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Politicized Sex Repression and Fascination in The Chinese Cultural Revolution

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Abstract

In this paper we study the sexual repression and fascination in mainstream films and underground literature during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The Cultural Revolution was launched by the Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong seventeen years after the Party had become the ruling force of China, and ten years from Mao's death in 1976. On the one hand, it was Mao's strategy to purge his once comrades who posed threats to his monopoly of power. On the other hand, Mao mobilized the mass movement to preserve the Chinese communist values that Mao believed to have been forgotten by the Party members. As a result, China in the late Mao era was to a large degree a sexually repressed country, under the censorship of Maoist "revolutionary" ideology that considered sex expressions a bourgeois obsession. Nevertheless, politically motivated sexual repression inevitably caused resistance that often took unexpected forms. Although the Cultural Revolution has been the focus of attention for China watchers for a relatively long time, sexuality and contemporary politics in China is a less explored topic. This paper aims to fill the lacunae by looking into some social undercurrents and unprivileged discourses that have escaped scholars' attention. This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, I discuss the changing attitude of the Chinese Communist Party toward sexuality, providing a historical background for the case studies in the second part that analyze sex repression and fascination in films and underground literature during the Cultural Revolution.

Keywords: Cultural Revolution, Sexual Repression, Chinese Films, Underground Literature, Maoist Ideology

The Chinese Communist Party and Sexuality

The attitude of Chinese communists toward sex has not been monolithic. Looking back at twenty century Chinese history, we discover that the relation between sexuality and politics had gone through certain dramatic metamorphosis. In the first half of the 20th century, the consensus of the reform-minded Chinese cultural elites was that personal happiness in a truly moral society depended on total sexual freedom. This radical view was an understandable reaction to the sexual repression of the feudal past. But it also stemmed from the intellectuals' determination to shake off any impression of traditional moral prudence and to set themselves apart from their conservative countrymen. The eccentric Confucian scholar and politician Kan Youwei predicted a utopia for future China in which private property and family are abolished.

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Women and men form temporary families that last a year, after that it is mandatory for them to separate from each other and find new partners. Children belong not to single families but the entire society, and it is the society's responsibility to take care of them.[5] Since no private properties exist to cause greed and crime, there is no use for law. The only punitive measures left for the society are reserved for laziness and abortion (Kang 1991). Yin Shun, arguably the best Buddhist scholar of the century, described in great interest and sympathy the Buddhist mythological kingdom of Uttarakuru in his popular introduction to Buddhism. He knowingly altered the classic sutras to give the Buddhist myth a socialist tint, including the depiction of free encounters between boys and girls (Yin Shun 1998). Indeed, socialist ideals were so prevalent in early 20th century China that even the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, who ruled China from 1928 to 1949 and was a butcher of communist rebels, had been an admirer of the Soviet Union in his early career. The Chinese Communist Party, founded in 1921, rose in such an environment and was in tune to the larger *Zeitgeist* when it came to their attitude toward sex. Indeed, the prospect of freely sharing goods and sex partners were taken for granted for a number of idealistic youth drawn to communism. The autobiography of Zeng Zhi, a veteran female revolutionary who played an important role in founding the earliest bases for the Chinese Red Army in southern China, tells us that such sharing was indeed practiced in the 1920's and 1930's. Social justice by day, -- which involved killing rich land owners and gave their land and possessions to the poor – and free love by night was those young rebels' lifestyle. An interesting fact about the revolutionary life was their lack of interest in taking care of their children because revolution always took priority over family. In one extreme case, Zeng's superior sold Zeng's baby to a rich family in order to raise funds for the Party, a decision Zeng did not object to (Zeng 1999).

It was until the early 1940's that the Chinese Communist Party turned puritanical in regard to sex (Gao 2000). Several factors were in play for this change. As the Chinese Communist Party became more and more successful and rapidly grew in size, the composition of the Party became very different than that of its early days. Idealistic, educated young radicals from big cities had been the founding members of the Party and initially filled leadership roles, now they were gradually replaced by a new generation of leaders – the poor-peasants-turned-Red-Army-generals who emerged from military struggles against the incumbent Nationalist government. These battle-hardened soldiers resented the rich and enthusiastically supported redistribution of wealth, but they were never able to appreciate the lifestyle of their city-born comrades. A second factor was that the fast-growth of the Party made strict disciplines necessary. The Party wanted to make certain that every member give up personal opinions, feelings, and aspirations, including their preexisting "incorrect" perceptions about sex, in order for the entire Party to act effectively -- like one person.

Ever since this time, the Party had had a twofold approach to sexuality. On the one hand, they still upheld progressive ideals about gender equality and freedom of choice in individuals' (especially women's) romantic relationships. While the Communists had advocated women's liberation from polygamy and parent-arranged marriages of China's feudal past from the time when the Party's began, they moved to action in 1949 when they took power. The Marriage Law of 1950 mandating free-choice monogamous marriage was the very first law implemented

[5] The catch is that citizen of the utopia is obligated to serve the world government – the only government after the disappearance of nation states – in various capacities including serving a certain amount of time at nurseries.

by the new Chinese government, a fact shows a sense of urgency that the Party felt about the status of women (Evens 1997). On the other hand, however, such equality and freedom in sexual relations were restricted by a variety of factors. For instance, young females were often persuaded, sometimes pressured, into marriages with senior party leaders. In fact, marriage was still the only way for women to get access to high levels of power within the Party (Terrill 1999). Another example is that the state openly intruded on the people's reproduction right. Forced abortion conducted by state-run clinics started in the early 1970s (White 2009) and continues to this day (The current Chinese constitution states in article 25 and 49 that Chinese citizens are obliged to take birth control). Finally, as Evens points out: the official discourse that purportedly champions women's liberation in fact "aimed to regulate sex practice in support of the project of social control and economic development formulated by the new government… Individual energies were to be channeled into working for the collective benefit" (1997). This total control created a society in which open discussion of sex is seen as distracting people from their commitment to the Party and its cause and thus needs to be repressed.

Since the 1950s, anti-bourgeois debauchery campaigns swept urban centers such as Shanghai and Beijing. Such campaigns reached to a head in the Cultural Revolution. During this period of time, the aversion to sexual "deviations" and exhibition of sexuality in public spheres permeated all levels of the society from the ruling Party leadership to common households. For instance, illicit affairs were an important reason to end a Party cadre's career and were used as a powerful weapon in the heated inter-Party political struggles. When it comes to everyday life, clothes factories did not make even slightly revealing dresses; in department stores, clerks always tried to make sure that their customers bought "enough" tailoring material to make clothes that would have the body decently covered. Nude and kissing scenes in a few imported foreign films were cut out when the films were edited and dubbed, while the most sexually explicit movies that Chinese viewers had access to were North Korean productions in which male and female characters hugged and held hands. Indeed, North Korean romance movies and North Vietnamese war movies, although politically charged, provided appealing alternatives to the "Eight Model Plays" – "modern revolutionary Beijing operas, ballets, and symphony" that were produced by Mao's wife and that dominated the Chinese theatres and stages at this time (Roberts 2009). Interesting enough, all the heroes in the Eight Model Plays are single. A best example is the Revolutionary Peking Opera "Story of the Red Lamp," in which a family, consisting of a widowed grandmother, a widowed father, and an unmarried, boyfriendless daughter, worked together for the Party under the Japanese occupation. In another Model Play, "Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy," a father and a daughter tell the audience in a song how they miss their family members killed by the Nationalist army. The lyric says that "father misses grandma and daughter misses mother," without any hint at possible spousal affections. Moreover, the love of a personal parent is often times translated into that of a collective mother – the Communist Party.

Sex Fantasies: Domestic and Imported

Young people growing up in the Cultural Revolution were genuinely ignorant of basic sex education and lacked legitimate outlets for their sexual energy. However, they were far from being completely sexually innocent. One of the channels through which the youth sought and

received information about sex was the so-called "hand-copied literature," which is the first case of my study.

Both before and during the Cultural Revolution, public publication was under strict control of the Party and the government. But it was during the Cultural Revolution when underground literature mushroomed and was circulated in handwritten copies among friends and trusted acquaintances. These volumes were mostly short (10-20 pages) for the sake of easy copying and circulation, but book length copies did exist. Surprisingly, they covered a wide variety of genres, ranging from translations of foreign literary classics to avant-garde poetry to amateurish novels (Link 1989). The latter constituted the majority of the underground literature, among which many had an explicit sex theme. One of the best-known hand-copied novelettes was "Heart of a Young Girl," which told the sexual adventures of a young woman Manna – the fictitious "Western sounding" names hinted at her "Western" lifestyle. An even more popular underground novel was titled "An Embroiled Flower Shoe," which was a poorly crafted mystery with frequent scenes of sexual and violence. What made this story stand out was its political references: it depicted the wife of Liu Shaoqi – a defeated chief political rival of Mao – as a member of the Plum Blossom Society, a CIA operated sleep cell working for the interests of the United States and plotting against Mao. Such a storyline no doubt satisfied sexually charged curiosity of many Chinese youths about a woman of higher social status and "out of their league." The weird story began with the discovery of a naked female corpse. A plum blossom sign was left on the dead body and soon it was realized that this was a politically motivated murder. Long Fei, the police chief in charge of this case had been a secret Communist agent infiltrating the Nationalist intelligence apparatus before 1949 when the Nationalists were still in power. Long Fei remembered that the Nationalist spy network he thought he had helped destroy had had a stone monument in their secret headquarter. On the monument, the names of all its members had been inscribed in the shape of a plum blossom. Long Fei now realized that this evil organization was still active and he needed to take on it again. After some pretzel-like twists of plots that do not make much sense, Long Fei was finally able to be exposed the Plum Blossom Society and his biggest catch was Wang Guangmei herself.



Fig. 1: Liu Shaoqin and His Wife Wang Guangmei in 1966

The above is a picture published on the Party's mouthpiece *People's Daily* when Wang accompanied Liu in a diplomatic trip to Southeast Asia in 1966. Soon after, both Liu and Wang disappeared from the limelight. Liu died of pneumonia in detention in 1969 for lack of proper medical treatment, while Wang managed to survive the imprisonment and spent her later years in apolitical philanthropically work. Wang Guangmei in the picture was wearing a while Cheongsam, a rarity at this time. Note that Wang also had a small handkerchief in her left hand. According to the underground novel, there was a plum blossom embroiled on it – a secret sign for the members of the antirevolutionary gang members to recognize each other.

In reality, Wang certainly had no connection with the Chinese Nationalists or the CIA. She was the daughter of a successful businessman and received elite education at Fu Jen Catholic University in pre-Communist China before she married Liu in 1948. The irony of Liu's love life was that he, like many of his comrades, loved women from a bourgeoisie background though he fought all his life against the bourgeois class and its values. After the Communist takeover in 1949, Wang was a darling in the social circles of the Party leadership. She was the lead dancer in high society parties, and coached many peasant-turned Red generals in their first ever Western style dance moves (Zhang, 2008). Because of her popularity, Wang was a target of Madam Mao's jealousy, as evidenced by the later harsh treatment Wang received in prison at Madam Mao's order. Indeed, people have suspected that Madam Mao's radical and eccentric political actions were spurred by her sexual dissatisfaction. In 1972, Jiang was not above confiding to a perfect stranger – the American scholar Roxanne Witke – about her marital problems with Mao (Witke 1977).



Fig. 2: Censored Scene from "The Plum Blossom Dossier"

After the Cultural Revolution, with Liu Shaoqin and Wang Guangmei politically rehabilitated, the Plum Blossom Society story took on a new life. The self-claimed author of the stories Zhang Baorui (another author has made a claim to the authorship of the same stories) completely rewrote the story. In the new version, references to Liu and Wang are deleted. The sex and violence remind though, so much so that when the novel was adopted into a television series in 2003, certain explicit scenes such as shown above were ordered by government officials to be cut out. The only other existent collection of underground literature, *An Liu*,

has done a good job to preserve the authenticity of the texts by not making any alterations. However, it does not include the original Plum Blossom Society story for its politically sensitive nature (Bai 2001). As a result, the only place to have access to the "real" Plum Blossom Society stories is the internet, where the stories are circulated and being constantly redacted.

My second case is a Korean movie that became a huge success in China right after the Cultural Revolution. Literature and art in the communist China serve as a cultural arm of the Party. Film production, like other artistic forms, is expected to "educate the people and attack the enemy." The film industry of the Red China first got started when it inherited film equipments and technicians from the Manchukuo Film Association after the People's Liberation Army reclaimed Manchuria from the Japanese-backed Manchukuo in the late 1940s (Ying, Ling 2002). At the beginning, however, they lacked the expertise to make films independently. Thus, the Chinese filmmakers at this time resorted to importing finished products from fellow communist countries, especially the Soviet Union. When Mao broke up with the Russians and their satellite East European countries in the late 1950s and early 1960's because of the latter's gradual moving away from hard line Stalinism and toward moderate, "revisionist" policies, films from the communist bloc disappeared from the Chinese cinema. The only exceptions were Korean and Albanian movies because the two countries sided with Mao in his debate with Khrushchev who made the scandalous anti-Stalin secret report in 1956.

It is only natural that the Chinese fell in love with North Korean films with love themes, even if the romance was strictly Platonic. One of the North Korean hits that graced China during or shortly after the Cultural Revolution was "The Unknown Heroes." Set in the Korean War in the 1950's, the film was about North Korean agents, the undercover nameless heroes, who sacrificed their lives, and feelings for the service of their country and the great leader Kim Il-sung. The film received a widespread favorable reception upon release in the domestic market, and was belatedly shown at the Kitakyushu Biennial Film Festival in 2007. Typical of North Korean films, it was produced as a political task. The main actor Kim Jung-hwa told reporters in an interview years after the movie was made that she and other actors worked very hard for this movie, sometimes rehearsing hundreds of times for a single scene. As a good communist party member herself, she attributed the movie's success to the Party's leadership (Lao Man (2008). An interesting fact is that a few deserting American soldiers during the Korean War played roles in the film (Jenkins 2009). The plot of the film was full of political stereotypes and ideological cliché back in thirty years ago, but they may not ring a bell with 21st century audience. To make things interesting, I substitute the Korean War background for contemporary settings while keeping the original storyline unaltered. A contemporary equivalent of the same story would be as follows.



Fig. 3: Chinese Poster for the Film "The Unknown Heroes"

In the United Stated controlled Baghdad, Abdul, an Iraqi born British journalist, arrived at the Green Zone to join his Western colleagues. The secret identity of this handsome journalist in his early 30's from a prominent Iraqi family, however, was an anti-US freedom fighter. His mission was to obtain information about upcoming US counter-insurgence campaigns. Abdul's chief foe was the head of the US military intelligence force in Baghdad, Colonel Claus, a Harvard trained classics scholar in his former life. A formidable enemy, Colonel Claus could talk classic Greek philosophy with his guests in a party, and calmly ordered the execution of dozens of Iraqis in the next moment. To Abdul's surprise, he found Colonel Claus' most trusted assistant to be Sergeant Jasmine, a woman who had been arranged in childhood to marry Abdul by their parents but had lost touch with him in war times. It was heartbreaking for Abdul to discover that the person he loved most in the world was working for the enemy. But the moment of truth came soon. Jasmine turned out to be a double agent working for the resistance, and the contact of Abdul. The common cause strengthened an old love. Abdul and Jasmine now fought for their country, their religion, and their love for each other. The savvy Colonel Claus began to be suspicious of Abdul, however, Abdul had his protection in a United States senator who happened to be also a businessman and had heavy investments in Iraqi oil fields. Abdul's family had done business with the senator for years and donated to his political campaigns. Eventually, the senator leaked strategically important intelligence to Abdul when he was visiting Iraq for business. Jasmine sacrificed her life in order to help Abdul send out the intelligence to resistance leaders. The resistance received intelligence in time thanks to the determination and sacrifice of its loyal sons and daughters. As a result the newest US attack was thwarted. Colonel Claus was called back to Washington for his failure in stopping resistance espionage. Before boarding on his plane back home, Colonial Claus pensively reflected: "Islam is invincible." Now substitute Iraq for Korea and Islam for Communism, as well as change the heroes names to Yu Rim (male) and Kim Soon-hee (female), you get the exact plot of this classic North Korean propaganda movie.

The original North Korean movie came to China in 1982, a time of political thawing. After Mao's death in 1976, Mao's wife and those who were responsible for the Cultural Revolution were arrested by the moderates in the Party. The reformer Deng Xiaoping, previously ousted by Mao, rose back to power and brought about partial tolerance to politics and Chinese

people's personal lives. The change of social ethos, however, lagged behind political changes. The Chinese still lived under Mao's shadow when it came to issues like sex, and "The Unknown Heroes" served as an eye opener. Indeed, the selling point of the movie was the female spy Kim Soon-hee with her hallmark black sunglasses and knee long leather jacket. It is to be remembered, sunglasses and leather jackets were unseen at this time because the standard dress code was the green or gray Mao suit. The cool "badness" of Kim Soon-hee's attire well registered with young Chinese audience. Moreover, that a good revolutionary could have a lover was an even more refreshing idea. With all the movie's bombarding propagandic messages, the seditious sexual images of a female body was a unique gift to the Chinese people in that time.

Twenty years after the first introduction of the film, current young and often English speaking Chinese moviegoers have acquired a taste for Hollywood. However, "The Unknown Heroes" still stays close to the hearts of the nostalgic middle-aged audience who remember the Red female fatale character from their early years, as attested by the fact that the same was re-dubbed and made available on DVD in 2003.

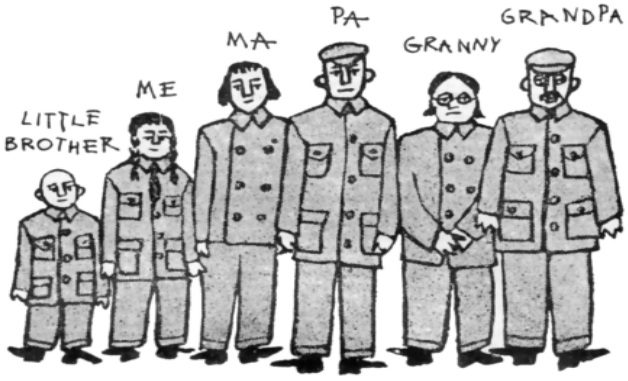


Fig. 4: Mao Suits

Conclusion

At this point, the reader may ask what I intend to prove by presenting my case studies. I would like to begin with what I try to avoid. When attempting to reconstruct the history of such an ideologically charged period as the Cultural Revolution, some scholars are attempted to over-interpret because of eagerness to show off new theoretical trappings, blindness to cultural and historical differences, and their own politics and vested interest. In fields such as literature and sociology, the danger of misapplying Western theories to nonwestern contexts is especially prevalent. For instance, there has been a tendency among certain sinologists to emphasize the "complexities," aka positive sides of the Cultural Revolution, rather than pointing fingers at its overt brutality. Some go so far as to recast Maoism ideology as some form of revolutionary eroticism, finding the roots of Maoist revolutionary enthusiasm in sublimated sexual drive (e.g., Wang 1997). Thus instead of a time of political, social, and emotional repression, the Cultural Revolution is depicted as a jubilant, carnivalesque release of collective social energy and an affirmation of humans' agency. Such scholars may intend to provide an alternative cultural vision to the manufactured popular culture of the late capitalism, but in my humble

opinion they have chosen a wrong target in the Maoist Cultural Revolution to project their idealism. In spite of their good intentions, the mimicking of fashionable literary theories and imposing them on the Chinese experiences fly in the face of ample personal accounts from people who lived through that period of time (e.g. Min 1994). It is true that life, including people's sex life, during the Cultural Revolution was not entirely bleak and miserable. We have seen above that the audience of "The Unknown Heroes" might well have been as absorbed in the cheesy plot and been momentarily happy as those of today's Hollywood TV shows. The sinful pleasure of the hand-copied volume readers was perhaps as intense as that of 21st century internet surfers looking for pornography. But those facts do not diminish the seriousness of the real repression in the 1960s and 1970s China. The enjoyments of reading "A Embroiled Flower Shoe" and watching "The Unknown Heroes" were derived precisely from transgression against the dominant political and ideological norms during this time. The Cultural Revolution was not about *jouissance,* to the contrary, *jouissance* resisted and outlived the Cultural Revolution. As for the Maoist and revolutionary references, such as the anti Liu Shaoqi theme in the underground literature and the communist heroism in the movie in our discussion, Wendy Larson reminds us that an important differentiation has to be made between political and cultural Maoism per se and people's appropriation of pleasure despite of Maoism –sometimes this involves recouping Maoist icons and rhetoric (1999). Even in such a case, the mixture of Maoist politics and blizzard sex story turns the former into laughing stock, not anything meaningful or inspirational (Lu 2004).

Forty years after the Cultural Revolution, we may have a sense of distance from its horrors, however, it would be callous for anyone trying to justify the social, physical, and emotional injuries left in millions of people's lives. The defiant, sometimes playful postmodernism challenges the validity of reason, denies the existence of an unchanging human nature, and reveals to us the fluidity of gender and sex (Freski 1995, Butler 2006). Thus Maoism and the Cultural Revolution may be nothing more than a political discourse, a cultural narrative, or a performance of power relations in the theoretical games of post-modernity and post-socialism. However, we have to ask whether such sophisticated theories can square with the real experiences of toiling and suffering souls who survived Mao and his mass movements? Heiner Muhlmann does not cover his sarcasm when he states: "How does transcendence come about? It comes about through the misunderstanding of slowness" (Sloterdijk 2009). I would put this statement on its head: if "slowness" is life experiences that span several generations, according to Muhlmann, then the slow to change collective human experiences deserve to be treated as if it was "sacred" or "transcendent." In other words, we do not have to believe in an unchanging human nature or gender roles, however, if certain biological behaviors, psychological traits and social institutions are found in a wide range of societies and cultures for a relatively long time and people seem to be largely happy about them, then it seems to me such biological, psychological and social propositions should be respected. Human sexuality and traditional practices associated with it, such as dating and family, are an integral part of our understanding of what a human being is. Its repression for ideological reasons in the Cultural Revolution was morally wrong, and self-defeating in the judgment of history. What I have demonstrated in this paper is how people under authoritarianism attempted to find ways to take back what rightfully belonged to them but was taken away: the access to and enjoyment of sexual pleasure. In both of my cases, people had to obtain such enjoyment through imagination, a imagination that was politically transgressive against the ruling ideology, a

formerly repressed, instinctual urge to seek individual fulfillment and to fight state control (Larson 1999). To conclude, sex seldom exists in the form of pure biological energy or universal psychological impulses. It has always been experienced, imagined and constructed in response to changing social, political, and historical conditions. By exploring and comparing some social undercurrents and unprivileged discourses in the Cultural Revolution, I hope to add a helpful measure gauging social complexes reflected in twenty-century Chinese psyche.

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