and space to see their girlfriends (Kam, 2013).

In this context it is easy to see why cooperative marriage might seem an attractive alternative. Among the *tonghzhi* and *lalas* interviewed by Choi & Luo (2016) in Northern China, such a marriage was seen by most as acting out "a well-intentioned and laregly harmless lie to make their parents happy" (p.266), though a minority thought the strategy too risky. Although cooperative marriage exemplifies the agency of sexual minorities in a hegemonic heterosexual social environment, and some commentators have suggested

that cooperative marriage households might become a semi-public sphere for the development of a "queer kinship network" (Wong, 2015, p.735), the public performance of heterosexual norms can indeed strengthen the mainstream gender hierarchy (Wong, 2015). Due to the purpose of cooperative marriage, gay men usually want their lesbian partners to possess feminine qualities and lesbians often require their male partners to be appropriately masculine (e.g. financially independent) (Liu, 2013; Wong, 2015).

There were predictions that the Chinese government would legalize same-sex marriage, since this might be an effective means of gaining international recognition for advancing human rights without significant domestic political costs (Hildebrandt, 2011). This now seems unlikely. Even if same sex marriage were to be legalized it might not immediately solve the problem. The *tongzhi* that Zheng (2015) met in Dalian found the idea alien. They did not support gay marriage and could not imagine availing themselves of it even if it was a possibility – they would not want to announce their "deviance" by marrying their lovers. While some tongzhi in China do support and campaign for gay marriage (Choi & Luo, 2016) there seems, in any case, little hope of it happening in the near future given the politics of the current regime. The paradoxical nature of cooperative marriage in the Chinese context is that this strategic response to the hegemonic cultural order can contribute to its continued legitimacy, particularly in the context of a regime that is increasingly using the Confucian political imagination to justify its authoritarian rule. This strategy has political consequences.

Most analyses of co-operative marriage have not framed this sexual choice in political terms, but simply emphasize the "near universal imperative" to marry (Engebretson, 2017 p.163). Engebretson's account is based upon two case studies of contract marriage

(*xinghun*) and online advertisements for partners and focuses on how such marriages are contracted and their potential pitfalls:

> … a *xinghun* marriage seeks to perform compliance with the social and familial order by faking marriage and therefore requires, strict, ongoing compartmentalization between a secret (or tacitly open) lesbian/gay personal life and the heteronormative social façade (pp.163-164).

She maintains that this is seen as more appropriate than same-sex marriage for Chinese gays men and lesbians, representing an ideal compromise between personal desire and social and family duty. This choice fits with the desire of individuals to be normal. But, as her case studies reveal: "The *xinghun* strategy, rather than resolving pressure, generates post-marriage complications that reaffirm the dominance of the heteronormative family" (Engebretson, 2017, p.164). Pressures to marry not only weigh more heavily (and earlier) on women than men, but so to do pressures after marriage. As Engebretsen (2017) points out, lesbians may experience more difficulties after marriage as responsibility for maintaining good relationships with parents and in-laws rests with the wife, in addition to entertaining visitors and caring responsibilities. Moreover the problems do not end there. Couples in *xinghun* marriage face their own and their parents' desire for children and fear of raising them outside heteronormative family. In other words, Engebretson recognizes that co-operative marriage is an attempt to subvert or modify prevailing norms, but argues that "success can only be relative and temporary" (pp.177-178). At best, this will allow people to buy time to potentially work out a better future.

Engebretsen (2017) cites Wang Yingyi's (2016) MPhil thesis as "a compelling analysis of *xinghun* arrangements, including what Wang considers a new ethics of lesbian-gay solidarity as a result of such conjugal cooperation" (p.181) but does not take up this issue. Wang's thesis does highlight many problems in cooperative marriages but suggests that where it works and is amicable and egalitarian it can provide a new way of living gay lives. The question remains as to whether this is "queering" the institution of heterosexuality or simply succumbing to its hegemonic position in China.

China's Sexual Marketplace

The place of non-normative sexualities in China raises some rather different issues in the case of commercial sex. It is most certainly seen as "deviant" in terms of China's "socialist morality," yet there is considerable evidence indicating that it is thoroughly integrated into the fabric of Chinese society. The sex-trade has received a great deal of attention from both Chinese and overseas scholars (Ding, 2012, 2016; Ding & Ho 2008, 2013; Jeffreys, 2004, 2012; Jiang, et al., 2012; Pan et al., 2011; Wen et al., 2013; Zheng 2009, 2011). This body of work provides further means of analyzing the complex interconnections between cultural, political, economic, interpersonal and personal life in modern China, raising interesting issues about the politics of sexuality and its place within the neoliberal market economy.

In a cultural environment where familial values are seen as the foundation of social harmony, it is not surprising that China's laws and policies are not friendly to the sex industry and that sex-workers experience restrictions on their freedom to the detriment of

their wellbeing (Boittin, 2013; Chin & Finckenauer, 2012; Jeffreys, 2004). Prostitution was officially outlawed soon after the establishment of the PRC and was rigorously suppressed during the Mao era. From the beginning of the reform era, however, commercial sex has flourished despite its continued illegality. Since the 1980s China has shifted to control and regulation of commercial sex rather than attempting to eradicate it (Gil & Anderson, 1998; Ren, 1999). Since the sex industry is often associated with corruption (Leung, 2015; Osburg, 2016), it has been subject to periodic crackdowns in recent years associated with Xi's anti-corruption campaign. Yet it is usually low end prostitution that is targeted and authorities often turn a blind eye to where corruption more usually occurs – in the high end private clubs catering to the party and business elite. Attempts to suppress the sex industry are generally sporadic and are usually soon abandoned. The reason is simple: despite its outlawed status and the public stigmatization of sex-workers, commercial sex is not a fringe activity in China. We will argue it is, in fact, essential to China's economic prosperity and integral to its business practices. Before elaborating on this, it is first necessary to consider what research tells us about the complex, segmented and highly stratified sexual marketplace.

This sexual marketplace caters for clients from the richest to the poorest sections of society and draws its service providers from a range of social backgrounds. Yet most of the extensive literature on sex work has focused almost exclusively on a particular category of female sex workers, those who sell sex in brothels and similar establishments. Additionally, much research on sex work in China has been preoccupied with its problematic aspects. Aside from social stigmatization (Wong, Holroyd, & Bingham, 2011), female sex workers have been closely associated with AIDS, with the emphasis

primarily on lower class prostitutes and their clients rather than considering how sexual practices higher up the social ladder might contribute to HIV transmission (see Uretsky, 2016). There is, therefore a copious literature on the health risks and health needs associated with commercial sex (e.g. Cheng, Han & Huang, 2010; Choi, 2010; Tucker, Ren & Sapio, 2010). Other issues that have received considerable attention are sex workers' vulnerability to violence (Li, 2012) their quality of life and psychological wellbeing (Jiang et al., 2012; Wen, Hao & Hong, 2013); subjective well-being (Monk-Turner & Turner, 2010) and the psychological stressors to which they are subject (Zhang et al., 2015). In research produced within China, aside from a few exceptions (e.g. Ding, 2016), sex workers are often considered as a problematic group waiting to be "rescued" or "rehabilitated." Thus, academic researchers collude with the state's public health discourse to construct an image of sex workers as a source of social harm. In other words, the stigmatization of sex workers comes not only from the state, but also from the Chinese research community.

There is no doubt that women sex workers do face a number of threats to their health, safety and well-being as well as structural constraints and inequalities, especially those at the bottom end of the hierarchy. They also, however, have agency and reflexive self-understanding which cannot be fully captured by structural analysis or by only considering the problematic aspects of the sex trade. In is increasingly recognized that it is important to understand how sex workers actively negotiate, or even take advantage of, seemingly oppressive structural conditions (Cheung, 2013; Ding, 2012, 2016; Ho et al., 2013; Yuen et al., 2014; Zhai, 2013).

It is also essential to take account of the diversity within the sex industry, since those working within it do so under differing conditions and in a wide variety of settings in the sex industry, entertainment industry and beauty industry (Ding & Ho, 2008, 2013; Tsang, 2017a, 2017b; Tsang & Lee, 2013). Literature in the area has expanded to cover a highly diversified range of transactions, services and actors involved in a variety of establishments including hair salons, saunas, foot massage and massage parlors, karaoke clubs, bars and hotels. Sex workers include and service those with different sexualities; sex work is not just about female sex workers (Kong, 2012), although it is women and their male clients who have received the most academic attention. Male sex workers most often appear in research on tongzhi communities (e.g. Zheng, 2015).

Moreover, sex workers' self-understanding varies depending on their position in the sexual division of labor. While the term 'sex-work' was introduced in the West as an alternative to the stigmatizing connotations of "prostitution", some Chinese women involved in commercial sexual transactions resist this label; rather than accepting it as de-stigmatizing, they see it as reducing their work to sex and failing to acknowledge the emotional and other types of labor that their occupation involves and prefer to be called "*xiaojie*" (Ding et al., 2013). Literally *xiaojie* means "young lady" and used to be a polite form of address to young women, before becoming almost exclusively used in mainland China in relation to commercial sex.

Many of China's sex workers, male and female, are internal migrants, moving from rural areas to urban centers, like the women in Ding's (2013, 2016) study of the Pearl River Delta area. For such women, sex work is seen as providing better prospects than long hours, poor working conditions and low pay in factories or as domestic servants; the work

is much more lucrative and more flexible (Choi, 2011a; Liu, 2011). It also enables them to see themselves as "modern" women embracing a "cosmopolitan" lifestyle in contrast to the "backward" rural areas from which many of them originate (Ding & Ho, 2008). They thus buy into the new subjectivities offered by the neoliberal ethos associated with China's modernization project. Some Chinese sex-workers pursue their dreams of social advancement by moving abroad. Every year, thousands of Chinese women travel to other Asian countries and the United States in order to engage in commercial sex work and other types of sexual labor in locations where it is more lucrative than in China. Most migrant sex-workers travel of their own volition rather than being victims of trafficking or sexual slaves (Agustín, 2007). While there are many individuals and agencies involved in "the sex trade supply chain" (Wong et al., 2010), such as pimps, agents, mommies, escort agency owners, brothel owners, and drivers, migrant sex workers are not always helpless victims. The social, economic, and political organization of the transnational sex trade is far more complex than admitted by the "moral crusaders" of the human trafficking world (Chin & Finckenauer, 2012). It is nonetheless the case that this movement, like labor migration in general, is fueled by the gap between richer and poorer regions and countries.

There is little research on sex tourism in China or on Chinese men abroad, but a few studies indicate that it certainly exists. For example, the South-Western province of Yunnan often attracts sex-tourists because, in Han Chinese men's imagination, its ethnic minority women are thought to be exotically alluring and sexually liberated (Otis, 2016a). Taiwanese men travel to China in search of sexual services, or access sexual services when travelling for business (Chen, 2017; Shen, 2008, 2014). The working-class

Taiwanese men who feature in Chen's (2017) study were motivated to visit Southern China for a number of reasons. Sexual services were cheaper there and they could afford to frequent a better class of establishment than would be possible for them at home. In this environment a man who was relatively low in status and power could play with a different kind of masculinity, being "a big man" or a "big lover" (p.930). The men also reported better sex than they received either from Taiwanese sex-workers or their wives and girlfriends.

There are other indicators of male travelers' access to commercial sexual services in the literature: foreigners and overseas Chinese as well as visiting businessmen were found to be among the clientele of a high-end karaoke bar in Dongguan (Tsang, 2017a). Rich Chinese businessmen and influential officials travelling within the country can expect their hosts to provide them with sexual companionship (Uretsky, 2016). When they travel abroad these men also commonly exploit sexual services in poorer, more peripheral countries (Chang & Chen, 2012). This may not occur in the context of sex-tourism per se but as part of business travel (see Hoang, 2015), which, in the context of globalized commercial networks is helping to fuel the growth of the international sex trade (Bernstein, 2007b, p.4).

Sex workers within China are not all poorly educated rural migrants; in higher end establishments workers are less likely to be from humble backgrounds. Inasmuch as there are many types of sex workers, there are also varieties of sexual services and sexualized labor from straightforward sexual transactions to those purveyed by escorts, hostesses and masseuses, some of who might also sell sex. They frequently provide emotional labor, romantic entanglements and "bounded authenticity" as temporary girlfriends (Bernstein,

2007a; Tsang, 2017a). There are also those that the feminist economist He Qinglian labels "grey women" (*huise nüxing)*, who form relationships with wealthy men (as cited in Osburg, 2013). Such women occupy a position between the respectable "white" world and the "black" world of prostitution and distance themselves from sex workers because they are often well educated and their relationships with their wealthy patrons involve far more than sex (Uretsky, 2016; Zurndorfer, 2016). These "grey women" fit into the top three levels of prostitution (out of a seven-tiered hierarchy) codified by the Chinese police (Jeffreys, 2004; Zurndorfer, 2016).

The first tier, *ernai* (second wife), is akin to a mistress. She is usually provided with an apartment, an income and gifts in return for sex, companionship and sometimes wifely domestic services. Many Chinese businessmen (including those from Hong Kong and Taiwan) retain the services of an *ernai* (Osburg, 2013; Shen 2008, 2014; Uretsky, 2016; Zhang, 2011). Those attached to wealthy Chinese or overseas businessmen are usually young and well educated – white collar workers or students. This is not the case with all *ernai*. Through her ethnographic research in Ningbo and Guangzhou, Xiao (2011) demonstrates that their social backgrounds vary. It is common for "second wives" of Hong Kong men working in China, such as truck drivers, to be rural migrants to urban regions. The second tier, *baopo* (hired wife), accompanies her patron on business trips and to entertainment venues and is paid according to an agreed-upon rate for each period. Being seen with a young and attractive woman can give a rich man "face" (*mianzi*). (Burger, 2012)

The third level, *santing* (three halls) or *sanpei* (three companies), includes women who work as hostesses in karaoke bars, dance halls, bars, restaurants, and teahouses. They are

paid, sometimes in the form of commission, by the establishment for which they work and receive "tips" from men for singing, dancing or drinking with them – and if they leave with them and offer "special services" (see Burger, 2012; Osburg, 2013; Uretsky, 2016; Zheng, 2012). These kinds of establishments are also stratified, catering to clients with varying incomes. Hostesses in these establishments offer much more than sex, especially in the top end bars, where they are expected to converse with elite men. In her study of a high end bar in Dongguan, Eileen Tsang (2017) found that men wanted to establish a degree of genuine intimacy with the workers, and sometimes longer term relationships. The women were primarily well educated and put some effort into presenting themselves as sophisticated and cosmopolitan, reading and keeping up to date with current affairs and finding out what their clients liked.

Workers in the four lower levels of the commercial sex hierarchy are more obviously exchanging sexual services for money. These are *dingdong* girls (doorbell girls) who work in hotels as prostitutes, *falangmei* (working in bath houses, foot massage parlors, hair salons etc.), *jienü* (those who work on the streets), and *xiagongpei* (women who engage in paid sex with China's transient male workers) (Zurndorfer, 2016). The variety of forms that transactions take within China's sexual economy is indicative of the ways in which it is interwoven with wider socio-economic relations.

The Political Economy of the Sex Industry

The global restructuring of capitalist production and investment that has taken place in China since its opening up has had consequences for commercial sex that are far more

profound than most sociologists and sexologists ever choose to consider. The scale of the sexual economy in China is huge. "According to the World Health Organization, China has the largest commercial sex workforce in the world, with an estimated 10 million men and women so employed – more than 300,000 in the city of Beijing alone" (Zurndorfer, 2016, p.9). Guan Qingyou, an economist with Minsheng Securities, estimated that the sex industry in China contributes $164 billion annually to the national economy (as cited in Guo, 2014). Following a crackdown on the sex trade in Dongguan in 2014, *The Economist* (2014), drawing on Chinese sources, reported that prostitution generated 10% of the city's GDP. In China as a whole it has been claimed that prostitution contributes 6-8% of China's annual GDP (Burger, 2012). Given that sex workers need taxis, clothing, cell phones, apartments, and cosmetics, many other sectors of the economy are connected to and benefit from sex work, making it a cornerstone of the economy (Burger, 2012).

The contribution that commercial sex makes to the economy is politically significant because China's growing economic growth and prosperity is vital source of the CCP's legitimacy. In addition to the substantial revenues generated directly and indirectly by the market for commercial sex, the sexual economy plays an important role in facilitating business deals (Osburg, 2013, 2016; Uretsky, 2016) and providing a means for the survival of those, such as migrant workers, who find it hard to earn enough to support themselves and their families by other means (Choi, 2011b; Liu, 2011). Higher up the social scale it provides educated women with a means of enhancing their social and cultural capital (Tsang, 2017b), which might enable them, when they move on from sex work, to improve their economic situation. The sexual economy thus serves multiple

purposes from contributing to the wider economy to providing a living for those who work in it.

Given that continued economic growth and prosperity is essential to maintaining the legitimacy of the party-state, it is not surprising that past attempts during the reform era to limit it have failed. While sporadic campaigns against prostitution ("sweeping yellow") may serve to bolster the legitimacy of the Party-state in seemingly upholding "socialist morality" (Sevastopulo, 2014; Shao, 2014), the government cannot afford to do too much damage to China's expanding economy and its standing in the world. This is why crackdowns are selective, directed against the more visible lower end of the sexual market so that establishments serving the elite survive. For example, it is reported that in the "sweeping yellow" exercise in Dongguan in 2014, "the high end bars and hotels, whose owners have close 'political' connections with the police and local governments, emerged unscathed" (Tsang, 2017b, p.452). Where campaigns aim higher up the social scale, they usually target the leadership's political opponents; accusations of corruption are often politically motivated (Ko & Weng, 2012).

The paradoxical nature of the sex industry in China is that both crackdowns on it and the sustaining of it contribute, directly or indirectly, to the legitimacy of the Party-state and thus to maintaining social stability. Understanding this paradox is essential to explain why China's sex industry continues to flourish despite the repressive apparatus of the Chinese state. Nonetheless, until very recently there has been little attention paid to the relationship between the sexual and wider economy or to the political utility of sex work for the legitimacy of the government. In order to understand the contradictions between China's laws (anti-prostitution) and practices (loose implementation), it is necessary to

examine the *raison d'être* of the sexual industry – how both the political system and the political economy gain from it. There are some recent studies that begin to cast light on the contradictions between public morality and the political utility of the sexual economy by exploring the links between high end commercial sex, business practices and Party-state oversight and regulation of the economy (Osburg, 2013, 2016; Zheng 2015; Uretsky, 2016). We now turn to consider these studies in some detail given the importance of their findings and analyses, which not only illuminate the ways in which sexualized labor is integrated into China's political and economic life also much about Chinese understandings of masculinity and the intersections between gender, sexuality and class.

Elite men, sexual consumption and Chinese business practices

The interest in elite men's consumption of sexual services and its integration into business practices is understandable given how it ties in with the much-researched issue of *guanxi* (Barbalet, 2017; Bian & Zhang, 2014; Yang, 2002; Qi, 2013). It also reveals much about the political and economic utility of sex-work to the Chinese establishment. *Guanxi,* literally "relationships", involves networks of reciprocal bonds of support and trust between individuals, which are essential to doing business in China. *Guanxi* networks are also implicated in the corruption underpinning much wealth generation in China (Osburg, 2016), although guanxi should not simply be equated with corrupt practices (see Barbelet, 2017; Yang, 2002). The ritualized process of business entertaining through which *guanxi* is cultivated is known as y*ingchou*. The provision of sexual services has become so much part of *yingchou* that it can be said that "the *guanxi*

machine is now oiled with the bodies of women who serve as mediators providing the glue that finally binds relations" (Uretsky, 2016, p. 45).

Sexualized entertainment has long been noted as an established part of East Asian business culture (Allison, 1994; Hoang, 2015; Lee, 2008) and found its way into China from the 1990s as part of the economic reform and "opening up" to global markets (Liu, 2002; Otis, 2012; Yang, 2002). Much of this takes place in karaoke (KTV) clubs, which were originally imported into China by Japanese businessmen (Zheng, 2012) and have come to play a key role in the "nightly carousing with business partners, mistresses, and paid hostesses that dominates the after work lives of most businessmen in China" (Osburg, 2016, p.163). The pattern of such evenings out generally includes a banquet, with copious amounts of alcohol consumed in rounds of toasts and then moving on to private rooms in a KTV club or bar in the company of hostesses, sometime supplemented by visits to other venues where sexual services are available such as saunas or massage parlors. While interactions with hostesses are very sexualized, these women do not explicitly sell sex but can, and often do, offer a "special service" off site. In any case, men frequently end such evenings in the company of a sex-worker, whether a hostess, masseuse or a woman summoned to their hotel room.

Elite men's sexual consumption practices have been attributed to a reaction to Maoist repression, said to have produced a feeling of emasculation in men, or simply as a result of men's increased sexual freedom in the reform era. Tiantian Zheng (2012) seems to endorse the former view when she says that "men remembered the Maoist era as an era of emasculation" (p.658) and that they "claim sexual consumption as a weapon against the socialist state" (p.662), a form of rebellion against and freedom from state control.

Osburg (2013, 2016) contests this view, arguing that these men's activities have more to do with cementing homosocial bonds and business relationships than a reaction against past Maoist oppression. Men might see their activities as a rebellious practices, but we are more inclined to Osburg's view, which is more in tune with that of Uretsky (2016). All three researchers concur, however, in linking men's behavior to the performance of a particular form of masculinity. The ethnographic studies conducted by these three researchers reveal the complexity of the social relations in which and through which elite men's consumption of commercial sex occurs, but differ in their analyses of the socio-political context.

The pictures of elite sexual consumption painted by these three ethnographers have many features in common; the differences of emphasis and interpretation among them arise from their varied research interests, the regions in which they conducted their research and their own gendered locations. Of the three, Zheng (2006, 2007, 2009, 2012) is the most concerned with sex work per se and has written extensively on the subject. Uretsky's (2008, 2016) research is focused on sexual risk, in particular how men's sexual consumption facilitates HIV transmission, as well as how it is a product of state regulation of business. Osburg (2013, 2016) is more interested in the lifestyles of the new rich, the blurred boundaries between legality and illegality, and hence the circumstances that give rise to corruption. Their research was conducted in different parts of China: Dalian, a Northern port city and a Special Economic Zone (Zheng), the inland city of Chengdu in Sichuan Province (Osburg) and in a frontier city, Ruili in Yunnan in the far South West (Uretsky). In research in this field, the gender of researchers matters, as does the way they position themselves in their fieldwork. As a male researcher, Osburg had

easy access to the activities of a network of young entrepreneurs, but found it difficult to gain much information from most of the women associated with them – in particular from their wives, mistresses and female colleagues. As women, Zheng and Uretsky viewed the sexual scene from perspectives that differed from Osburg's but also from each other's. Uretsky was able to make contact with both entrepreneurs and local officials in Ruili and be accepted into their social circles, including contact with their wives, but was excluded from direct observation of sexualized entertainment, although men talked to her about their sexual exploits. Zheng lived and worked alongside hostesses in karaoke bars and was therefore privy to interaction between them and their clients.

What is clear from the differing perspectives offered by Zheng, Uretsky and Osburg is that this sector of the sexual market most definitely has specifically "Chinese characteristics" and is a product of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." While sharing some features of sexualized entertainment elsewhere in East Asia, the form it takes in China has its own particularities due to its role in *guanxi* building and a politico-legal context which makes businessmen dependent on the goodwill of party officials in their locality. All commentators agree that sexualized entertainment has become essential to business success in China and that, therefore, the sexual economy is bound up with the growth of the economy overall (Osburg, 2013, 2016; Uretsky, 2016; Zheng, 2012; Zurndorfer, 2016). As Uretsky (2008) put it in her earlier work:

> … the confluence of a market-oriented economy operating within a socialist-style political system under the influence of traditional networking practices has engendered a unique mode of patron-clientelism that brings them together over

> shared social rituals including feasting, drinking and female-centered entertainment that is often coupled with sexual services. (p.801)

Uretsky (2016) argues that this is not an accidental result of pre-existing practices of *guanxi* operating in an expanded market economy, but is a direct result of the Party's efforts to "to maintain an ideological hold over flourishing entrepreneurialism" (p.51). This contention casts doubt on Zheng's (2012) claim that sexualized consumption represents a form of resistance to the state, suggesting that although such practices conflict with "socialist morality," the state is implicated in sustaining them. Because the local state apparatus controls access to key resources, such as land for building and the various permits needed for entrepreneurial enterprises, and can smooth the way for businessmen (or obstruct it) in a variety of ways, entertaining local officials and building relationships of trust with them through *yingchou* becomes essential. For example, she cites the case of a man who opened a karaoke bar. Building it, he said, was easy, taking only a few months, but it had taken a few years to cultivate the necessary *guanxi* with local officials to obtain permission to go ahead.

It is not only relationships between businessmen and officials that are affected by the practice of *yingchou*, but also relationships among officials. Within the local bureaucracy sexualized entertainment is used to cement relationships between junior and more senior officials. Engaging in such practices with a superior and facilitating his entertainment is a way of proving loyalty to him and, paradoxically, to the Party – although it runs counter to the official ideology and, indeed, the law. This is because the local bureaucracy is not so much a meritocracy as what Uretsky calls a "virtuocracy" in which men rise up the hierarchy as a result of being seen as "virtuous" by their leaders which, in turn, relies on

demonstrating loyalty. An official's advancement within this system is "based more on the relationships he builds over food, drink and entertainment than on the technical skills he can demonstrate in the office" (Uretsky, 2016, p.47).

Demonstrating loyalty to superiors can result in men spending five nights out of seven entertaining until late at night. One man recounted how, when a senior official came to town it would be essential to organize eating and drinking followed by the karaoke and then, he said, "the soliciting of prostitutes [for the official] that comes along with it" (Uretsky, 2006, p.49). Rather than simply being a by-product of China's shift to a market economy, Uretsky suggests that the state's effort to exert control over business is precisely what has led to these "new ways of demonstrating party loyalty," which have "increased state control over individual, family and collective lives" (p.51), impacting not only on the men involved but also on their wives and families, from whom they are kept apart. Far from being a site of resistance to the Party-state, as in Zheng's (2012) account, Uretsky's analysis makes it abundantly clear that this *guanxi*-building entertainment is necessitated by the organizational structure of the Party bureaucracy and its oversight of business.

Where Zheng, Uretsky and Osburg all agree is the importance of the trust built through the homosocial bonds men create through business entertaining. While the relationship between officials and entrepreneurs is a product of party organization (Uretsky, 2006), it nonetheless operates at the margins of legality and leaves all concerned open to charges of corruption and malpractice – even more so now with Xi Jinping's crackdown on corrupt officials, when suicides among officials at risk are becoming common. While writing before the current anti-corruption campaign took hold, Zheng suggests that sexual

consumption might be particularly important for building trust between entrepreneurs and officials through "testing and bonding activities" (2012, p.659). She argues that through appropriate sexual conduct, men demonstrate their competence and reliability. There are right and wrong ways to consume, she says. In particular, a "man who is not able to control his desire is seen as a danger to himself and the group" (Zheng, 2012, p.659). The emphasis Zheng places on self-control in sexual consumption could be seen as an interesting twist on the ideal Chinese sexual citizen as enterprising, responsible and self-restraining (Wong, 2016).

The use of sexualized entertainment to build trust also *requires* trust because it could potentially discredit those involved. Thus discretion is essential. Sexualized entertainment only ever takes place among invited guests in private rooms of KTV establishments or other venues, never in their public areas (Osburg, 2013; Zheng, 2012). One official told Uretsky: "We can only hang out in these little rooms", rather than the public areas, "because our jobs can be threatened if people know we are here" (2016, p. 45). Ironically it is the very illicit nature of these activities and the official disapproval of them that reinforces their necessity – only through strong bonds of loyalty can men both court favor in the exchanges between officials and entrepreneurs and simultaneously protect themselves from accusations of corruption.

While this building of trust and cultivation of *guanxi* through *yingchou* is essential to business success and official careers, it is not entirely a materialistic enterprise. Trust implies an emotional element and *guanxi* in general is built on affective and not merely instrumental relationships (Barbalet, 2017). Osburg's (2013) analysis emphasizes the importance of sentiment (*ganqing*) in the practice of *yingchou*. In order to develop *guanxi*

relationships it is not enough to simply entertain. Men strive to "transform relationships of cold calculation into particularistic relationships embedded in moral economies of sentiment" (p.43). A guest should leave at the end of the night not just feeling indebted, "but with an embodied memory of shared pleasure and a latent sense of fondness, or *ganqing*, for their host" (p.43). While seeking to "forge homosocial ties crucial to their career success and financial futures" men also hope to transform these ties into kin-like relationships "through shared experiences of intimacy, vulnerability and transgression" (Osburg, 2016, p.163).

This sensibility is less prominent in Uretsky's (2016) account. Possibly because of her gender, men were more willing to discuss the down side of sexualized entertainment. They complained about the obligations imposed by *yingchou*, how tiring it was and how they viewed it as a grueling work obligation rather than pleasure. Men said they felt compelled to engage in liaisons with sex workers even if they were reluctant to do so. To refuse might result in reputational loss and loss of face (*mianzi*). Their social standing depended on "successfully performing accepted social roles" (Uretsky, 2016, p.50). Here there is potentially another instance of the "culture of conformity" (Huang & Pan, 2009), the desire to fit it, to be "normal".

While men's negative attitudes to sexualized entertainment are not so evident in Osburg or Zheng's depictions of *yingchou* it is certainly clear that men experience a degree of pressure to conform to what is expected of them and that trust and safety are dependent on this conformity. All three researchers place an emphasis on the ways in which participation in *yingchou* is essential to their gendered being; in Osburg's words, to "creating and enacting a particular version of masculinity that is associated with being a

man of status and wealth in post-Mao China" (Osburg, 2016, p.163). Zheng similarly discusses the way men used access to high end karaoke bars to signify wealth and status and demonstrate entrepreneurial masculinity through their familiarity with such places and their interactions with the hostesses. Here again, though, there were differences of emphasis among the three researchers. Uretsky highlights a tension between elements of masculinity: the need for business or career success and therefore successful performance of *yingchou* on the one hand and the demands of being a good husband and father on the other, both seen as equally important to being a good man, Zheng's male informants, however, do not appear to experience this tension. Rather most saw their obligations to their wives as beginning and ending with supporting them economically. The Chengdu businessmen depicted in Osburg's (2013) study were only seen with their wives at traditional Chinese celebrations. They kept their wives well away from the world of business entertainment. Mistresses and girlfriends accompanied them to banquets and KTV, not wives.

Zheng's (2012) study stands out from the other two in her depiction of a form of masculinity that explicitly establishes itself through dominance over women. She describes how men display their power over women in selecting hostesses from a line up and ordering them around. According to one of these men: "Hostesses are like toys, something to serve men and help them relax" (Zheng, 2012, p.661). Interactions with the hostesses "provided a testing ground… for alliances between entrepreneurs and officials" through which they proved themselves to each other (p. 653):

> Men would share companionship and pleasure but would also attempt to demonstrate their self-control through their emotional detachment from, and

> control of, the hostesses…One aspect of the karaoke bar is men's triumph over women. Triumph in the bar prepares men for triumph in the market world. (p. 653)

Men also demonstrated masculinity through sexual prowess: "sexual potency was an index of a man's business competence" (Zheng, 2012, p.661). Zheng tells of one man who avoided sexual contact with hostesses because he was afraid of contracting a sexually transmitted disease. He was, as a result, subjected to a campaign of ridicule and accused of being impotent. In the end he responded to this pressure. In front of his friends he "aggressively pinched hostesses' breasts," insulted them, had sex with them and bragged about his sexual encounters (Zheng, 2012, p.661).

We have discussed Zheng's account of men's sexual conduct in the bars at length because she is alone among the three researchers in depicting such a domineering form of masculine sexuality. While her account chimes with those of Osburg and Uretsky in identifying the role that collective sexual consumption plays in promoting business-oriented homosocial bonding, she places far more emphasis on male power over women and the importance of sexual activity itself in establishing men's masculine and business credentials. Uretsky, of course, was not in a position to observe men's sexual interaction with hostesses since she was excluded from this element of men's entertainment, whereas Zheng, in positioning herself among the hostesses, saw it at close quarters. Osburg was integrated into the social circles of his male informants but either did not see, or failed to note, men exerting their power so directly over hostesses. It seems unlikely, however, that Zheng's observations are an isolated case and more probable that similar scenes are occurring in other KTV venues in other parts of China but have simply not been recorded

The practices of *yingchou* of which sexual consumption is a part have evolved over time alongside China's economic development and as a result of the relationship between the state and the market. Where banqueting was the main activity through which business relationships were conducted up to the 1990s, the sexualized environment of KTV has now become more central. Zheng (2012) sees KTV as supplanting banqueting as the main venue for male bonding and as part of men's rebellion against the state given that state banquets in the past were symbols of state power. Osburg (2013), however, regards this shift as part of ongoing inflation in the expectations attached to *yingchou*. In his account, as in Uretsky's (2016), banqueting precedes the move to the karaoke club in a typical evening's entertainment rather than being replaced by KTV. Rising expectations, however, have not stopped there. Whereas once the favor of a business contact or official could be courted by supplying him with a sex-worker for the night, this is now not always enough. What is more effective is finding a man a mistress or girlfriend, preferably a young, attractive, educated and accomplished white-collar worker, a woman of quality (*suzh*i). Hostesses and sex-workers are, from elite men's point of view, cheap and disposable; girlfriends and mistresses are more of a status symbol. Many of the men featured in Uretsky's and Zheng's studies kept mistresses or *ernai*, as did Osburg's Chengdu businessmen – though they distanced their practices from *bao erani* (keeping a second wife) which they saw as lower class. Wealthy men, then, are able to trade their assets for women's youth and beauty. As Osburg (2013) remarks, in the business world where women's greatest asset is their sexual attractiveness, men only need money "and even the oldest, ugliest most uncouth country bumpkin will be transformed by wealth into an object of desire" (p.182).

Mistresses - *ernai* or *xiaosan* – are sometimes seen as unproductive "grey" women, living off the work of others, as they are by the feminist economist He Qinglian (as cited in Osburg, 2013). This is clearly not an accurate view of their place in China where the sexual market is so central to the economy. Aside from the profits generated by the sex-industry itself, it is clear that the women who service elite men as hostesses, escorts and mistresses play a central role in the business practices associated with China's economic growth and are therefore far from marginal.

The contradictions inherent in these practices, particularly between the official party ideology and "socialist morality" on the one hand and the use of sexual consumption to facilitate business connections on the other, raises questions in the light of Xi Jinping's austerity campaign and crackdown on corruption. As extravagant banqueting becomes less socially acceptable, the adverse effect on the restaurant trade and sales of expensive liquor is already evident. The consequences for sexualized entertainment are less clear. As Ko & Weng (2012) note, corruption evolves and changes its form each time regulations change or new campaigns against it are mounted – and that which takes place privately has replaced more overt forms such as misappropriation of public funds. Since sexualized entertainment is less visible than lavish banqueting, taking place in private rooms, it might actually become a relatively more important element of *yingchou*.

At the same time China's increasing economic influence globally, including business investments overseas, creates the potential for the export of its sexualized business practices. This seems to be the case in Vietnam which, like China, has a post-socialist marketizing economy in a communist party-state. Here local Vietnamese elites cultivate links with Chinese businessmen. In Kimberly Kay Hoang's ethnography of the stratified

sex industry in Vietnam, the highest tier establishments cater for local elites – entrepreneurs and party officials – entertaining Asian, mostly Chinese, business contacts in order to solicit foreign direct investment. The private hostess clubs where this takes place are very exclusive – it is only Asian businessmen who are seen as worth courting in these venues. European businessmen and even overseas Vietnamese operate on lower rungs on the commercial sex and business hierarchies. The Vietnamese and their Chinese contacts thus capitalize on and celebrate Asian economic ascendancy and western decline. The sense of superiority thereby engendered further enhances their sense of powerful masculinity (Hoang, 2015). They are no longer the effeminate oriental "other" of the western colonial imagination, but can afford to ignore the west and do business with those with whom they share a cultural affinity and associated embodied practices.

While we have emphasized the importance of women's sexualized labor for the Chinese economy, there are other women on whom these practices impact that we have yet to mention: women involved in the business world and the wives of elite men – the women abandoned for nights on end while their husbands entertain other men and are entertained by hostesses, sex-workers and their mistresses. Moreover, the corporate practices we have described represent only one facet of China's highly gendered and heteronormative sexual culture and its assumptions about male sexual "needs" and women's role in satisfying them. This essentialist understanding of gender differences and sexuality, bolstered by Party-state ideology, goes largely unquestioned within a society that privileges conformity so that male dominance is taken to be the natural order of things. Inequality and injustice are therefore integral to the ordering of sexuality in China. Injustices are not confined to the obvious use of state power against those who fail to

conform (sexually and/or politically) but also arise in everyday interactions at work, at home and in public spaces, where they are so routine that they are seen as unremarkable. These intimate injustices, whether hidden in the domestic sphere or hidden in plain sight in the workplace are most evident and prevalent in the inequalities and problems that women face daily in a society that is increasingly sexualized and where gender divisions are deeply entrenched. While they are often not seen as injustices by Chinese people, but "just the way things are," this does not mean that women are entirely passive or without agency in negotiating their way through China's sexual landscape. Recent research not only brings to light the daily injustices women experience, but also reveals the strategies they use to deal with them. In discussing these issues, we first consider research on women in the workplace before moving on to more private injustices.

Everyday injustices at work: China's sexualized occupational culture

Sexualized labor in both Chinese and western contexts is most often associated with the service sector, where young women are employed for their looks and charm and are often expected to engage in sexual display through their dress and demeanor (e.g. Adkins, 1995; Otis, 2012; Xu & Feiner, 2007; Yang, 2011). The sexualized business practices prevalent in China, however, impact directly on the lives of female entrepreneurs and white-collar workers as well as those in the service sector, albeit in different ways (Liu, 2016; Zurdorfer, 2016). It can result in women's exclusion from male-dominated arenas as well as inclusion into sexualized business practices. There are also numerous other ways in which women are sexualized within everyday workplace interactions.

The sexualized networking of businessmen and officials obviously puts their female counterparts at a disadvantage, since they are excluded from much of the activity through which alliances are established and deals are made and thus have to establish *guanxi* in the interstices of male business; they are also regarded as morally suspect (Osburg, 2013; Zurndorfer, 2016). Female entrepreneurs do exist and some are very successful, but they are fewer in number than men and have to be careful in the way they negotiate business. Uretsky (2016) and Osburg (2013) each provide an example of a businesswoman engaging in *yingchou*. These women provided lavish banquets for their quests but absented themselves from the more sexualized environment of KTV. The woman mining entrepreneur interviewed by Osburg (2013) left the sexualized aspects of entertainment to her male employees, because, she said, "it was easier for men to build relationships" when she was not there (p.151). In so saying she appears to echo the views of the men, who found the presence of women business associates in sexualized spaces inhibiting. Businesswomen were seen as *nüqiangren* (strong women), undesirable as sexual partners and unwelcome when men were entertaining. Yet they were also suspected of having used their sexuality to get ahead. So they were damned both ways, regarded either as having used their sexuality to advance themselves or as too unattractive to have done so.

There are some women, aside from hostesses, who are welcome in the environment of KTV: young and attractive white collar workers (Liu, 2016; Osburg, 2013). White collar women are viewed positively, as embodying *suzhi* (quality) through their education and middle-class occupation, as well as youthful attractiveness. These were seen as ideal women to take as lovers or mistresses by Chengdu businessmen – or to introduce to influential business contacts or officials (Osburg, 2013). Female entrepreneurs, on the

other hand, had very negative views of young women who used their sexuality for advancement – but from Osburg's account it seems that some of them were quite happy to use their female white collar employees to entertain business clients.

In China young women graduates employed in the business sector are known as "white-collar beauties," itself a term that implies sexualization. While these women make an appearance in the literature on business culture, and are much discussed in popular media in China, their working lives have received little attention from researchers, perhaps because they are seen as relatively privileged and thus not deserving of critical attention. One scholar, however, has conducted intensive and revealing research on the sexualized labor and gender discrimination characteristic of white collar work in China, Jieyu Liu (2008, 2016). Liu undertook ethnographic work in an export-orientated, state-owned enterprise in Jiangsu Province, referred to as "The Organization", where she joined the white-collar workforce and also conducted interviews with managers and workers. In addition, she conducted in-depth and repeated interviews with 20 women and 10 men, all graduates, who were employed in the sales departments of a range of state-owned and privately owned domestically-oriented companies. She was therefore able to identify differences in working practices leading to differing forms of sexualization.

Liu's analysis amply demonstrates the ways in which the intersection between gender and sexuality in the workplace serves to reinforce its male dominated hierarchy. She draws our attention to the "moralization" of women's sexual conduct in China, creating a sharp distinction between reputable and disreputable women. As a result, while white collar workers are routinely sexualized, they cannot use their sexuality as a means of empowering themselves in the workplace; they cannot appear to be actively sexual (Liu,

2016). The sexualization of white collar women takes varied forms in differing work contexts, which Liu (2016) discusses through distinguishing between sex *in* work and sex *as* work. Sex in work is discussed in relation to the sexual objectification of women in workplace interaction and work-related activities; sex as work encompasses the ways in which employers use women's sexual appeal to generate business.

In The Organization there was a tension between the de-sexualization and sexualization of women. The Organization's rules, which Liu was handed when she arrived, stipulated a strict dress code for women: no sleeveless or low-cut clothing, no bare midriffs and no skirts shorter than knee length. White-collar women were expected to appear respectable and professional. At the same time they were routinely made the objects of sexual banter, particularly from senior men, which was seen by the men as making for a "pleasant" working atmosphere. A section manager in said of this practice:

> It can stimulate productivity. Life won't be boring. If I flirt with women colleagues the atmosphere will be lifted up. I hope that in my section there are considerable levels of office banter as I find it can be inspiring (Liu, 2016, p.76)

One senior woman, who often found herself the only woman among male colleagues, was constantly the butt of sexual jokes. She reported that when she began work in The Organization this had made her very uncomfortable, but she had since become used to it and simply did not react (Liu, 2016, p. 77). Whereas women in western contexts might flirt back or answer back to men who behave in this way, this was not a strategy open to women in The Organization; actively flirting would damage their reputations and it would be difficult to challenge a man who was senior to them. There is also no

recognition of and no institutional remedies for sexual harassment in Chinese workplaces even were men's conduct to be recognized as such. Women do, however, have spaces where they can joke among themselves and in a female dominated environment may even use similar jokes against a man, but could not do so in the public space of the office. They could, and did, also warn each other about persistent harassers. The most common and effective form of resistance against workplace injustices that Liu discusses – though not directly in relation to sexual issues – is emotional display. Because women are seen as "naturally" more fragile than men and because managers are concerned to maintain a "harmonious atmosphere", men fear upsetting women; moreover, a woman's display of emotion can shame a wrongdoer. While this may appear to be a weapon of the weak, as Liu (2016) says, "in a relational society like China it has the potential to retrieve justice by throwing into question the actions of the wrongdoers" (p. 115).

One event during Liu's time with The Organization provides a particularly graphic example of sexualization in the working environment and also brings out the issue of political control. State run companies typically organize leisure activities for their employees, in this case a basketball tournament involving other state-owned enterprises in the area. Only men were involved in the teams. In order to include women, the managers of the companies decided that they should act as cheer-leaders for their respective teams – and they called these the "basketball babes"! Joining the cheer-leading team was defined as a "political" task and therefore mandatory. In a state-owned company there is always a Communist Party presence and in The Organization the manager was also the party secretary – so a refusal to participate would be deemed disloyal to the company and the Party. One woman did refuse and Liu subsequently

discovered that she was likely to be excluded from other activities, including work-related opportunities. Thus the Party is implicated in promoting a sexualized work culture.

There was, however, some collective resistance from the cheer-leading team. Some of the senior men tried to influence the women's costume, saying it should "excite one's eyeballs." The women cited the company dress code in order to avoid wearing too revealing an outfit – and were criticized for being too traditional and conservative. They compromised by wearing cropped short-sleeved T-shirts and mini-skirts with shorts underneath. During the matches the cheer-leaders rather than the players were the main draw and numerous ribald comments were heard from the audience, commenting on women's bodies or complaining that they weren't "sexy" enough. Afterwards the women's performance became the subject of another round of sexual and sexist jokes.

While this "eroticized workplace culture" reinforced "male dominance and hetero-normative control" (Liu, 2016, p. 86), women sales staff within The Organization were not expected to use their sexuality to woo clients. Because their clients were foreigners, The Organization "protected" their female employees from too much contact with them by relegating them to support roles (and lower pay) in sales teams. The situation was different for the sales employees of companies oriented to the domestic market. These companies "actively and deliberately institutionalized and deployed the selling of women's sexuality in their non-sexual economic operations" (Liu, 2016, p. 89). Women sales representatives were selected for their beauty and expected to take good care of their appearance, whereas the men only had to be clean and smart. Using their physical attractiveness to lure clients was seen as essential to the women's work and, in a

competitive working environment, where sales performance was often ranked and linked to pay, they were under considerable pressure to do so. On the other hand they were conscious of the need to protect their reputations as professional women so they strove to appear "pretty but not sexy" (Liu, 2016, p. 91). In their dress, demeanor and behavior they walked a perilous tightrope between respectability and disreputability. They were aware that they could use techniques associated with femininity to lure clients that men could not. As one said: "women have the advantage, during the negotiation, women could *sajiao*" whereas if a man did this, or a woman did it with another woman it would be "disgusting" (Liu, 2016, p. 92). The term *sajiao* has no easy English translation, though the behavior it describes is not unknown in the Anglophone world. Liu glosses it as acting "like a spoiled and naughty child," but this does not quite capture it. It is certainly child-like; it conveys a sense of dependency on the other in order to make demands on them; it involves "playing cute", pestering and wheedling and often the use of a high pitched, pleading tone of voice. It is a widely seen as a means by which young, feminine Chinese women try to get their own way, especially in intimate relationships. Its use in the context of a sales negotiation therefore implies an intimacy with the other that borders on the sexual and demonstrates a willingness to use femininity to manipulate a man. The women sales representatives in general "recognized the value to them of being able to play on men's sexual susceptibility" (Liu, 2016, p. 92). When asked about the contradictions between such behavior and their attempts to present themselves as desexualized and professional, these women stressed the importance of subtlety in using their femininity. Their male colleagues recognized the advantages this gave women, but despised them for it.

These sales representatives were expected to take part in the evenings of entertainment typical of male business culture (Liu, 2008, 2016). As Liu describes this activity, as 'three step socializing', it differs a little from that we have discussed above. While it begins with banqueting and moves on to karaoke, it ends at a sauna, which is where encounters with sex-workers occurred. Most of the women she interviewed accompanied the men in banqueting and karaoke, but left before the sauna. This discretion did not shield them from sexualized interaction. In banqueting they were encouraged to play an active part in toasting and drinking (see also Mason, 2013), which was seen as attracting masculine attention, and to tolerate much sexual joking at their expense. When they moved on to karaoke they entered a much more sexualized environment and were expected to sing duets with men, dance with them and submit to unwanted physical contact and sexual advances. While some women expressed a strong dislike of such male behavior, others simply accepted it but played down its sexual import so as not to align themselves with disreputable women. They were expected to be self-reliant and to cope with these situations. A woman manager said "if a woman couldn't take this light-heartedly, I'd advise her not to stay in this occupation" (Liu, 2016, p. 97). Unlike the women in The Organization who had a degree of solidary and warned each other against known harassers, who were colleagues rather than clients, these women were in competition with each other and their male counterparts for clients and sales; to "one woman a client might be a harasser, to another he might be an economic opportunity" (Liu, 2016, p. 98).

There were limits, however, to what was expected of women; it was accepted that they would not attend venues where commercial sex took place. Women could use their

femininity to make sales but, like women entrepreneurs, they were excluded from places where their male colleagues could clinch deals. Moreover, if a man closed a good deal it was put down to his ability; in a woman it was attributed to her physical attractiveness. Finally, the use of sexualized feminine charm served to naturalize gender differences and, at the same time, put women at risk of reputational damage, something men did not have to worry about. In both types of company Liu discusses, the heterosexualized, male-dominated environment in which women worked was riddled with injustices and inequities. While Liu is at pains to present women as having agency, which indeed they did have, this more often involved accommodating to the system than resisting or subverting it.

Similar patterns emerge in other occupations where young women are engaged in selling or promoting a variety of commodities and services (Zurndorfer, 2016). At a lower level than the "white-collar beauties" are the service workers, primarily from more working class backgrounds and with lower than undergraduate qualifications. Eileen Otis (2008, 2012, 2016a) provides illuminating insights into women's working conditions in her ethnographic study of two luxury hotels, one in Beijing catering to foreign businessmen, the other in Kunming, which attracted Chinese tourists. The differences between the two hotels parallel those found by Liu (2016) between workers in firms selling into foreign and domestic markets. Both hotels deliberately recruited attractive young women, under the age of 27, and trained them to enact particular forms of heterosexual femininity, but in different ways. Their contrasting labor regimes led to women cultivating "virtual professionalism" in the Beijing hotel and "virtuous professionalism" in the Kunming hotel.

In the Beijing hotel young women were trained into an American style of heterosexualized femininity designed to appeal to cosmopolitan elite men – to style their hair and make-up subtly and elegantly, to be friendly, smile and make eye contact and to learn about and cater to their clients' individual needs. While male hotel employees were expected simply to looks smart, the rules on women employees' clothing, make-up and demeanor were detailed, precise and comprehensive. Although the women were recruited on the basis of their appearance and expected to be pleasing to male eyes, the (hetero)sexualized element of femininity was not overt and clients did not, in turn, sexualize the workers, enabling them to maintain their professional façade. It should be remembered in this context, however, that heterosexuality involves more than its explicitly sexual elements (Jackson, 2006; Jackson & Scott, 2010). Although Otis does not comment on this, the ways in which these women workers were expected to make male guests feel at home in a foreign hotel – knowing everything from their tastes in food and drink to where they liked to keep their toothbrush and anticipating their every need – is similar to that expected of attentive wives in traditional marriages. They could be seen, therefore, as an army of surrogate wives.

The working environment in the Kunming hotel was much more sexualized, largely because the clientele largely comprised male tourists attracted by the city's sex industry (Otis, 2008, 2012). Kunming is the capital of Yunnan province in the far South West of China, an area that is home to a number of ethnic minorities who are seen as having more liberal sexual mores than the Han Chinese majority. Han men view women from these ethnic minorities as exotic and exciting (Uretsky, 2016), hence the attraction of Kunming to sex tourists. The women working in this hotel were not expected to anticipate their

clients' needs as in Beijing, but to prioritize selling the hotel's products and services to clients – and these included escort services provided through the hotel, although the women who accompanied men to KTV and saunas were not employees. The women employed directly by the hotel wore uniforms, but these often served to sexualize them; for example waitresses in the restaurant wore a close-fitting version of the traditional *qipao* slit to the top of the thigh. The "virtuous professionalism" displayed by the workers in this hotel was adopted in their attempts to avoid sexual advances from the guests. They were constantly subjected to sexual harassment and therefore had to make considerable efforts to distinguish themselves from the sex-workers who frequented the hotel and to fend off men who assumed that Kunming women were there to service their sexual desires. The differences between the two hotels, then, tell us not just about their labor regimes but the different expectations of affluent Chinese and Western men.

Sexualized labor in its varied forms also involves aesthetic labor, the work women do on their own bodies to present an appropriately attractive and/or professional image. Underpinning this is China's beauty business staffed by an army of low paid workers, mostly women, working in beauty salons, at cosmetic counters in department stores and in cosmetics factories, all contributing to a market second only to that in the USA in volume (Otis, 2016b; Yang, 2011). The state has played a part in this, in encouraging its growth as part of a building an internal consumer culture essential to expanding the economy beyond the older production centered, export-oriented stage of development and helping to construct consuming citizen-subjects who buy into the Party-state's project (Yang, 2011). It has done so through a variety of means from promoting beauty contests in the early 2000s to encouraging laid-off women factory workers to open beauty salons.

In so doing it has contributed directly and indirectly to feminizing and sexualizing its female population. Jie Yang (2011) argues that the beauty economy "capitalizes on the erotic-aesthetic functions of the female body and also relies on…the use value of their bodies" (p.346). Given the multiple ways that sexualized femininity contributes to the Chinese economy, from facilitating men's business transactions to promoting sales and being integral to service provision, it could also be said that these bodies have exchange value – and not just when they are traded explicitly for a cash return. This is made explicit by a Beijing hotel manager who said to his female trainees, "our profit comes from your smiles" (Otis, 2016a, p.927).

China's beauty industry, and the wider promotion of sexualized femininity, has an impact on women not only as workers, but also as girlfriends and wives who are under increasing pressure to look good, especially older women with affluent husbands who are mindful of the risks of losing them to young "grey" women seeking rich patrons (Ying, 2011; Zurndorfer, 2016).

Inequality and intimate injustices in heterosexual relationships

The highly gendered and sexualized working culture and the existence of the seven-tiered hierarchy of sex workers (Jeffreys, 2004, 2010b; Pan, 1999) make life difficult for many wives who cannot help but worry about their husbands' loyalty and the stability of their marriages. Chinese wives have to face a number of threats, not just from the Other Woman (*xiaosan*, little three), but the many women who are ready to provide emotional and sexual services to their husbands. These potential competitors are mostly young and beautiful. Some are educated and can engage in interesting and intelligent conversations

with their husbands. It is not only rich men's wives who have reason to worry since the sex industry provides services for men at every point in the social hierarchy. The complex division of labor in the sex industry, including both "black" and "grey" women, also makes it harder for women to judge whether their husbands have visited prostitutes or are having extra-marital relationships. Even if their husbands are caught or admit their extramarital liaisons, there is very little wives can do. So there is considerable pressure on wives to compete with these women for their husbands' attention. They have to be the good wives that their husbands expect them to be if they are to maintain their marriages and social status as the only wife, or at least the main wife. While their men are out carousing with work colleagues and bar girls or visiting sex-workers, these women are keeping the household running, doing childcare and also doing the relational work involved with fulfilling filial obligations to both their own parents and their in-laws. There is little work exploring these "first wives" in mainland China, aside from the business that sexual infidelity has generated for (technically illegal) private investigators (Jeffreys, 2010a). Research by Shen Hsiu Hua (2008, 2014) on the wives of Taiwanese businessmen who work and maintain relationships in China suggests that these "first wives" make the best of it. A wife puts up with her husband's infidelities as long as he continues to support her and finds ways to keep the marriage intact while enjoying the additional freedom his frequent absences affords her. In living out this scenario, both husbands and wives become "situational singles" taking a "gendered break" from marriage (Shen, 2014, p.264), husbands by being freed from sexual and emotional monogamy and wives by being liberated from daily care for their husbands. Similarly, Hong Kong women whose husbands have intra-national cross border romances (Ho,

2012), often have to find ways to cope or just suffer in silence and wait for their husbands to come home after these romances have failed.

The threat to women's marriages comes, in the main, from their husbands' dalliances with much younger women. With the development of consumerism, the post-Mao gender ideology celebrates a sexualized femininity associated with beauty and youth, subjecting women to the male gaze and making them conscious of evaluation. As Jie Yang (2011) argues, the gendered representations of *nennü* (tender women) and *shunü* (ripe women) reassert the cultural dominance of a masculine gaze and a male body politic. Yang interviewed beauty care workers, beauty salon clients and managers in Changping (Beijing) and Jinan between 2003 and 2008. Among them was a woman in her mid-fifties, who was a former party secretary of a factory in Beijing. She told Yang that when she was young, she was called upon to focus only on work and socialist construction (*shehui zhuyi jianshe*) without paying much attention to her appearance, but now she wanted to make up for her lost youth by taking advantage of new cosmetics and technologies as a form of revenge against her husband who had had a series of affairs with younger women. Her husband did not appreciate her efforts and ridiculed her as an "old, yellow cucumber wearing green paints, pretending to be young" (*lao huanggua shua luqi, zhuang nen*) (Yang, 2011, p. 334). While expressing frustration about the value placed on appearance, she said she would persist in trying to save her marriage. As Yang comments, this story sheds light on the problems faced by many Chinese wives trying to compete with younger rivals in a culture that increasingly values women primarily in terms of youth and beauty.

A further problem that men's extra-marital sexual activity poses for wives is the risk of sexual infection. The UN reports that 46.5% of sexual transmission of HIV in China occurs through heterosexual contact, with a quarter of these transmissions estimated to be between spouses and infection among women dramatically increasing. Women accounted for 15.3% of those infected in 1998 and 30.5% in 2009.This is an issue central to Uretsky's (2016) study of the consequences of *yingchou* practices in Ruili, a city with a high prevalence of HIV infection and AIDS. She cites the case one wife of a local official who had been infected through her husband's consumption of sexual services in the course of business entertaining. While clearly not happy with the situation, she excused her husband and blamed the system, which pressures men into practices that they cannot avoid if they wish their careers to prosper (Uretsky, 2016). This justification is a credible one; such situations cannot be explained simply by reference to individual men's behavior, but are produced by the socio-political system.

In the face of all the threats and uncertainties facing their marriages, Chinese women have to find ways to protect their own financial well-being and their children's interests. One option open to wives who are aggrieved by their husbands' extra-marital activities is to divorce. China's marriage laws have, until recently, benefitted women (see Davis, 2014). In 1950, as part of the Maoist project of promoting gender equality, child marriage, arranged marriage and polygamy were outlawed and subsequent changes to the 1950 law have, among other things made divorce easier. Divorce, however, can create new problems. In particular, recent changes in the marriage law have undermined women's previously established rights to conjugal property, thus adversely affecting wives' security (Davis, 2014).

As Davis (2014) makes clear, the change in the law has to be understood in the context of China's economic reforms and the consequent privatization of urban housing stock, as well as the practices of Chinese families. Rapidly rising property prices since privatization, especially in major cities, have put a home beyond the means of most newly married couples, requiring multigenerational investment from their families (Zhong & Ho, 2014). Because those who had a financial stake in the conjugal home went beyond the couple, there was a potential for disputes over divorce and inheritance, creating a need for greater clarity in the law governing private property. In its interpretation of the marriage law of December 2003, the Supreme People's Court (SPC) confirmed the property rights of anyone who had invested in a marital home. Since it is traditional, and still usual, for the man's family to provide housing for newlyweds, a woman's in-laws might now have a claim on her home equal to or greater than her own as a wife. This ruling clearly disadvantaged women, but it also left conjugal claims to the marital home vague, leading to an increase in family property disputes. In August 2011 the SPC issued a further interpretation, which clarified the situation by strengthening individual property rights, further weakening conjugal claims on the marital home and thereby a wife's rights to the property. This interpretation "privileged the ownership claims of the spouse who made the down payment even if, after the marriage, both parties paid the mortgage" (Davis, 2014, p.50). A divorcing wife might thus find she had no rights in the marital home. If she continued to live there she might find it sold over her head, since the 2011 ruling also allowed individuals to sell the marital home without consulting their spouse and protected the rights of the third party to which it had been sold.

In this situation we might wonder why women do not challenge current practices and insist on having their names on the deeds to the home at the outset, giving them clear legal co-ownership. It has been suggested that women fail to do so because of the pressure on them to marry and their unwillingness to enter into a dispute with their future spouses and in-laws prior to the wedding (Hong-Fincher, 2014; Zurndorfer, 2016). Once married, wives are not in a good position to bargain and so they may have to accept the co-existence of *ernai* or *xiaosan* (little three) and new relationship scripts that they find unfair. The alternative is the risk of losing their home and all they have invested in it, not only in terms of their contribution to the mortgage, but also all the domestic labor they have put into its upkeep.

It is still the case in China that women undertake the bulk of domestic work and childrearing (Cao, 2017; Du et al., 2015; Shu et al., 2012). Although most married Chinese women are employed full-time, men remain, symbolically if not actually, the family breadwinners. This ideology, underpinned by naturalistic understandings of femininity and masculinity, justifies the unequal marital division of labor. Women are seen as primarily family centered and are expected to facilitate their husbands' breadwinning role and maintain family harmony. As recent research suggests, men appreciate it if women live up to these ideals and complain if they do not – whether by being inadequate at housework or failing to raise a child by appropriate "scientific" standards (Cao, 2017). It is not only domestic chores that constitute a wife's lot but also the task of maintaining harmony with parents, in-laws and wider kin. While geographical mobility, the decline of three-generation households and renegotiated intergenerational contracts have reduced the filial obligations of younger generations towards their elders,

they have not eradicated them (Liu, 2016; Qi, 2015; Zhang, 2016). Women are still expected to undertake much of the work involved in acts of filial piety (*xiao*) and must not only perform *xiao* appropriately, but be seen to be doing so (Zhang, 2016).

While women may have more autonomy prior to marriage, even so they experience gendered inequalities and injustices in their dating relationships. Wang Xiying (2017) reports a high level of sexual coercion in dating in Beijing, where many women's loss of virginity was accomplished by force. Moreover, the idea of men's "natural" sexual "needs" is still prevalent and it is women's responsibility to manage these "needs" and deal with the consequences if pregnancy results from fulfilling them (Xie, in press). As pre-marital sex has become more common, so has pre-marital pregnancy. Unmarried motherhood is not much of an option in China: it is not only highly stigmatized but also extra-legal: a premarital birth is an unauthorized birth. The remaining choices are to marry or terminate the pregnancy. Abortion is now widely available as a result of the one child policy. It is difficult to ascertain how many of China's over 9 million abortions annually are to unmarried women, since they are not recorded as such, but Xie (in press) cites official statistics indicating that 50% are to women below the age of 25 without a pregnancy history, who are likely to be single. Xie argues that women's pregnancy is moralized and responsibilized, as revealed by the way women she interviewed talked about it. Women are blamed for becoming pregnant, for not protecting themselves, either by resisting male sexual demands or not using contraception (despite the fact that the most commonly used contraception method among the unmarried is the condom). If they could not marry for any reason, then abortion was regarded as the only responsible choice. A responsible woman should not consider having a child outside marriage – this

would make her a bad mother. Abortion, however, was seen as potentially damaging a women's body and therefore her future reproductive capacity, also damaging her status as a good woman, and was therefore stigmatized. The morality here was not, as in western societies, structured around the "right to life" of the fetus versus a "woman's right to choose," but in terms of the responsible choice a woman as a potential mother should make (Xie, in press).

A moral, responsible Chinese woman produces a "quality" child at the right time, soon after marriage (McMillan, 2006). In keeping with the Party-state's population agenda, pregnancy has been increasingly medicalized and women are encouraged to monitor their own bodies, follow medical advice assiduously and ensure they consume all the correct nutrients. Many hospitals and other institutions now provide maternal education classes to convey this message to women (Zhu, 2010). Here biomedical understandings of women's bodies, government concern with the quality of the population and increasing consumerism converge. Zhu (2010, p.416) reports one woman spending half her monthly income on a luxury brand of vitamins. The mothers of such women, brought up in a more frugal era and producing their children without such supplements, found such extravagant expenditure incomprehensible. In today's China, however, young women as desiring subjects include in their desires the production of a quality child.

China's social policies and political structures create a host of intimate injustices. The *hukou* (household registration) system, which divides the population into urban and rural residents and creates a social hierarchy favorable to the former, is a case in point. Wang's (2017) study on dating violence in Beijing shows how the *hukou* system, the rural–urban division and the difference between Beijinger and smalltowner may interact to create

both opportunities and obstacles for young women in pursuing their sexual choices. Gaetano, too, reports that young women migrants can exercise more choice over marriage partners than if they remained at home, but that if they marry into urban households they can often be stigmatized and maltreated by their in-laws and are perceived as inferior outsiders (Gaetano, 2008). For this reason, as Gaetano notes, marriages between rural women and urban men are uncommon, an issue discussed in detail in Lake Lui's (2016) study of rural-urban inequality and intermarriage.

Lui (2016) examines the marriage market in urban China through the lens of intersectionality to analyze how structural inequalities shape rural-urban intermarriage preferences and opportunities. The research involved 134 individual interviews at various sites in the migrant-receiving regions of Guangzhou and Shenzhen and rural villages in migrant-sending regions in South China. Lui (2016) argues that this hierarchy, in turn, creates a *hukou*-based gender system in which various types of masculinities and femininities are constructed that guide preferences for intermarriage among different groups. Urban masculinity is admired by most women, while rural migrant men find urban femininity undesirable. Rural femininity is agreeable to most urban and rural *hukou* holders, yet less so among local urban men for fear of status loss. She finds that men who hold an urban hukou who marry rural migrants either live on the social margins or are paired with rural wives who display urban ideals of beauty and manners, compensating for their "rural" disadvantages. She thus concludes that rural-urban boundaries are still strong in China. "Working within the hierarchies of *hukou* status and gender, individuals embed macro-inequalities into their mate selection process." (Lui,

2016, p.659) Thus intermarriage preferences illuminate the persistence of gender and class inequalities in marriage.

A persistent feature of gendered sexual injustice, in China as elsewhere, is sexual violence. There is research on this issue in China, but it is patchy. There is more on domestic violence, seen as potentially disrupting family harmony (He & Ng, 2013; Hou et al., 2012), than on rape and sexual harassment. Sexual violence against women and children has become a touchy subject in China. It has become a problematic issue because it has provided a focus for feminist activism, which is increasingly seen as disruptive by the Party-state, hence the arrests and harassment of those campaigning on such issues (Hong-Fincher, 2016). Two celebrated films demonstrate both the potential and pitfalls of publicizing these issues (see Zeng, 2017).

In her film *Garden in Heaven* (2005) Ai Xiaoming, a feminist, university professor and public intellectual, tracked the case of Huang Jing, a primary school teacher who was found raped and murdered in her home after spending a night with her 26 year old boyfriend. This documentary became a catalyst for activism against date rape. Chinese feminists began to organize activities to support Huang's mother in her appeal for justice. Soon scholars began to pay more attention to gender-based violence in China. Wang Nanfu's 2016 documentary, *Hooligan Sparrow* is a testament to the dangers of campaigning too actively against sexual violence. Ye Haiyan (aka Hooligan Sparrow) organized protests about the sexual abuse of six schoolgirls, aged 11-13, by the school principle and a local official, which took place in Hainan province. The campaign spread and was successful in drawing attention to the issue and resulted in the prosecution of the men involved. Ye Haiyan, however, was subjected to a lengthy campaign of persecution,

repeatedly evicted and forced to move from city to city and imprisoned for defending herself against a gang of armed thugs – all of which is recorded in Wang's film. Wang, too, was constantly harassed by the authorities, who tried to prevent her from filming, but she managed to smuggle the film out of China (see Zeng, 2017).

There is an evident contradiction between the government's opposition to feminist activism, evident in this case and in the arrest of the feminist five (Fincher, 2016), and China's avowed support for advancing the cause of women. The CCP may have retreated from the Maoist commitment to gender equality but it is a signatory to CEDAW and in 2015 Xi Jinping pledged to donate $10million to the UN to promote women's rights, along with promising money for girls' education and women's and children's health projects in developing countries. This could be seen as simply a cynical move to enhance China's image in the world but, in our view, it also reflects a limited perspective on what women's rights might be. Within China itself women's interests continue to be cast as equivalent to family interests, thus continuing to define women primarily as wives and mothers – in addition to workers and, ideally, patriotic citizens (Guo, 2010). The Party-state is certainly not promoting ideas of sexual autonomy and, as we have seen, is complicit in the sexualization of women and their continued subordination to and sexual exploitation by men.

Conclusion

In this article we have endeavored to convey a sense of what is happening in Chinese sexual culture and practices, how sexual lives are changing and how, in particular, this relates to the political scene. The political uses of sexuality in China have been noted by a

number of scholars in terms of managing the Chinese population, reinforcing the importance of the family, inculcating socialist morality and defining normality and deviance (e.g. Sigley, 2002, 2006; Wong, 2016). In its reproductive form it has been used to manage population growth and quality, with particular impacts on the policing of women's bodies (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005; McMillan, 2006; Xie, in press). Less directly sexuality is integral to the new neoliberal gendered subjectivities produced by economic modernization (Rofel, 2007; Zhang, 2015). In terms of the broader shifts in sexual politics it has involved reconfigured masculinities and femininities, including the sexualization of women and their positioning as objects of male sexual consumption (Liu, 2016; Song & Lee, 2010; Zheng, 2015). Sex is also intricately interwoven with the political in its usage by individuals and groups at every level of society to make money, to contribute to economic growth, for personal or political advancement and in political struggles.

For government officials at local levels sexualized entertainment provides a means of building relationships with the business community (Osburg, 2016; Uretsky, 2016). This same set of practices provides the government with opportunities to demonstrate socialist moral rectitude by purges against prostitution and prosecution of corrupt officials and political enemies. At the same time the lucrative sex industry plays a part in keeping the economy going, both directly and indirectly (Zurdnorfer, 2016), which is crucial to maintaining the Party-state's legitimacy. Sex is also deployed as protest by political activists, for example Ai Xiaoming's naked protests and Ye Haiyan's offer of free sex to migrant workers to draw attention to conditions in low-end brothels and the deprivations

faced by male migrant workers. But sex and can also be used against them, to discredit and shame them (Zeng, 2017).

In considering the political uses to which sex is put in China, it has become clear that, despite the withdrawal of the state from regulating of much of personal life, the Party-state still has a major influence both on ordinary people's sexual lives and on the scholarship produced from within China. Much of the writing on gender and sexuality in China (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005; Rofel, 2007; Wong, 2016) has taken a Foucauldian approach to governmentality, arguing for the construction of new desiring but self-restraining, responsible subjects who can be counted on to govern themselves without direct intervention from above. There is however, a tension between neoliberal governance based on self-regulating subjects and recent moves back towards a more authoritarian regime under Xi's presidency. In the Xi era the neoliberal form of subjectification is being supplemented by increased repression by the Party-state authorities. Self-regulation, it seems, is not deemed sufficient to guarantee compliant Chinese subjects – they now need to be under more surveillance, told much more directly what to think, feel, do and say and be prevented from, or punished for, doing or saying anything that disrupts harmony or challenges the regime (Lampton, 2016; Ringen, 2016). This is not to deny the continued importance of neoliberal governance; in many respects most Chinese citizens are lured into compliance, or at least acceptance, by continuing to pursue individual desires and goals, buying into, or hoping for, the benefits of material comforts.

The construction of new sexual subjects in China takes place in a variety of arenas, including sexological writings, popular culture, the promotion of consumerism, CCP

sponsored events and propaganda, and though the everyday practices of Chinese people. These sexual subjects are, of course, gendered but not in any uniform way; gender intersects with wider social differences and inequalities and is played out in varied ways among those in differing sectors of society. While the ideal for both men and women includes material success and the acquisition of cultural capital, markers of *suzhi* (quality) and *pinwei* (taste), (Song & Lee, 2010) most will not achieve it given the scale of inequality in China. Nonetheless dreams of becoming "modern" and cosmopolitan have been recorded even among urban workers, migrant workers and migrant sex workers (Ding, 2016; Gaetano, 2008; 2015; Pun, 2005; Rofel, 1999, 2005).

What we know of masculine subjects is uneven. Those who have received the most attention are elite men and migrant men, and far more research exists about sexuality in relation to the former, where masculinity is enacted partly through sexualized consumption and sex can also express a man's status and *pinwei* (Song & Lee, 2010). Little is known about the intimate lives of the mass of Chinese men who do not fit into these categories. Only in literature on tongzhi do we see men from different social backgrounds (e.g. Zheng, 2015), though there is some recent work beginning to explore the intimate lives of "ordinary" men (see Cao, 2017).

The ideal feminine subject in post-socialist China is the young, sexually attractive wife, mother and successful career women. This has become an aspirational goal for many Chinese women, which few will fully achieve; certainly most will not be as materially privileged as they might hope to be (Guo, 2010). The "white-collar beauties" who tolerate being sexualized in the workplace but can expect to enter the ranks of these ideal women, provided they find a suitable husband soon enough and avoid the ignominy of being

labelled as *sheng nü* (leftover women). Lower down the social scale, ordinary workers and migrant workers may also harbor dreams of modernity and hope for happiness through marriage and motherhood. Then there are those who threaten the marital harmony of wives and mothers, including mistresses and *ernai*, the *xiaosan* (little three). The *xiaosan* is an ambiguous figure, on the one hand the disreputable wrecker of marriage, on the other an aspirational subject, using her sexual charm to buy into the cosmopolitan, consumerist culture. She may be a status symbol for an elite male patron, but she can also be used to discredit a corrupt official. Below the *xiaosan* in the hierarchy of the sexual marketplace are the *xiaojie* (young ladies, sex workers), some aspiring to become cosmopolitan women, some simply struggling to survive.

China's new sexual subjects have the freedom to govern their own lives provided they fit into the harmonious society, stay within the law and continue to pursue personal satisfactions without challenging the status quo. As long as they do not rock the boat they may not even notice the increased authoritarianism unless or until they seek redress for a grievance against the system. New measures for a "social credit scheme" proposed by the Beijing government in 2014 threaten to further curtail citizens' freedoms to an extent that might be difficult to ignore. The original document, circulated by the State Council to all lower levels of government throughout the PRC in June 2014, focused on primarily on regulating business, government, legal and other organizations in order to promote trustworthiness and eliminate corruption, fraud, counterfeiting and general dishonesty. Since then, more documents have been released on plans to use "big data" to monitor Chinese citizens. According to reports in the western media, there have been concerns about the ways this is being extended to include intrusive surveillance of every citizen,

gathering and collating every piece of information about them available online, to give everyone a social credit score (Clover 2016; Denyer 2016a. 2016b). These reports suggest they every misdemeanor from running a red light, to failing in filial obligations, to criticizing the government on social media could be detrimental to an individual's score. This, it is said, could affect everything from access to education to ability to travel abroad – or even book a seat in a good restaurant. There are, however, doubts about its technical feasibility, especially if it is to be fully implemented, as planned, by 2020. Nonetheless the intent is clear: to increase control over private citizens. Some reports suggest that the aim is "to return China to levels of personal surveillance common between the 1950s and the 1970s, when everyone had files maintained by their work units under Mao Zedong's regime" (Clover 2016). If implemented, this system, in conjunction with other forms of control, would affect daily behavior and life choices, including potentially sexual choices, and severely limit both personal and (already restricted) academic freedom.

In this climate of increasing censorship the lack of clarity about what is and what is not permissible makes scholars and activists ever more cautious and likely to engage in self-censorship. Chinese scholars are constrained by fear, censorship regulations, and the lack of freedom to think and do things that are different or innovative. There are many things that cannot be said, or are too risky to say. This helps to account for many of the shortcoming in mainland Chinese research, which cannot be attributed to the superiority of western concepts. Chinese language and culture is replete with concepts that could be put to analytical use (Qi, 2014; Zhang, 2016), but it is mainly scholars outside China whbring these concepts into a critical dialogue with western ones. Most of those within

China play safe and confine themselves to exploring social issues only on the Party-state's terms. Thus, as a discursive production, Chinese scholarship has been implicated in producing the ideal sexual subject and in constructing dissident sexualities as "problems" to be solved. Anything that is about diversity and alternative sexualities, if framed other than negatively, is potentially subversive. It is certainly not possible to implicate the state in sustaining sexual injustices. It is clear that the Chinese Party-state would rather its academics, or citizens, did not fully exercise a "sociological imagination" (Mills, 1959), to transform personal troubles into public issues – except perhaps those issues that the state itself wants to address, such as ensuring that norms of filial piety keep individuals responsible for the care of elderly relatives (see Qi, 2015). It certainly does not want a feminist imagination that transforms the personal into the political. Questioning authority is dangerous and is becoming more so.

As we were about to finish this article, we heard that "The Measures for the Administration of the Publication of Audio-Visual Programs through the Internet or Other Information Network," which came into force in October 2004, are being tightened. On June 30, 2017, a set of new rules and regulations called *shen he tong ze* (general rules on censorship) was passed. The controversial section 6 focuses on activities that promote pornographic and bad taste representations, which are to be prohibited. They include images and scenes of prostitution, promiscuity, rape, masturbation and abnormal sexual relationships and behaviors, such as incest, homosexuality, sexual perversion, unhealthy values on marriage, extra-marital relationships, one-night stands and sexual liberation. Also included are sexually explicit images and seductive language. The prominent sexuality scholar and campaigner, Li Yinhe (2017) quickly responded,

publishing an online article. She is troubled by two issues: first, the constitutional right to creative freedom will be affected; secondly, the rights of sexual minorities are threatened. She argues that sexual needs, like the desire for food, are issues of livelihood and should not be suppressed. While we would not endorse her essentialist assumptions about human sexuality, she is correct to be concerned. These regulations could also affect academic production and certainly our colleagues in Mainland China, who alerted us to these new regulations, are afraid that they will severely restrict teaching and research on sexuality. They tell us that the situation is worsening recently, even when compared to the conditions we outlined earlier, and believe that things will become even more difficult for them.

China's internet censorship not only affects material produced and circulating within China but is also intended to block traffic from outside the country, reinforcing its "great firewall" and sealing any cracks in it. Recently this has involved restricting the use of foreign-based VPNs (virtual private networks) used by many international businesses (see, for example, Hornby 2018). VPNs are also a means by which international NGOs link members in different countries and enable overseas scholars conducting research in China to keep in touch with their home institutions or Chinese scholars with affiliations to foreign universities to access their systems and keep in touch with colleagues. This may, in the near future, make it even harder for Chinese sexuality scholars to collaborate with those based outside China.

Given the challenges that Chinese scholars face, it is not surprising that it has been western-based academics, including overseas Chinese, who are free to write more critical accounts of sexual life in China, for example to expose the links between commercialized sex and corruption in political and economic life and analyze the links between "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and the continued restrictions on women. Chinese scholars need to be far more circumspect. There is plenty of excellent work produced by Chinese scholars, but this is placed in international journals and is often authored by overseas Chinese scholars or those who have had a western education. If they are based within China their future careers may not be promising as restrictions tighten further, making it more difficult for new ideas and innovative scholarship to emerge in China.

China's censorship seems to run counter to one of its longer term aims: to promote world class universities. To this end Chinese researchers are encouraged to publish in international journals, but it is being made difficult for them to do so. In addition to the practical problem of the dominance of English in the international arena – a heritage of the colonial past that disadvantages all non-English speakers – Chinese scholars are facing new obstacles. Recently there have been moves to restrict their access to international scholarship. Since January 2015, the South China Morning Post (SCMP), a Hong Kong based broadsheet, has been reporting on Chinese initiatives to restrict foreign influences in its universities, including the use of foreign books, promulgated through speeches by Xi Jingping and various government ministers and Party news outlets (Chen and Zhuang 2015; Jun, 2016; Li, 2017). China has recently, in 2017, even pressured major western publishers, such as Cambridge University Press and Springer, to remove

"sensitive" content from their journals' Chinese websites. While Cambridge reinstated the censored material, Springer has complied with the Chinese authorities' demands. If Chinese scholars are limited in what they can read, restricted to thinking in terms of the "correct" political line, and if they are unable or afraid to engage in the forms of critical academic debate expected by international journals, they will not find it easy to have their work accepted for publication – unless they stick to very safe uncontroversial issues. The study of sexuality is not a safe area. In some Chinese universities, zealous party secretaries are defining anything concerned with sexuality, or even gender, as too "sensitive" for discussion in classrooms, thus impeding the education of new cohorts of sexuality scholars.

As authors we are privileged by our location outside China. We are two Hong Kong scholars, a British scholar and a Chinese scholar educated and currently based in the UK. We therefore have the necessary language and conceptual knowledge to engage with international scholarship and, importantly, academic freedom. But is the form of critical knowledge we are endorsing simply a result of western bias? Concerns have emerged in recent literature about western, Eurocentric and Anglophone bias in the social sciences and the humanities (Bhambra & Santos, 2017; Connell, 2015; Jackson, 2008, 2015; Jackson, Ho & Na 2013). We are aware that we have not done enough in this article to question the western-centric concepts and theories deployed in studies of China's sexual culture and to challenge the cognitive injustices involved.

We would argue, however, that there is a need for a climate of academic freedom to foster productive engagement between Chinese and foreign sexuality scholars and promote alternative perspectives that embrace sexual diversity. This is difficult to

accomplish at present, but there are things we can do and that scholars and activists inside China are already doing. China's netizens are finding ways around the "great firewall" and the restrictions it imposes on them. Creative uses of new media may enable Chinese academics to find outlets for their work and also to engage in democratic forms of knowledge production within China and well as knowledge exchanges with overseas scholars. This may involve less traditional forms of academic research and writing. Scholars outside China can help ensure that good critical scholarly work on sexuality produced inside China is translated and disseminated through the means we have open to us as editors of journals or through our contacts with publishers. There are numerous young Chinese scholars currently being trained in sexuality studies in the USA, UK, Hong Kong and elsewhere outside the PRC, to whom we owe responsibilities. We can offer them the benefits of access to alternative ways of thinking and knowing and democratic forms of knowledge production, which, in a small way, may help to counter the restrictions imposed within China. This is not without its problems. Some of the doctoral students currently being trained outside China have taken such messages on board and are producing feminist and critical work or sexuality that is unlikely to be palatable to the current Chinese regime. There are worries that some may encounter difficulties on returning home. We need to find ways of supporting them, whether by enabling them to stay overseas (e.g. though protected scholar programs, legal help to claim asylum or by any means available) or, if they return to China, be ready to keep in touch and campaign on their behalf if they should face persecution. These are not easy or always feasible solutions. Whatever the problems, we should strive to keep communication channels open as far as possible, perhaps learning from the courage and

inventiveness of China's netizen activists and continue, whenever possible to create opportunities for dialogue with Chinese sexuality scholars.

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