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Actually, Let's Not Talk About Sex: The Value-Laden Sex Education Received by China's Young Women

Allyson Tsu

SIT Study Abroad, at2989@barnard.edu

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**Actually, Let's Not Talk About Sex:
The Value-Laden Sex Education Received by China's Young Women**

Tsu, Allyson

Academic Director: Lu Yuan

Project Advisor: Zhao Jie

Barnard College, Columbia University

Department of Philosophy

China, Yunnan, Kunming

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INTRODUCTION

I. Understanding Educational Goals and their Value-Laden Nature

What an educator believes to be the functions and goals of education will necessarily influence the choices she makes when she is educating. Regardless of if she purposefully references her own opinions, an educator's choices—her curriculum, lecture format, etc—will inevitably be impacted by what she considers to be education's ultimate aim.

So what is the end that education hopes to reach? Education theorists, unsurprisingly, disagree about the goals of education. British philosopher Harry Brighouse organizes education goal theories into four main categories¹:

- (1) The theory of autonomy: the goal of education is to maximize an individual's freedom, choices, and right to self-determination. Education ought to help individuals “find a way of life that is best suited to their personalities.”²
- (2) The theory of human capital: the goal of education is to improve both an individual's and her society's economic well-being. It is assumed that the more educated a work force, the greater its productivity.
- (3) The theory of personal flourishing: the goal of education is to posit an individual in a situation where she can fully develop her personality and live a happy life.
- (4) The theory of cooperation: the goal of education is to provide an individual the skills for living amongst others. Being able to cooperate benefits individuals not just because it creates societal order, but also because individuals usually will live a better life if they are able to work with others.

¹ Brighouse, H., *On Education* (2006)

² —, “Moral and Political Aims of Education” (2009), p.37

For the past few decades, China has prioritized the theory of human capital, viewing education as a key tool needed to ensure national economic growth.³ Surely, however, economic growth is not the only desired end in itself, but the supplier of the means that will allow people to live happy, self-determined, civic lives; as Brighthouse notes: “[a]t the foundation of the arguments for preparing children to be autonomous and preparing them for the labor market is the idea that these are extremely valuable for them to be able to live flourishing lives.”⁴ Thus it seems that the goals expressed by these four theories are not nearly as distinct and independent as they appear when laid out in theory, and in actuality, are densely intertwined.⁵

To underscore and expound on the implications of what has been presented: when we deliberate education’s purposes, we are in turn deliberating what makes “the good life.” Such question requires us to reflect on our morals, as it asks us what matters and conditions ought and ought not to be pursued in order to ensure both individual and societal flourishing, and on

³ In 1978, Deng Xiaoping enacted the “Four Modernizations”—the government’s promise to strengthen China’s spheres of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology—which posited education as the key to making China a great economic power. In 1983, Xiaoping cited economic goals for China’s education system when he publicized his “Three Orientations,” stating: “education must be oriented to modernization, to the world, and to the future.” In 2004, the State Council of the People’s Republic of China issued its “2003-2007 Action Plan for Invigorating Education,” which pushed educational reform and development in order to rejuvenate China’s economy: “[i]n the 21st century and with the context of economic globalization and knowledge economy, the competition in economy, science and technology lies its root in the competition of education and the advantage in human resource.” In 2014, President Xi Jinping urged Communist Party committees to put greater importance in students and teachers: “[t]oday’s students are the major driving force that will realize our great Chinese dream: the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”

⁴ *Id.* at 2, p.40

⁵ In the “2003-2007 Action Plan for Invigorating Education,” the State Council underlined the relationships between (1) education and civic living and (2) education and human flourishing: “we should think seriously about the relationship between the educational development and the goal of establishing a well-to-do society by 2020”; “we should think seriously about the relationship between educational development and the overall development of human beings” (2004), *available at* <http://www.edu.cn/20040324/3102182.shtml>

a fundamental level, how human beings should live. What we deem to be the aims of education, therefore, will necessarily reflect and embody our values, for our understanding of such goals stems from our own personal definition of what makes a life good and flourish.

II. The Myth of Value-Free Education

“[W]hen we bring up children in the family or in the school, we are always engineering. There is no values-free form of education in the world. [...] You can’t avoid shaping children.

And, of course, we want to shape children. As they come into the world they are very wonderful, but they don't get very far in adult life without being shaped. And so, then the question is what way do we want to do it. What kind of people do we want them to be?”⁶

—MARTHA NUSSBAUM, Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago

When we think about education, we frequently interpret its duties narrowly, believing it’s only responsibility to be in the transmission and acquisition of empirical knowledge. This narrow interpretation can be seen in many school curricula, which prioritize memorization of facts over analytical and original reasoning. Because it attempts to exclude the teaching of values from education, this form of education has been labeled by scholars as “value-free”—neutral instruction that does not hold “standards and principles for judging worth.”⁷

Supporters of value-free education believe moral judgments ought not to be made by schools, which they view as impartial and secularized institutions. However, as I previously explained, our understanding of the goals of education is unavoidably value-laden. Therefore, if the kinds of education we produce reflect our understanding of what we hold to be good and valuable, can education ever truly be value-free?

⁶ Coalson, R., “‘There Is No Values-Free Form Of Education,’ Says U.S. Philosopher” (2011), available at http://www.rferl.org/a/nussbaum_interview/2315794.html

⁷ Shaver, J.P. and Strong, W., *Facing Value Decisions: Rationale-building for Teachers* (1976), p.15

Current literature seems to side against the feasibility of value-free education, arguing that it is impossible to enact in reality because values and ideals are inherent to teaching.⁸ Education scholars have found that values underlie all aspects of education, ranging from institutional disciplinary procedures to teacher-student relationships. In a system where “even the seating arrangements in a classroom convey certain values,” children and their particularly impressionable intelligences are formed by the value-laden issues and questions they encounter in every assignment, every interaction, every word of criticism.⁹

In the introductory chapter for his book *Values in Education and Education in Values*, J. Mark Halstead concisely spells out the effect of societal educational goals on the field of education: “[s]chools reflect and embody the values of society; indeed, they owe their existence to the fact that society values education and seeks to exert influence on the pattern of its own future development through education.”¹⁰ Values, it seems, find a home not only in educational theory and thought—in our hopes and goals for education—but in our actual execution and practice of education, as well; therefore, I agree with the opinion which holds value-free education to be a myth, for education necessarily involves the teaching of values.

My reasoning for delineating and substantiating the claim—that all education is unavoidably value-laden—is that I wish to have readers begin my paper with a base understanding that China’s sex education does impart values to those listening. In my research I was not attempting to determine whether values are or are not relayed, but trying to discern the value statements that are in fact being communicated.

⁸ Carr, D. (1993); Halstead, J.M. (1996); Hansen, D.T. (2001); Jackson, P.W., Boostrom, R.E., and Hansen, D.T. (1993)

⁹ Halstead, J.M., “Values and Values Education in Schools” (1996), p.3

¹⁰ *Id.*

THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF OFFICIAL SEX EDUCATION DISCOURSE UNDER THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA (PRC)

I. *The Maoist Era*

Though the foundation of the PRC and popularization of socialist ideology is frequently associated with the upheaval of traditional Chinese culture and thinking, China's preoccupation with socialist modernity in the Maoist era did little to change the classic Chinese sex narrative, which enforced discipline and control. Public authorities did, however, begin to view sexuality as another method of enforcing state jurisdiction, and began to regulate and direct sex and sexuality along modern socialist principles of sexual behavior.¹¹

This socialist discourse equated citizens' sexual conduct to either their support or opposition to the country's new conceptualization of socioeconomic modernity. Because the needs of the collective reigned paramount to those of the individual, it was considered unacceptable for citizens to incorporate individual appetites into negotiations on any issue, including sexuality. Therefore, sex became a matter solely of doing one's reproductive duty, and sexual behaviors considered to be outside the boundaries of monogamous heterosexuality or the product of "bourgeois individualism" (i.e. premarital sex, adultery, homosexuality) were harshly criticized and prohibited.¹²

¹¹ Various publications and pamphlets were disseminated to the Chinese public in an effort to control sexual behavior. Most notably, women's magazines, such as *Zhongguo Qingnian* (*Chinese Youth*), *Zhongguo Funü* (*Chinese Women*), *Xin Nüxing* (*The New Woman*), and *Funü Zazhi* (*The Ladies Journal*), covered the topics of sexual hygiene, sexual development, reproduction, and sexual morality.

¹² Evans, H., *Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender Since 1949* (1997), p.359

It is a common misconception that the topic of sex went unexplored under Maoist rule, for the PRC's sex-related decrees framed much of what was generally considered socially acceptable rhetoric and behavior.¹³ However, with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, discussions about sex were banned from the public sphere, and all official and unofficial debates about sex education were silenced, for sexual knowledge outside the sphere of biology was considered inappropriate. More simply than being deemed improper, sex education was often just viewed as unnecessary, a secondary concern in China's expansive, socialist doctrine:

“Since ours is a class struggle, we teach the students to solve their personal problems. We tell them not to pay too much attention to the problem of sex. In fact, just ignore it, and instead concentrate on Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong thought.”¹⁴

It was not until the end of the Cultural Revolution and Mao's death that there could be open dialogue about sexuality and sex education. Overall, sex and sexuality during the Mao years were “treated either as shamefully illicit or as a manifestation of bourgeois individualism and thus detrimental to collective welfare.”¹⁵

II. Population Considerations and the One-Child Policy

With the implementation of the One-Child Policy in 1979, discussions about population control and as a result, sex, had to be had, marking a clear shift in the PRC's tone on sex-related issues. In order to control the quantity of births, the policy explicitly urged Chinese citizens to use birth control methods. Additionally, in 1981 the Ministry of

¹³ *Id.*— The PRC established marriage as the only relationship where sexual activity was allowed; therefore, those who engaged in extra-marital actions were considered psychologically disturbed and a danger to a healthy, socialist society.

¹⁴ Fraser, 1978—Quote given by an unidentified Chinese middle school teacher interviewed in 1976

¹⁵ *Id.* at 13, p.362

Education published its first sex education textbook, *Population Education*, which covered the topics of sexual hygiene and birth control for middle schoolers.¹⁶

Demographic concerns dominated the official sex education discourse of the early 1980s, and provided the impetus for sex education discussions to reemerge and enter schools through classes on population control and family planning.

III. Moving Towards Moral Rationale

In August 1988, China's State Education Commission and State Family Planning Commission jointly issued the "Notification on the Development of Adolescent Education in Middle Schools," which included the country's first required nationwide sex education curricula. The Notification, which assigned schools the official responsibility of educating children about sex, outlined the subject matter that ought to be covered.¹⁷ Yet despite the document's dissemination, its policies and goals were never fully acknowledged or implemented by Chinese schools, and the national, standardized sex education curricula being pursued never came to fruition.

Though the Notification was largely ineffective, it clearly showed how the PRC continued to view sex education as a way of maintaining social stability; however, this time specifically through the refinement of the population's sexual morality and the prevention of *xing zuicuo*, or "sexual crimes and sexual misconducts."¹⁸ By providing sex education in middle schools, Chinese schools were supposed to help their students find the "correct

¹⁶ Ministry of Education, *Population Education* (1981)— The text contained material that would have previously been too sensitive and controversial to be covered in public (i.e. reproduction and contraception).

¹⁷ The Notification highlighted the topics of sexual physiology, sexual psychology, sexual morality, and socialist moral education as the pinnacles of its new sex education curricula.

¹⁸ Ruan, F., *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture* (1991) — The term referred to sexual behavior that was both illegal (i.e. sexual assault) and abnormal (i.e. homosexuality, premarital sex).

outlook” on love, marriage, family and giving birth, and ultimately, foster the development of their sexuality in a way that would “facilitate progress in the development of society.”¹⁹

Specifically mentioned in the curricula was the obligation of teachers to tell young people to refrain from pornography and premarital sex.

Since the distribution of the Notification, the themes of sexual morality and sexual abstinence have prevailed in China’s official sex education discourse. Most notably, in recent years schools and leading education scholars have advocated for a curricula which provides *zonghe xing jiaoyu*—“comprehensive sex education.”²⁰ Regarding sex as an issue of self-discipline and morality, *zonghe xing jiaoyu* texts take sex education as a means to promoting moral, socialist ends:

“[A] sex education without value criteria is an education without value...”²¹

“[Sex education] is an important element in the construction of socialism and [...] socialist spiritual civilization.”²²

“[A]s a means of knowledge dissemination and guidance, adolescent sex education must include a clear sense of values. [...] Sex has both a carnal and emotional dimension as well as a social, ethical and spiritual dimension. Sex can be healthy only if all these dimensions are combined together...”²³

¹⁹ Farquhar, J., *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China* (2002)

²⁰ It is important to note that the Chinese conceptualization of “comprehensive sex education” differs greatly from the conceptualization spoken about in the international sphere. “Comprehensive sex education” outside of China provides full information about a range of sex topics (i.e. puberty, sexuality, contraception, safe sex), and tries to remain unbiased in its teachings; for example, abstinence is not promoted. This can be compared with China’s “comprehensive sex education,” which covers what is and is not proper sexual morality and what are and are not proper sexual values (i.e. emphasis is placed on abstinence, students are warned of the dangers of premarital sex).

²¹ Gao, D., *Childhood’s Golden Key: Sex Education for Primary School Students* (1998)

²² —, *Sexual Education* (1998)

²³ Chen, Y., “Adolescence Sex Education is a Whole Life Education” (2002)

Despite covering the topics of biological and physiological development, psychology, moral discipline, self-protection, self-discipline, and self-esteem, *zonghe xing jiaoyu* does not discuss safe sex, in fear that discussions about the act of sex will encourage sexual behavior among youth.²⁴ Although middle school textbooks do mention condoms and other contraceptive devices, they seldom provide information on their correct use, and instead, explicitly criticize safe sex as a method unfit to protecting one's sexual health. Instead, focus is placed on teaching students the techniques and strategies which can be used to control their sexual desires.

Since the 1980s, China has constructed a national sex education program founded on negative prescriptions, a curricula which tells its young people sexual behavior puts their health and moral status in jeopardy. However, when considering the increasing number of youth who accept and engage in premarital sexual activity, it seems that China's official sex education rhetoric is quickly becoming out of touch with the country's increasingly open and liberal society.

RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

I. Data collection design and rationale

Throughout the duration of my ISP fieldwork, I had to remain mindful of my topic's controversial nature. Discussions on sex education necessarily require individuals to recall personal and intimate experiences, a defining characteristic of what is said to make a research topic "sensitive."²⁵ And of course, when fieldwork involves exploration into potentially

²⁴ Peng, X., "Puberty Sex Education and Teachers Training" (2001)

²⁵ Renzetti, C. M. and Lee, R. M., *Researching Sensitive Topics* (1993) — In their explanation of what constitutes a "sensitive topic," Renzetti and Lee outline several categories of sensitive research;

sensitive and emotionally charged issues, notable challenges often materialize when one attempts to tap into and engage with peoples' voices and experiences.

Studies done on how to collect information on sensitive topics have cited both focus groups and individual interviews as appropriate and mindful techniques.²⁶ Nevertheless, because the location of participants in my research spanned across many of China's provinces, I was unable to arrange focus groups to assess group attitudes and dynamics when discussing sex education. For such reason, individual interviews became my principal method of gathering first-hand information about Chinese peoples' opinions of their own sex education experiences.

In addition to my decision to employ one-on-one interviews as my method of experimental data collection, I also planned to have each of my research participants direct his or her own interview. My rationale for holding unstructured interviews was two-fold: firstly, I hoped that the flexibility of my interviews would allow details and accounts of participants' sex education experiences to emerge naturally; secondly and more importantly, I hoped that the freedom to lead my interviews would empower participants to purposefully reflect on their own perspectives about sex-related topics.

II. Breakdown of research participant demographics and interview procedure

The body of data discussed in this paper was collected during fifteen casual interviews conducted from the seventh of November to the second of December. The majority of interviews—eleven—were held with young women from the ages of nineteen to twenty-six, who reflected on their own personal experiences with sex education and

they are as follows: (1) research that involves deeply personal experiences, (2) research that is concerned with social control and nonconformity, (3) research that impinges on the interests of powerful persons, and (4) research that involves sacred subject-matter

²⁶ *Id.*; Cowles, K.V., "Issues in Qualitative Research on Sensitive Topics" (1988)

compared their attitudes on sex-related topics to those they had heard from their parents and in schools. I specifically chose young women as the focal population of my study, for the values attached to China's sex education weigh particularly heavily on females, who bear the brunt of value-laden expectations and restrictions regarding sexual behavior (i.e. not engaging in premarital sex).

To better understand the relationship between parent-given sex education and its effects on China's female youth, I conducted an additional two interviews with the mothers of two of the eleven young women. During these interviews, I focused primarily on the mothers' opinions on what information they thought ought to be communicated to their daughters about sex and sex-related topics.

The final two interviews conducted were held with two educators— Zhu Laoshi, the principal of Yunnan Normal University Experimental Middle School and Xiao Laoshi, a psychologist also from Yunnan Normal University Experimental Middle School. Zhu Laoshi and Xiao Laoshi were introduced to me through Charles, who was also present during their interviews to assist the flow of communication and assure that both I and the two interviewees had a full understanding of all questions and responses. Zhu Laoshi's and Xiao Laoshi's interviews served as first-hand sources of official opinion on the current status of sex education in China.

Though conversation in all my interviews flowed freely, the aforementioned eleven young female participants were specifically asked to answer the following questions, where phrasing of questions remained consistent for comparative purposes. Each of these interviews were conducted in a one-on-one design, so all information disclosed by participants was revealed only to me:

- What age did you receive a sex education?
- From where did you receive your sex education? From what sources?
- Did you receive sex education in school?

—Follow-up question: **if they say YES**

- What information did your school(s) share with you?
- In your opinion, do you think the information they shared was sufficient or insufficient?
- Regarding the sex education you received in school: did your school set an expectation as to how you should act sexually?

—Follow-up question: **if they say NO**

- Would you have wanted to receive sex education in school?
 - What do you think was the reason(s) why you were not taught sex education in school?
 - Do you think your teachers had an opinion on how you should act sexually?
- When you were growing up, were your parents a source of information about sex topics?

—Follow-up question: **if they say YES**

- What information did your parents share with you?
- Regarding the sex education you received from your parents: have your parents set an expectation as to how you should act sexually?

—Follow-up question: **if they say NO**

- Would you have wanted your parents to provide information?
 - What do you think was the reason(s) why your parents did not give you information about sex?
 - Do you think your parents have an opinion on how you should act sexually?
- Do you think the sex education that Chinese youth receive is sufficient? Why?

After being asked the list of questions seen above, each woman was also given the opportunity to supplement her responses with further opinions and/or experiences. This was done to ensure that the structured segment of interviews did not lead to the unintentional omission of valuable and meaningful information.

Because sex education remains a taboo and sensitive topic in China, I was aware that the women may be reluctant to provide truthful accounts of their experiences. To

circumnavigate such difficulties, prior to all interviews I tried my best to construct a space where my interviewees would feel safe and at ease with me and my role as a researcher. At no point did I want to risk making the women I interviewed uncomfortable by being the probing stranger asking exceedingly personal questions; therefore, rapport-building was carried out with the women for some time before any formal interview was conducted. Another practice I found particularly helpful in easing the minds of interviewees was sharing my own experiences with sex education and sex-related issues as a young woman in the United States. I hoped that in initiating a comparable level of vulnerability and openness that I was going to ask of them in their interviews, the women would reciprocate my honesty and understand that they could trust me to faithfully record their stories.

During the duration of my interviews, I remained in Kunming, for Zhu Laoshi and Xiao Laoshi and those helping me gather and organize my research—Charles, Lu, and Klaus—were all located within the city. Though it was most practical for me to reside in Kunming while conducting ISP fieldwork, I did not want my research population to ultimately consist only of women who grew up in Kunming and its surrounding neighborhoods. My intention was always to study the larger landscape of sex education in China, and to discern a set of comprehensive values attached to the way Chinese society communicated sex-related topics to its youth; therefore, I avoided interviewing only those native Kunming, as I imagine the experiences and opinions I would have heard would have been indicative only of a Kunming-specific sex education and likely, Kunming-specific values.

In order to diversify the demographic of women in my study while still living in one location, I had Charles and various friends put me in contact with a multitude of young women they knew, and later, chose those I would ask to interview in-depth based on the location of where they received their sex education. The geographical breakdown for the

eleven women I ultimately interviewed are as follows: four women from Kunming, Yunnan, one woman from Chengdu, Sichuan, one woman from Ziyang, Sichuan, one woman from Guangzhou, Guangdong, one woman from Qianxinan, Guizhou, one woman from Dezhou, Shandong, one woman from the Xicheng District of Beijing, Hebei, and one woman from Huangshan, Anhui.

Before any of the interviews were conducted, all fifteen individuals who participated in my research were informed of their ability to clarify and/or change his or her responses after the duration of the interview (all participants were able to contact me through WeChat, text message, and/or phone call). In addition, all participants were informed of their right to withdraw themselves from my study at any point, so that if they wished, I would not incorporate any information they shared with me in my findings. In the end, all the individuals I initially interviewed remained a part of my study; however, five of the young women did initiate contact post-interview to provide further context and reasoning for the answers they provided earlier.

THE EXISTING UNOFFICIAL SEX EDUCATION DISCOURSE WITHIN CHINA

I. The Values Imparted by School-Provided Sex Education

A. Interview Population: Educators

Zhu Laoshi and Xiao Laoshi are Yunnan Normal University Experimental School's principal and psychologist, respectively. I would like to premise my findings from these interviews by noting that Yunnan Normal University Experimental School is one of the top schools within the province. When speaking to Zhu Laoshi and Xiao Laoshi, both individuals were careful to remind me that the sex

education their school provides is not representative of the norm within China.²⁷

Therefore, if anything, the information I gathered from them is only representative of China's more well-funded, progressive sex education programs.²⁸

To begin our interviews, I asked Zhu Laoshi and Xiao Laoshi to share their general thoughts about sex education from the position of being educators. Both individuals seemed very open to discuss the topics surrounding *xing jiaoyu*, not just *shengli weisheng*, and immediately expressed their desire to hold more open dialogue about sex-related issues beyond physiology. When I asked if their colleagues held similar opinions, Zhu and Xiao Laoshi each separately responded yes, and explained that in their school, there are likely only a few teachers—typically from an older generation—who do not approve of freely discussing sex with the students.

Attesting to the school's progressiveness, when Xiao Laoshi and the other psychologist from Yunnan Normal University Experimental School were given the opportunity to create a mental health class, they chose to devise a formal sex education course, where second-year middle school students meet to discuss a new sex-related topic every week. Xiao Laoshi was kind enough to give me the syllabus for her class sex education curriculum is as follows:

Lesson 1: Introduction to Sex Issues and Questions

Lesson 2: The Origin of Life and Reproduction

Lesson 3: Gender Characteristics

Lesson 4: How to Be Healthy and Hygienic

Lesson 5: Problems Encountered by Teenagers

Lesson 6: The Psychology of Different Genders

Lesson 7: Gender Identity

²⁷ Interview with Zhu Laoshi, Interview with Xiao Laoshi

²⁸ Since I only interviewed educators from Yunnan Normal University Experimental School, it is even difficult to extrapolate and say that this school's sex education curriculum and programs are indicative of any trend within larger Chinese schools.

Lesson 8: The Diversity of Gender Issues (inc. introduction to homosexuality)

Lesson 9: The Relationship of Different Genders, **Section I + II**

**Section I: Outdoor Activities; Section II: Indoor Activities

**Activities are focused on having male and female students interact

Lesson 10: Sexual Harassment and Self-Protections, **Section I + II**

**Section II is given only to female students

Lesson 11: The Harmful Effects of Sexual Intercourse at a Young Age

Lesson 12: Sex Ethics

In addition to the aforementioned structured curricula, students of Yunnan Normal University Experimental School are encouraged to seek out help from Xiao Laoshi, if they encounter any sex, sexuality, or relationship difficulties.

B. Interview Population: Young Women

Most participants had received some sort of sex education while in school. During the formal component of my interviews with the eleven young women, nine reported having received at least some sex education in school, and two reported having received none at all. The women who reported receiving in-school sex education expressed that the education focused mainly on the reproductive system and excluded information related to the act of sex and sexuality:

“In school, my teacher taught me about the human body and the reproductive organs.” —Jing Qian, 20

“They taught us about puberty and how all our bodies were going to change. My teacher told us that we should not be ashamed of our own bodies, or make fun of our classmates because of this process.” —Lin Jia Hui, 23

Because of the education’s biology and physiology tone, some of the women seemed hesitant to label their experiences as *xing jiaoyu* — “sex education,” and considered *shengli weisheng* — “physiology and hygiene” — a more appropriate title for the

education they received. Of the nine, seven reported having received some information on a form of contraceptive; however, instruction on actual contraceptive use was seldom provided.

The two young women who reported having not received any sex education in school both expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of sex education provided to them. When asked why they believe they did not receive information, both women cited awkwardness of the subject-matter and one added additionally, lack of time:

“Schools and teachers care most about their students getting good scores, so sex education, in comparison, is viewed as unimportant.” —Zhong Jia Wei, 19

When I asked about how schools and teachers expected them to act sexually, all women responded that they were held to the expectation to stay abstinent. One individual commented on how abstinence was explicitly labeled as the “good” choice:

“Chinese teachers say that if you are a good student and a good daughter, you will not [have sex] before marriage.” —Lin Jia Hui, 23

The assumption was that premarital sexual behavior would hamper students studies and occupational goals by “moving [their] focus away from things other than schoolwork.”²⁹

II. The Values Imparted by Parent-Provided Sex Education

Several studies have found that most Chinese adolescents obtain little to no knowledge or advice on sex-related topics from their parents.³⁰ Nevertheless, despite being

²⁹ Interview with Lin Jia Hui

³⁰ Jia, X., Lu, C., Chen, W., Huang, W., Yan, Y., and Dai, C. “Investigation on KAP for AIDS Among Junior High School Students in Shenzhen” (2007); Cui, N., Li, M., and Gao, E., “Views of Chinese Parents on the Provision of Contraception to Unmarried Youth” (2001); Liu, D., Ng, M.,

an infrequent source of sex information, the majority of Chinese parents say they support their children receiving a sex education, and feel that they, as guardians, should be the first source of such education.³¹

So if a majority of parents believe they should supply their children with knowledge on sex, why do only a small minority actually teach their children about the topics? Past research suggests various reasons, including the following:

- (1) Parents prioritize their children's academic studies, and choose to postpone sex education until after graduation from secondary school.³²
- (2) Parents feel uncomfortable discussing sex-related topics with their children.³³
- (3) Parents feel unprepared to discuss and answer their children's questions about sex.³⁴

Though they may feel that they *should* discuss sex and sexuality with their children, Chinese parents may not feel obligated to be the informant on such topics, for studies have found that they also believe it is the government's responsibility to provide sex education.

When asked what information ought to be incorporated into their child's sex education, parents have also expressed sentiments similar to those found in the official discourse, believing that abstinence ought to be emphasized and safe sex subject matter (i.e. contraceptive methods) excluded. Past research has found it was common for Chinese parents to equate the inclusion of safe sex into sex education discussions to the condoning of sexual activity.³⁵

Zhou, L., and Haeberle, E., "Sexual Behavior in Modern China: Report on the Nationwide survey of 20,000 Men and Women" (1997)

³¹ Liu, W., Van Campen, K., Pope Edwards, C., Russell, S., "Chinese Parent's Perspectives on Adolescent Sexuality Education" (2011)

³² Gao, Y., Lu, Z., Shi, R., Sun, X. and Cai, Y., "AIDS and Sexuality Education for Young People in China" (2001)

³³ *Id.* at 28

³⁴ ____

³⁵ *Id.* at 27, Cui, N., Li, M., and Gao, E. (2001)

A. Interview Population: Mothers

The perspectives of the two mothers I interviewed were consistent with the larger conclusions found in the aforementioned studies on Chinese parent's views of sex education. Both women thought sex education should be provided in the home and in school; however, neither reported presenting any information to their daughters. When asked why they chose not to discuss sex with their daughters, it was implicit that the discomfort which comes with discussing these issues played a large factor:

“I think my daughter knew from a very young age how [sex] works. I think she learned from the Internet and movies and friends. But no, I never talked to her about it directly.” —Zhu Xing Yi, 50

In addition, both expressed their disapproval of premarital sex, with one mother going so far as to say that: “young people do not know what they want, so they should not be making decisions about these kinds of things.”³⁶ There seemed to be concern that sexual behavior and intimate relationships in general would distract children from matters of greater importance (i.e. educational goals).

B. Interview Population: Young Women

Most participants had not received sex education from their parents. During the formal component of my interviews with the eleven young women, only one reported having received sex education from her guardians, while the other ten reported having not received information. The one individual who reported receiving parental sex education expressed that her parents shared knowledge on pregnancy and contraception with the intention of making sure she acted safely:

³⁶ Interview with Zhu Xing Yi

“My parents told me I shouldn’t be too free, but that if I choose to have sex, that I need to be safe.” —Li Wenjie, 23

Of the ten young women who reported having not received any sex education from parents, eight participants expressed that they wish their parents had taught them about sex-related issues, one participant expressed ambivalence to parental sex education, and one participant expressed being glad that her parents did not try to discuss such topics with her. When asked why they believe they did not receive information from parents, like with school-based sex education, most women cited awkwardness of the subject-matter and additionally, “traditional and appropriate” family conduct.³⁷

When I asked about how parents expected them to act sexually, the eleven women responded that they were either (1) expected to not have premarital sex or (2) only have sex with a man she planned to marry. Much like their school sex educators, participant’s parents assumed that premarital sexual behavior would hamper their daughter’s studies and turn them into poor students. According to one woman, “traditional Chinese parents believe that if you are responsible and a good girl, you should not engage in [sex].”³⁸

DISCUSSIONS

Within China’s modern sex education discourse there are both explicit and implicit values communicated to young women. In the realm of explicitly stated values: abstinence is branded as the standard for model behavior in both official and non-official sex education.

³⁷ Interview with Lin Jia Hui

³⁸ Interview with Lin Jia Hui

Conduct outside of celibacy (i.e. premarital sex, homosexuality) is highly discouraged, and labeled as the less respectable option chosen by girls lacking self-restraint.

Because abstinence is labeled as the way of decent and virtuous women, other actions, as a result, are frequently regarded as indecent and shameful. This moral classification of sexual behavior implicitly insinuates that women's moral stature is bound to their sexual behavior, that the choices they make in their sex life are indicative of how "good" they are as students, daughters, and women. Such a value prescription constructs matters of sex and sexuality as issues of an ethical nature.

In addition to being constructed as something ethical, sex—and whether or not one chooses to engage in it—have been made focal points of self-discipline and restraint, with official and nonofficial sex educators framing sexual behavior as something dangerous that ought to be controlled and suppressed. Though it seems that some schools are becoming increasingly more progressive (i.e. discussing topics beyond biology and physiology), sexual abstinence is still imposed as the standard of acceptable behavior, falling back on existing discursive arguments and providing little information about safe sex. In China, this approach now appears unfit and out of touch with wider society, where young people have become increasingly more interested in sex-related issues, and are engaging in sex before marriage.³⁹

Lastly, China's sex education—or in this case, lack thereof—labels sex and sexuality as embarrassing and shameful by withholding essential information from students. It may be that Chinese parents and educators possess traditional cultural norms related to sex education, and are concerned that sex education would encourage children to become more sexually active. By choosing to provide a sex education which omits information actually about sex,

³⁹ Chinese society has clearly become more liberal on the topic of sex. Published in 2009, China's First National Youth Reproductive Health Survey reported that approximately 60% of Chinese youth aged fifteen to twenty-four were open to having premarital sex and 22.4% had already had a sexual encounter by the time of the survey.

Chinese schools and parents reinforce the stigma that sex is something one should be humiliated of, something one ought not to discuss openly.

CONCLUSION

This research explored China's sex education and the values it imparts to China's young women. Findings indicate that although young women wish to learn about safe sex and sexuality from both schools and parents, communication is restricted by both parties embarrassment, lack of preparation, and fear that open dialogue on such topics will promote sexual activity.

The study found that while sex education classes were informative on physiological topics, in participants' perceptions, they lacked information on safe sex (i.e. use of contraceptives) by sticking to the abstinence narrative, and assuming—or pretending—that China's young people are not engaging in sex. Although many educators and parents think that they are protecting their children by withholding information about sex and sexuality, past research indicates that more and more Chinese adolescents are becoming sexually active at a younger age; therefore, as a result, sex education—both in schools and in homes—have not kept up with China's increasingly sexually open youth.

In addition, the values being shared with young people are also outdated. Youth are told sex is an ethical matter, a shameful act, and a measure of their ability to control themselves; however, the reported rapid changes in values and behavior in relation to sex call for safe sex education programs and their associated sexual and reproductive health services. The schools and families ought to develop future programs and services that are more suited to China's increasingly sexualized society.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

- *Sensitivity of subject matter*

Though I tried to lessen the effects of sex education's controversial nature by conducting one-on-one interviews, there still remained moments in my exchanges where research participants seemed hesitant or embarrassed to share their experiences. Individuals frequently minimize and pacify their opinions and experiences when discussing sensitive topics, and all the data I collected was self-reported; therefore, my findings may understate my research participants' opinions of China's sex education.⁴⁰

- *Interviewees were not randomly assigned*

The interviews I conducted were not randomly assigned. Because I wished to interview women from various areas of China, but had neither the time nor resources to travel across the country, I ended up having to actively pick my participants based on the geographical location of where they received their sex education. Although I tried to minimize

In addition, I found many of my interviewees through mutual contacts and friends. Those you associate with undoubtedly assist in the shaping of one's opinions; therefore, it is possible that my population sample was biased, for it is likely that the individuals comprising it shared similar beliefs and principles.

SUGGESTIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 11— A research participant is especially likely to downplay his or her opinions and experiences when the information he or she is sharing is part of the minority viewpoint, or is a taboo and/or unwelcome belief.

I believe a fruitful direction for future study could be found in comparing the sex educations received by various demographics of China. The following are two comparative sex education studies that I think would be particularly valuable to look into:

- *Female vs. male sex education*

Since we only had a month to conduct our independent study projects, I found it more prudent to narrow down my study population to only women, and focus on the values they discerned in their sex education experiences. Nevertheless, one could certainly ask men the same questions I asked my female interview participants, and identify the values Chinese men encounter when receiving their sex educations. After such male-specific study is conducted, the gender-distinct value conclusions from the two projects could be compared and analyzed in an effort to determine if particular values imparted during sex education are indicative of one gender or another. Potential research questions could include:

1. What value(s) do sources of sex education communicate to China's young men?
2. Do the value(s) communicated in China's sex education vary based on gender, or do young men and women generally identify the same values?
3. If value(s) are found to be gender-specific: what underlying reasons account for such gendered values?

- *High-income neighborhood vs. low-income neighborhood sex education*

Within the Chinese school system, there exists a disparity of opportunities and resources received by high and low-income students, and sex education is no exception to this overarching imbalance. As I read and held progressively more studies and interviews, it became apparent that the wealthy and poor of China receive very different sex educations, especially that had in school. In more well-off and developed communities, more progressive and thorough sex education curriculums are provided, while in many rural parts, sex education—even the rather subdued topics of sex-related biology and physiology—is

scarcely provided. Therefore, I imagine that the values received by young women Potential research questions could include:

1. Do the value(s) communicated in China's sex education correlate with wage and socioeconomic class?
2. Is sex education curricula in high-income neighborhoods or low-income neighborhoods more heavy on value arguments?

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