

## Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China



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ence to family planning by women writers does not originate from a lack of interest, but is first and foremost a result of strict Party control on publications.

MONIKA SCHAEGLER

*Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China.* By FRANK DIKÖTTER. [London: Hurst & Co., 1995. v + 233 pp. \$28.00. ISBN 1-85065-166-3.]

This is a fine study of how Chinese intellectuals re-conceptualized and sought to modify the public's perception of human physiology and the place of sexuality in daily life. It was during the Republican period, Frank Dikötter suggests, that contemporary Chinese understanding of human sexuality shifted from a cosmology based in metaphysical images of competing essences (*yin* and *yang*) to one that was anchored in an emerging, albeit often erroneous, biology discourse. He further contends that this transformation has its roots in Qing intellectual history and thus was already under way prior to Western contact.

The shift in thinking about human sexuality found ready currency in the production of numerous "how-to" books which had an audience wanting greater clarification and eager to adopt a more modern and thus cosmopolitan outlook on things sexual. One way this was accomplished was through reading "childbirth manuals, gynaecological treatises, books of medical remedies, family handbooks, marriage guides, and primers on sexual hygiene" (p. 14). These medical and lay texts shaped the average urban (though not necessarily rural) Chinese understanding of male and female sexual behaviour.

The emphasis on biological discourse also resulted in a shift in how intellectuals understood the origins of hysteria. Instead of being seen as arising from spirit possession, it was now regarded as resulting from sexual frustration. In what sounds like something taken directly from Freud, Dikötter informs us that Chinese writing in anatomical and gynaecological treatises stressed that a woman was equivalent to a man "turned outside in [and thus] contained a topological inversion of the male penis within her body" (p. 23). Intellectuals who were concerned with improving the overall quality of urban life started to map out new sexual itineraries which resulted in the orgasm becoming the symbol of marital intimacy and conjugal satisfaction. In this new urban milieu the kiss, which was regarded in some quarters as a primary index of marital intimacy, became a lively and popular topic for debate "in vernacular newspapers, with some hospitals warning patients who suffered from high blood pressure or weak constitution [to refrain] from kissing" (p. 48).

The Chinese, like almost every other culture, remained ambivalent toward homosexuality, prostitution, masturbation and other forms of sexual enjoyment that did not promote procreation. Masturbation was considered to be a bad habit which was "acquired by a weak mind like

addiction to cigarettes and alcohol and would erode the memory” (p. 170). It was suggested that a man “immerse his penis in a glass of ice-cold water” (p. 173). After the 1920s there were a few authors calling for a greater tolerance toward masturbation and the need for an “occasional hygienic outlet” (p. 173).

I have three reservations with this otherwise wonderfully rich book. First, I wish Dikötter had discussed more fully the interplay between Chinese and Western discourses. Because he does not, there is no way to know if an idea stemmed from diffusion, arose from convergent or parallel development, or is the by-product of synthesization. It is therefore difficult to evaluate the full significance of his thesis. Secondly, because he favours a cultural constructionist perspective that focuses on the transformation of cultural images of sexuality, it ignores those forms of male and female sexuality that remain constant across historical eras. Finally, since his study is not about sexual behaviour per se but only intellectuals’ writings on the topic, the problem of representativeness, which he is well aware of, remains, as in most studies of sexuality, problematic.

Still, this is an important and very readable book that could easily be used in undergraduate and graduate courses. If it had been published before I began my analysis of northern Chinese sexuality, my work would have been fuller and more accurate. One thing is certain, this pioneering effort will serve as a base line for studying the intellectual transformation of Chinese thinking about human physiology and sexuality for some time to come.

WILLIAM JANKOWIAK

*The Uneasy Narrator: Chinese Fiction from the Traditional to the Modern.* By HENRY Y. H. ZHAO. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. ix + 302 pp. £29.50. ISBN 0-19-713611-7.]

Henry Y. H. Zhao’s study of the narrator in traditional and modern Chinese fiction argues that through interpreting the narrator’s position in fiction, we can understand the “text-distortion caused by the tension between culture and historical movement” (p. 2). Thus the uneasiness – lack of a comprehensive interpretive system, loss of a fixed set of narrative devices – that the narrator shows betrays the author’s “hidden” meanings, which in turn are more effective than plot or other overt contexts in revealing the intellectual and subjective dilemmas of any particular time.

While Zhao focuses on the narrator of the late Qing and early 20th century, through wide-ranging research he successfully embeds May Fourth fiction within the larger category of Chinese fiction. That is not to say that he ignores the rupture May Fourth fiction created, but rather, he traces a series of narrative positions in fiction that range from the traditional domineering narrator to the uneasy late Qing narrator