

Sex, Culture and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period.



Review Author[s]:
Borge Bakken

The China Journal, No. 37. (Jan., 1997), pp. 205-206.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=1324-9347%28199701%290%3A37%3C205%3ASCAMIC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-9>

The China Journal is currently published by Contemporary China Center, Australian National University.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://uk.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://uk.jstor.org/journals/cc.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Sex, Culture and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period, by Frank Dikötter. Hurst & Co., London, 1995. ix + 233pp. £19.50 (hardcover). (Paperback edition, Hong Kong University Press, 1995.)

Dikötter's combination of detailed empirical knowledge and cultural analysis makes this well-written book worth reading for a much wider public than just those interested in Chinese medical history during the early Republican period. Dikötter examines sexuality from the perspective of modern danger and control: how human sexuality gradually appears as an object of inquiry, intervention and surveillance, as a controlling 'science of sex'. He discusses the interesting period in China where sexuality was being linked to the fortunes of the modern state. It becomes important for the sake of state power and the nation: an object for the techniques of social discipline and social engineering linked to the alleged eradication of 'social decay'. The recurrent fascination with quantification and measurement throughout Chinese history is now seen as an effort to naturalize and control human sexuality.

The text discusses sexuality in a broad cultural context. For instance, there is much of interest here for the study of gender, such as the debate during the early Republican era on the category 'woman' (*funü*). The female sex was then described in a fundamentally new way as exactly the opposite of the male sex. While the male was *wai*, or exterior, the female was *nei*, or interior. Gender boundaries were thought to be only partly dependent on biology until the end of the nineteenth century, and until then biology was not used as a public argument for the subordination of women in China. With the onset of the biological debate, gender differences were thought to be found in almost every part of the body, and it was assumed that a woman was endowed with a physique which marked her as the passive counterpart of the active man.

The book also contains interesting discussions on population studies and eugenics as well as a continuation of Dikötter's earlier discussions on race. In an interesting passage on early Chinese viewpoints on population and population control, Dikötter mentions Hong Liangji, who in 1793 compared the unlimited increase in the population with the limited increase of the means of subsistence. Hong thus preceded Malthus' famous 'Essay on the Principle of Population' by five years. Dikötter's examples on population are linked to the Chinese debate on eugenics and racial hygiene. Often they cast shadows into the present debate. This is the case in the recent discussions on the prevailing strong preference for male children. Dikötter quotes from the journals of Wang Shiduo, a preceptor of the Imperial Academy and adviser to the government, who during the Taiping rebellion suggested that all female children of poor families should be drowned, and that sons with physical abnormalities or ones who 'did not have handsome features' should suffer the same fate. He also addresses more recent debates on eugenics from the 1940s, quoting the biologist Zhou Jianren, who advocated that 'eugenic principles

should guide love', and that love itself should be disciplined to serve the needs of a higher collectivity.

Dikötter, however, never falls into the trap of making generalizations of an 'orientalist' kind. He never idealizes nor denounces otherness, and explicitly warns against such approaches. He correctly attempts to tear down the walls between 'East' and 'West', 'modernity' and 'tradition'. He uses examples from our own cultural setting showing striking similarities to the Chinese case. It is the task of other researchers, however, to use Dikötter's rich findings in a broader comparative analysis.

Even if the great majority of his examples are taken from a specific period of Chinese history, the book convincingly advocates a wider perspective on cultural transformation. I fully agree when he attacks 'Westernization' theories of modernity as one-sided. The example of sexual discourse in Republican China cannot be reduced merely to a 'derivation' from the 'West', he argues; the roots of modernizing representations need also to be sought in the Chinese past itself. His perspective presents new, valuable information in the study of sexuality, modernity and cultural transformation.

Børge Bakken
Nordic Institute of Asian Studies

The Making of a Chinese City: History and Historiography in Harbin, by Søren Clausen and Stig Thøgersen. M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, 1995. xvi + 236pp. US\$59.95 (hardcover), US\$22.50 (paperback).

Conventional wisdom portrays Harbin's history as the creation of Russian railway czars and Japanese militarists. The standard story is told of a cosmopolitan city in China's frozen northeast built and administered by foreign imperialists, dotted with onion-domed Orthodox churches and Ginza-style shops. Although this portrait is not inaccurate, it is incomplete. Two Danish sinologists, Søren Clausen and Stig Thøgersen, present a scenario in which the Chinese assume an important role in the history of what now must be viewed as equally a foreign and a Chinese city. Mixing their own analysis with translations of recent historical studies from the People's Republic, Clausen and Thøgersen demonstrate that the native Chinese played a crucial role in Harbin's history. This book reminds us that even when examining the most imperialist of creations in the 'Middle Kingdom', China and its people should remain clearly in focus and not be reduced simply to the role of a supporting cast.

This important work is a unique departure from other recent studies on the history of Chinese cities in the twentieth century. While other historians admirably utilize Chinese scholarship, Clausen and Thøgersen, by placing