Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History

Gender and sexuality have been neglected topics in the history of Chinese civilization, despite the fact that philosophers, writers, parents, doctors, and ordinary people of all descriptions have left reams of historical evidence on the subject. Moreover, China's late imperial government was arguably more concerned about gender and sexuality among its subjects than any other premodern state. Sexual desire and sexual activity were viewed as innate human needs, essential to bodily health and well-being, and universal marriage and reproduction served the state by supplying tax-paying subjects who were duly bombarded with propaganda about family values. How did these and other late imperial legacies shape twentieth-century notions of gender and sexuality in modern China? In this wonderfully written and enthralling book, Susan Mann answers that question by focusing in turn on state policy, ideas about the physical body, and notions of sexuality and difference in China's recent history, from medicine to the theater to the gay bar and from law to art and sports. More broadly, the book shows how changes in attitudes toward sex and gender in China during the twentieth century have cast a new light on the process of becoming modern, while simultaneously challenging the universalizing assumptions of Western modernity.

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Susan L. Mann

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in memory
William Skinner
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Preface: Does Sex Have a History?

> Conversations about sex are always part of a larger current of conversations and arguments. Desire's objects, expressions, control, suppression, transgression, relative importance, and the venues in which all of these are expressed, are not "natural" occurrences, but social ones. Like everything else of interest to the historian, they change over time.
>
> Gail Hershatter (1996:78)

Does sex have a history? Almost any teenager coping with a parent who still lives in the dark ages will assure you that it does. But the history of sex is surprisingly difficult to study. Why? Lack of evidence. Most people keep their sex lives to themselves. What people write down, publish, and circulate may be sexual fantasy or invention, with plotlines designed to sell copy. This evidence can tell us a lot about what people like to read or watch or imagine, but little about what they actually do. Ironically, the most reliable evidence for a history of sex is the mass of material (by government officials, religious leaders, parents, doctors, and so on) telling people what *not* to do. We can be certain that *some* people were doing *some* of that.

Sometimes the historical record on sex becomes very noisy, but at other times it is quiet. Clearly that is not because people stopped having sex. Sporadic outbreaks of chatter about sex in the documentary record pose additional problems for historians interested in the history of sexuality. When, where, and why do certain kinds of sex, or certain kinds of sexual relationships, become problematic? And what is going on the rest of the time?

There are many other reasons, besides these obvious ones, why the history of sex is difficult to study. In the case of this book – a history of sexuality in modern China – the usual problems with evidence apply.

But two additional challenges face Western[1] scholars and students who are interested in the history of sex and gender in China. One has to do with time, and the other with culture – and the two are related. The problem of time arises whenever China's cultural history is told in terms drawn from the history of Euro–North America, using "the West" as an implicit template for measuring China's historical "progress." Precisely *when* China made the transition to "modern" culture, and *what* that transition entailed, has been a consuming question for China historians. Such habits of thinking about historical time, and the questions they raise, have invited scholars and students in Euro–North America to imagine that temporal change is not only linear but convergent. In other words, eventually – as time marches on – the Chinese will somehow become "just like us." This kind of thinking casts sexuality in late imperial China as both exotic and backward. It also impedes our understanding of sexual morés and practices in contemporary China, where – despite the hallmarks of modern sexuality that Western readers find reassuringly familiar – sexual culture differs in important ways from a Euro–North American model.

At the same time, being attentive to cultural difference can also produce misreadings of the history of sexuality in China. An example of this can be found in the learned writings of the Dutch intellectual and sinologist Robert van Gulik (1910–1967).[2] After years of research on Chinese erotica, Gulik concluded that before the Manchu conquest of 1644, Chinese culture encouraged "natural" forms of sexual expression that liberated the Chinese from the moralistic constraints of his own time and place. As the chapters that follow will show, however, Gulik was misled by his own yearnings for a different cultural idea of sexuality. In China, as in every culture, there was and is nothing "natural" about sexuality. It was, and still is, strictly regulated and calibrated by rules and conventions, by custom and taboo, by medical and governmental authorities, and by profiteering and preaching (see Goldin's introduction to Gulik [2003], also Furth [1994]). Gulik further maintained that "prudery" associated with Confucian orthodoxy inhibited sexual expression in China after the fall of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), making it extremely difficult to find out anything about people's private sex lives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Gulik 1951). As we shall see, this assertion too can be challenged.

[1] This conventional term refers to Euro–North America; it is used in this book for convenience whenever it is less cumbersome than the alternatives.

[2] A sinologist is a scholar who studies Chinese culture using sources written in classical Chinese.

The chapters that follow aim to avoid bad habits of thinking about time and culture. They focus on the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, from the "late empire" to the "modern nation." Chapters are divided topically, each foregrounding the nineteenth-century context in which change occurred. During the decades between 1898 and 1949, new ideas about gender and sexuality reshaped the Chinese social order. These new ideas spread during decades of revolutionary conflict and warfare that ended with the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Over the course of the twentieth century, then, the meaning of the categories "men" (*nan* 男) and "women" (*nü* 女) shifted in many arenas, from the state to the family, from medicine to literature, from labor to law, and from the theater to the gay bar. Yet the heteronormative conventions in the phrase "man/woman" and "husband/wife" remained stable, and the family system in which descent was traced through the male line stayed largely intact. This paradox lies at the heart of the book.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I focuses on the government and its relationship to gender and sexuality, with a focus on the family. Part II shifts the focus from the institutions in Part I to individual persons and their bodies. Part III shifts yet again to consider questions about fantasy, modernity, and globalization, defined in sexualized and gendered terms. In each part, three broad, overarching patterns become clear. First, the movement of women toward work and study outside the home after 1900 was the most significant and sweeping change in China's sex-gender system in centuries.[3] Its repercussions are still being felt. Second, in a culture in which sex was never coupled with sin – in which Adam and Eve had no role in the cultural or historical explanations for sexual desire and its consequences – the Chinese conviction that sexual activity is an essential part of a healthy human life softened and defused the conflicts about homoerotic desire, and about homosexual and transgendered identities, that feed homophobia and even violence in many modern cultures. Third, the Chinese state or government has historically played an overwhelmingly important role in defining the criteria for performing gendered identities. Government policies promoting heteronormative reproductive marriage have merely grown more pervasive, and even coercive, in the course of the twentieth century.

The reasons why any history of gender and sexuality in China must begin by addressing the role of the government will quickly become clear. The prominent role of government in defining gender relations and sexuality is a unique, enduring feature of Chinese history that sets the Chinese experience apart from that of other modern industrial nations. As

[3] For a formal model of the concept of sex-gender systems, see Rubin (1975).

for bodies, in China as in Europe and the Americas, physical bodies generally determine who counts as male and who counts as female. But conceptions of the physical body are constructed by culture in historical time and space. Bodies are coded by age, class, race, or ethnicity. Bodies are mutable and subject to transformation through fantasy or imagination, by clothing or costume or disguise, and by injury or surgery or adornment. Finally, physical bodies *perform* gender and sexuality, and those performances are fluid and constantly shifting. Part II, then, gives evidence for the ways in which bodies submit to, resist, challenge, and reshape government and its policies. In late imperial Chinese history, the unstable meanings of "male" and "female" were pushed to extremes in the creative imagination and were in turn deeply shaken by processes of modernization and globalization, including imperialism or colonialism. Part III moves into the other arenas beyond state and body where the meanings of sexuality and gender have been continually transformed at the hands of writers, artists, entertainers, travelers, and tourists.

To anchor the reader as the discussion moves rapidly through time, three temporal signposts appear. The first refers simply to "late imperial," or "Qing dynasty" culture. This signpost signals the broad cultural matrix of social, legal, economic, religious, and medical beliefs and practices of "premodern" China. The Qing dynasty began in 1644 and ended in 1911, in a tumultuous paroxysm of belated reforms that included changing the educational system and raising the status of women. Late Qing reforms anticipated many of the transformations that came in the twentieth century. The second temporal signpost refers generally to "twentieth-century" changes, especially changes in beliefs and practices associated with the new Republican nation, established in the revolution of 1911, which brought down the Qing dynasty. Republican-era changes in gender and sexuality were all shaped by the intellectuals who led the New Culture and May Fourth movements of 1915–1919. These movements, centered in Beijing and Shanghai, called for an end to the authority of Confucian values, especially the authority of elders over youth and men over women. May Fourth intellectuals also hoped to spread their new values by writing in "plain speech" or vernacular Chinese, to reach a broad popular audience. A third major signpost in this book points to the radical shifts that followed the Chinese Communist revolution in 1949. These shifts were manifested in two stages: the Maoist period, from 1949 to 1976, and the post-Mao era, from 1976 to the present. Roughly speaking, readers will find each chapter divided into discussions of late imperial or Qing dynasty cultural forms, followed by briefer comments on changes in the twentieth century from May Fourth through the present era. The aim of these sweeping overviews is to suggest how our

understanding of the history of gender and sexuality in contemporary China must take account of pre-twentieth-century beliefs and practices. Despite the massive changes that revolution brought to every person in China, deep-rooted past ideas about sexuality and gender performance are still being reinvented, recirculated, and given new meanings.

What kinds of cultural expectations and rules framed the idea of "man" and "woman" in nineteenth-century China? How did these figure in the new rules and expectations that developed in the twentieth century? Readers will encounter in this book recurrent ideas that shape notions of gender and sexuality. These include the cosmological forces *yin* and *yang*; fantasies and myths about male-female relationships with profound sexual meanings; convictions – philosophical, religious, and medical – about human nature and the body; and, finally – perhaps most important, in the Chinese context – governmental "statecraft" policies promoting civilizing projects. All of these ideas constructed notions of *nan* (male, or men) and *nü* (female, or women) in the late empire. Sometimes, they worked together; often, they worked against each other; over time, they changed. The twentieth century was arguably a period of continual, even tumultuous, change in gender and sexuality. But the foundational ideas did not vanish. In contemporary China, the cosmological forces of *yin* and *yang* still inform the most basic medical conceptions of the human body. Fantasy and myth about past heroes and heroines still figure in popular culture from television and film to comics, fiction, and the Internet. Convictions about human nature and the body from the past have been infused into the vocabulary of Western science, social science, and philosophy. And the government is engaged as never before in the active manipulation of norms governing gender and sexuality.

A final note about the relationship between gender and sexuality that is implicit in this book: Many scholars would argue that by assuming a relationship between gender and sexuality, we have predetermined our findings and trapped ourselves in arbitrary and unexamined (Western) binaries before we start (see, for example, Boellstorff [2007] and Najmabadi [2005]). As this book shows, the discipline and control that ordered the nineteenth-century Qing empire was based precisely on a carefully calibrated and even coercive relationship between sexed bodies (gendered male and female) and the performance and expression of sexuality. This discipline and control was so powerful, so unconsciously embraced, and so skillfully deployed by human agents that the surviving evidence compels the historian to recognize a sex-gender system based on models of "male" and "female." At the same time, the easy slippage between masculine and feminine bodily styles and performances – a central feature of sexuality in Chinese culture – makes even Western notions of

"queer" difficult to apply meaningfully in any historical context, including the present (Sinnott 2010). Readers of this book will come away with at least a keen awareness of the extent of sexual control, and of the modes for internalizing that control, in modern Chinese history. Perhaps, on reflection, readers will also become cognizant of the conditions that shape sexual behavior and sexual identity in their own lives and cultures. At the same time, they may also gain a new appreciation for the capacity of the individual person to defy, subvert, or manipulate the powerful hegemonic structures of state, family, and society, given the right historic moment.