

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



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Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Vol. 61, No. 1. (1998), p. 183.

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and also shies away from engaging with indigenous tradition. However it would be wrong-headed to complain that Liu had failed to do something she did not set out to do. This book is both immensely important and richly rewarding. It illuminates so many issues no one in the field should ignore it.

S. F. DARUVALA

FRANK DIKÖTTER: *Sex, culture and modernity in China: medical science and the construction of sexual identities in the early Republican period*. ix, 233 pp. London: Hurst & Company, 1995. £19.50.

This tightly argued volume, an effective companion to the author's important study of *The discourse of race in modern China* (1992), takes as its subject the constitution of a modern discourse of sex in the China of the Republican period down to the 1930s. The formula, 'a modern discourse of sex' is important, for it is one of the book's great strengths that it refuses the idea of 'the modern discourse of sex', a single monolithic, transcultural discursive field which organizes sex into one narrative, marching in step with the advance of a unified master-narrative of modernity imposed on China, as on the rest of the globe, from a heartland in northern Europe and North America. As such, it is another nail in the intellectual coffin of that single narrative of modernity, and of 'Westernization' in China, which has led and misled the field for so long. Instead of the simple imposition on a static 'tradition' of externally developed theories of the body, Dikötter argues forcefully for an active appropriation of elements which enabled certain élites of the new Chinese Republic to construct plural discourses of sex alongside the equally diffuse modernity which was their central project. (Homi Bhabha's invocation of 'hybridity' is perhaps apposite here, although the author prefers the term 'lattice knowledge'.) If the nation was to be written through the bodies of its subjects, then those bodies could not but be central concerns of the nationalist agenda. Desire, disease, procreation and perversion are here seen not as specialized 'medical' knowledges, but as central to the sustenance of much larger objects: woman, population, youth.

In the introduction, it is already argued that nothing less than 'an epistemic shift away from Confucian discourse' was manifested in the twentieth-century medicalization of sex, bringing a dichotomy between nature and culture to an area where none had previously been thinkable. The description in general of the pre-1911 history of sex in China is necessarily broad-brush in a work of this type, but there may be some specialists who would want a more refined picture of pre- or early-modernity in this regard. It might be felt that for polemical purposes the contrast has been overdrawn (the author admits as much at the foot of p. 49), and that the concentration on 1911 as a moment of epistemic as well as political rupture in China is occasionally asserted rather than fully argued. And the

invocation (p. 13) of 'deeper historical shifts', situated 'below the surface ... beyond the cycles ...' seems at one point to risk reinstating a methodology of surface phenomena and real structures which is at odds with the general constructionist insistence (which I take to be broadly Foucauldian) that there are no surfaces and sub-structures, but that discourse itself is the object of the analysis.

However, it is the very clarity of the author's arguments which makes such cavils possible, and there is no doubt that this is above all an argument-driven book. Its research base, much of it in the periodical literature of the period, is unarguably impressive, a necessary part of its frequently made point that it is a new type of print culture in the Republican period which is the material matrix carrying new discourses. All constructionist, textually based scholarship of this kind can find itself vulnerable to questions about the size and extent of the audience for the texts on which it rests. Who read this material and in what contexts (specialized periodical or general-interest magazine)? The question is raised particularly by the author's scrupulous care in pointing out that the Republican period saw frequent reprints of Qing dynasty gynaecological texts, sometimes by publishing concerns like the Foxue shuju (Buddhist Philosophy Press) which, he says, 'continued to cater to a wide audience'. How wide? How did different presses like the Buddhist Philosophy Press and the Commercial Press differentiate themselves in 1930s Shanghai? Did they seek the same audience, or were they both exercises in 'niche marketing'? What were the mechanics of the frequent translations and adaptations of foreign work which the author catalogues? These are not perhaps questions for the author of this book to answer, but his research certainly raises them very forcefully. Only considerable care over these aspects will prevent 'text-as-discourse' from collapsing into the 'text-as-fetish' trope of sinological enquiry.

A central argument of the book is that 'sexuality' as an expression of individual proclivities and personality did not develop in China, although 'sexual desire' most certainly did. This will be an important element in the ongoing research, being conducted by many scholars, into the construction of the self in China, and seems likely to be controversial in a stimulating way. That is a point which could be made about the book as a whole; written with great verve, and highly readable (appositely illustrated too), it is an important intervention in debates which have as their aim nothing less than the dismantling of frameworks for the study of China which are themselves no less 'constructions' of knowledge than are the specialized texts which lie at the core of this book.

CRAIG CLUNAS

JAMES MILES: *The legacy of Tiananmen: China in disarray*. viii, 379 pp., 16 plates, map [on endpapers]. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996. \$29.95.