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# Sex and Sexual Education in China: Traditional Values and Social Implications

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**Sex and Sexual Education in China:  
Traditional Values and Social Implications**

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>I.</b>	Abstract.....	4
<b>II.</b>	Introduction.....	5
	1. History of Sex and Marital Views.....	5
	2. Current Sexual Education in China.....	7
	3. Purpose.....	9
<b>III.</b>	Methods and Results.....	9
	1. Base of Study.....	9
	2. Objective of Interviews.....	10
	3. Difficulties.....	10
	4. Scope of Interviews.....	11
	5. Individual Student Interviews.....	12
	6. Educator Interview.....	13
<b>IV.</b>	Traditional China.....	15
	1. Family: Structure, Values and Norms.....	15
	2. Weight of Confucianism.....	16
	3. Government.....	17
<b>V.</b>	Social Implications.....	17
	1. Homosexuality in China.....	17
	2. HIV/AIDS in China and it Expansion into the General Population.....	20
	3. Condom Use and Birth Control.....	22
	4. Abortion.....	23
	5. Sexual Abuse and Rape.....	26
	6. Human Trafficking and Prostitution.....	29
<b>VI.</b>	Conclusion.....	31
<b>VII.</b>	Suggestions for Further Study.....	34
<b>VIII.</b>	Resources.....	35

## **Abstract**

In China, the differing views of sex between younger and older generations is the clearest indicator of the division of modern and traditional thought in society and their resulting repercussions. The paper examines what specific traditional Chinese norms and values spark many social issues in China, how those traditional values are reflected in the lack of sexual education, and then analyzes how the lack of sexual education impacts those social issues. Formal interviews were conducted in Kunming with seven college students (aged 18-23) from Yunnan Finance and Economics University and other universities, while more casual conversations were held with people of other ages in an English practice corner, as well as an informant who educates middle school students on human trafficking prevention. These interviews sought to explore and distinguish traditional Chinese norms and values, current views of sex and sexually related issues, sexual education, and government policies. Social issues concerning homosexuality, the HIV epidemic, condom use and birth control, abortion, sexual abuse and rape, and human trafficking and prostitution were also examined through these interviews and extended research. In order to alleviate and prevent further severity of these social issues, Chinese youth must be educated on the consequences of risky sexual behavior and other dangerous sexually related situations, and how to prevent them.

## **Introduction**

### ***History of Sex and Marital Views:***

In times previous to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marriage and sex were highly controlled in a hierarchical system with paternal supremacy. Marriages were arranged by the parents and viewed as a moral obligation and apparatus to have children. Birth to sons was specifically desired because of the male's entitlement to inheritance and ability pass on the family name. Women had little to no rights due to this patrilineal nature of the family and were valued in accordance to their bound feet, pre-marital virginity, and utmost dedication to their husbands. It was not uncommon for men, on the other hand, to have multiple wives as well as mistresses (Zheng, 2011). Therefore, sex and sexual pleasure concerned only men and women were expected to comply to meet their husbands' needs by all means.

Into the 1900's, contrasting ideas to the hierarchical and paternal supremacy began to rise. With the birth of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese society experienced a societal shift from the traditional system that previously existed. In 1950, The Marriage Law was put into action where polygamy was made illegal and there was free choice of marriage partners within the heterosexual sphere. These new policies were significant in that they established monogamy and a greater sense of equality between the sexes in marriage (Jeffreys, 2015). Women were freed of oppression and allowed more rights than in the previous centuries. The reason of this change corresponded with Mao's idea that the equal presence of everyone in society was required in order for China to develop (Zheng, 2011).

Even though some positive change was established concerning marriage and equality, sex and sexuality was still controlled by strict norms. During the years under Mao Zedong's leadership, especially during the Cultural Revolution, individuality, and thus sexuality, was suppressed. Sex and all other expression of romance and personal interests, were viewed as shameful and as an act of individualism that challenged the ideology of collectivism (Zheng, 2011). Sexuality was so suppressed that de-feminization of women and gender neutrality became common due to the promoted bland, male standard of dress and uniformity (Jeffreys, 2015).

Since the death of Mao in 1976, the People's Republic of China has been experiencing rapid socio-economic change alongside the marketization of the economy and the new embrace for globalization. Paired with creation and further development of the Internet, many people in modern day China are becoming more exposed to international influences and ideas regarding sex and sexuality. This influence combined with a relatively lighter gripped control of self-expression has sparked what many believe to be a sexual revolution among the youth population.

The views held by China's youth population regarding relationships and marriage, pre-marital sex, and sexual orientations are becoming more open-minded and accepting. However, Chinese society as a whole and the Chinese government remains bound to many traditional values that restrain the youth's changing views of sexual expression in a healthy process. The biggest restraint is on sexual education; that is only covered through the lens of basic human biology of reproduction and lacks critical information on sexually transmitted diseases and infections, HIV, use of contraception, pregnancy, and other sexual related matters. Traditional Chinese values are also rooted in many sexually

related social issues such as the HIV epidemic, sexual abuse and rape, human trafficking and prostitution, harsh discrimination of homosexuality, and abortion. These effects combined with ignorance due to deficient sexual education among the Chinese population, especially the youth whom are becoming more sexually expressive, further inflates the severity of these social issues.

***Current Sexual Education in China:***

Sexual Education in China today is almost nonexistent or, where it does exist, is heavily restrained. The Chinese school system does very little to approach the subject and most parents find the subject too “embarrassing and awkward” to talk about at home. Chinese youth are usually given lessons on puberty by the time they enter into secondary school but these lessons are brief and gender segregated. Into high school, sexual education is vaguely covered through basic biology of human reproduction. Sometimes the topic is not even talked about in class, in which students are only told to read about the subject from home. This shallow coverage of sexual education is usually only covered in more urban areas, leaving rural areas of China with virtually no sexual education at all. By the time many students head off to college and have reached the average age to start having sex (approximately 18 years old) they are very much deprived of essential knowledge of sexual practices and protections. Some colleges are beginning to offer more in depth sexual education courses that include discussions on contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and infections, abortion, childbirths, and medical methods to help stay healthy when sexually active. However, these courses still skip over various topics due to social and cultural stigma, and the fear that sex will be encouraged. The

courses are also never required so while many students are interested in the topic, most choose not to take the it.

After several interviews with college students, it is clear that younger generation views concerning sex related topics have certainly developed. Despite the embarrassing and reserved complexion of the topic, all students expressed interest and openness to talk about sex and sexually related topics and believed that further sexual education in their lives would be useful and important. Based on what was shared, it is evident that traditional family values and social/cultural values of society and government shame and prevent younger people from acquiring the knowledge required to be aware of the consequences of sex, how to protect themselves with contraception, their sexual identity, and how to handle difficult and dangerous sexually related issues.

***“Sexual education is not taken seriously enough in China. It’s a really important subject because more people are starting to have sex at a younger age. I have never taken any sexual education in school. The only way I was able to learn about it was through surveys and websites on the Internet.” -Female student, age 19.***

***“ There should be a required sexual education course because my generation is more open- minded about sex. A lot of students my age have curiosity and questions, but teachers never mention anything.” –Male Student, Age 21.***

***Purpose:***

The purpose of this paper is to explain how the combination of cultural stigma towards sex related matters and lack of sexual education underlie the various social issues that exist in China today. Traditional aspects of family, society, and government will be analyzed to explain the taboo views of sex. Once those views are determined, they will be applied to explain why specific social issues exist, how sexual education is affected, and how and why the lack of sexual education plays a significant role in the impact of those social issues.

**Methods and Results**

***Base of Study:***

This study was based out of Kunming and was made up of a collection of interviews with individuals from various age ranges, hometowns, sexes, and occupations. As the capital of Yunnan, Kunming receives a large influx of people with various cultural and economic backgrounds from all over the province. The majority of Yunnan's population lives in rural areas where traditional values are held more strongly and sexual education is the most lacking. Yunnan's location as a whole is incredibly unique because of its border to three Southeast Asian countries. These borders, Myanmar specifically, have shown to leak social issues such as HIV/ AIDS and human trafficking that have started in Yunnan and spread throughout the entire nation. Kunming is also bound to experience further development and migration as it becomes a more desirable city to live in. This allows the city to be a key spot to witness development and its effects on shifting views and social implications; especially concerning sex related matters.

### ***Objective of Interviews:***

The objective of the interviews was to obtain an understanding of traditional norms and views of sex, the changing views of sex and related matters, knowledge of sexually related social issues, and current sexual education. In order to do so, individual interviews of seven college students (ages 18-23) were conducted with questions focused on current knowledge and their history of sexual education, and opinions on traditional Chinese values, sex itself, contraception, homosexuality, rape, and abortion. In order to avoid student bias, the same type of questions were asked to about 20 individuals from other age ranges in a group discussion at a local and public English language practice corner. In order to understand how sexual education in China functions, what is being taught, and difficulties within the educational system, a woman who works as an educator in a local middle school in Kunming was also interviewed.

### ***Difficulties:***

The central difficulty of the study was the scale of sensitivity that the topic of sex possesses in China. The initial expectation was that people were not going to want to discuss the issue and the majority of research gathered would be based off of observation of reactions to questions. While many students and individuals from other generations were much more open to discussion than anticipated, the level of sensitivity was still a crucial fault in the study. An interview was confirmed with an education official from the Yunnan Province Department of Education, but, unfortunately, that interview was cancelled last minute due to apprehension of the subject matter. Background research was also found to be problematic. Specific educational policies, data figures and term definitions were either vaguely stated or unable to be found.

### ***Scope of Interviews:***

To great surprise, all interviewees were more than willing to talk about sex and all of the topics associated with it. Younger generation people certainly gave the most detailed responses but people from other age ranges were also very amenable to discussion. The English corner was a very advantageous tool to witness clashes and the cohesiveness of ideas about sex in culture and society. During the English corner group conversation, individuals ranging from ages 35- 60 were very interested and comfortable in talking about sex, sex education, and marriage. They were very helpful to distinguish traditional values and expectations of themselves from their families growing up and expectations they have had for their own children. However, other topics such as abortion and homosexuality were not as easy to talk about. Almost all information gathered from interviews about abortion came from younger generations while people from older generations remained silent. Homosexuality was especially difficult for older men to talk about. Almost immediately after the word alone was mentioned, almost all men turned away and chuckled under their breath. It was as if they couldn't believe the topic was being brought up and were embarrassed about it. Additionally speaking on homosexuality, older women did not have much to say and younger people seemed very passionate about the topic.

It was a bit of a nerve- racking subject to bring up in a public sphere but forced sex and rape was the most intriguing topic during the English corner discussion. Again, older men shielded away but women of all ages were very involved in explaining the norms of society and voicing their opinions. College students discussed how common forced sex in relationships was for people around their generation. Older women

expressed curiosity by asking questions about norms and policies concerning rape outside of China. It felt as if they were trying to gain a different perspective in order to compare their lives to women's lives outside of China. Observationally speaking, the sense gained in talking with these women was that they felt very empowered. It was as if they had just had the tape peeled off of their mouths and could finally talk about something that had either personally affected their lives or other women they knew. No one came out and discussed any personal stories but the look of intent in their eyes gave the impression that the issue was not unfamiliar to their lives.

***Individual Student Interviews:***

During one-on-one interviews with students, more direct, personal questions were the focus. Questions about sexual and reproductive health, contraception, and abortion were asked to female students because of the higher pertinence the topics held specifically to female lives. These questions revolved around if personal sexual life was discussed with their doctor, access to birth control, use of birth control, and opinions about abortion. It was found from the responses that personal sex lives, birth control, and abortion are not discussed with doctors. All female informants stated that the use of birth control pills had been highly discouraged in sexual education. Awareness and knowledge of abortion was very high and many felt that abortion was even encouraged due to an abundance of abortion advertisements. However, the subject was never discussed based on personal experiences. Questions about condom usage were asked to both male and female students. Both sexes stated a general knowledge about condoms usage that was either acquired from a college level sexual education course or the Internet. While all

students stated that access to condoms was readily available, many said that purchasing condoms was embarrassing and they worried they would be judged harshly for it.

Students were also asked questions about their families' influences on their lives. Such questions included their families' expectations about school, marriage, and sex. Students were also asked if their parents had ever given any sexual education to them from home. These questions were asked in order to gauge how significant family ideals are in student lives and to find out if these ideals altered the way students thought about sex. These questions also helped to clarify traditional values of older generations.

From what was gathered, the majority of parents had given some sort of 'sex talk' but without explicitly stating the matter. Based on informant responses, the majority of these sex talks never actually mentioned sex. They were just awkwardly covered conversations about sticking to school and avoiding boyfriends/girlfriends. The parents that did explicitly mention sex would just say to not have it. There was nothing mentioned about consequences of unprotected sex, use of contraception, difficult sexual situations they may face, or sexual health factors. Despite the promotion of abstinence by parents, marriage was not a silenced expectation. All students had stated that their families expected them to get married by a particular age to the opposite sex.

***Educator Interview:***

During the course of interviews, an interview was organized with a woman who works for an business-organization that works to help rescue women who have been trafficked into the life of prostitution. Denise, the interviewee, holds a position in the organization to educate younger students on self- value and decision making in order to avoid risky situations that could lead to being trafficked. She works through a program

set up with a local middle school in Kunming to gradually introduce kids to various topics such as peer pressure, judgment of others, and sex. The questions that were asked revolved around history and work of the organization and program, curriculum of the program and its relation or inclusion of sexual education, and the organization and program's experiences of working with the Chinese government and education administration.

To start, organizations that work within China are extremely sensitive to the government. In that fact, the business-organization preferred to remain anonymous due to paranoia of the government. With Christian values at its core, the organization has been running for nearly 12 years in work regarding human trafficking and prostitution of women in Asia. However, the branch off program started up more recently after successful work was done by the organization that assisted two women in a difficult situation. An administrator in some universities around Kunming, that held a close relation with two women that were assisted by the organization, wanted the organization to further its work against human trafficking and prostitution. This further work formed into what is now the middle school program in Kunming.

In relation to sexual education, the program gives a very brief outline of sex but it is not the focus. Topics such as birth control cannot to be mentioned, despite its relevance to the program's course, for reasons unspecified by the government partnership. The government partnership with the program only wants sex to be mentioned when in line with discussion on thenegative consequences that could result from it. For instance, the topic of STDs could be discussed but only in the light of teaching abstinence until marriage. The topic is approached through ethical teachings such as "it's not just bad

people who get STDs”. This method’s effort is to develop a thought process that deviates from traditional societal stigmas. Overall, explicitly bringing up sexually related matters is sensitive and if the administration is skeptical of what is being taught, it can be risky for the program to continue working. The program can only function with the strong hand of the education administration firmly clasped around it. When the program is organizing its lessons, what is allowed all depends on the terms of the education administration. Nonetheless, amazing work is still getting done through the program and that is better than nothing being done at all.

### **Traditional China**

#### ***Family Structure, Values and Norms:***

Family is the utmost important factor that has structured Chinese society throughout history and that still holds a great significance today. Almost all social aspects of Chinese life are highly controlled and impacted by the family. This is especially prevalent when it comes to marriage and sex. The traditional Chinese family structure most often involves heterosexual marriages, strict gender roles, childbearing, and a strong parental role with little independence for the child’s own decisions (UNDP, 2014). Traditional family values revolve around respect through hierarchy and are often very paternalistic, even with shifts in modern day society concerning gender equality. Males hold significance in the family because of their ability to pass on the family name, inheritance, and gain power to the family. With the strict family planning law in China, the importance of childbearing holds great significance in the family in order to pass on the family name and gain power. Women are often valued on their sexual purity and may face stigma if they have premarital sex, are divorced, or are not obedient to their husbands. Family respect is

highly valued and everything that is done by a family member must be done with the family in mind. Anything that could embarrass the family could ultimately bring shame not only on an individual but also, on the entire family. In that, private matters, including those related to sex, must be kept a secret and handled from within in order to prevent bringing embarrassment to the family.

***Weight of Confucianism:***

The traditional family structure, values, and norms that have existed throughout history and still currently exist in China today are heavily rooted in Confucian philosophies of respect, rank and hierarchy, and collectivism. To start, the Confucian virtue of “Filial Piety” lays the ground of parental and elder control over the child’s life. The virtue states that the child must hold absolute respect and obedience to the parents. In Confucianism, the worst un-filial conduct one can commit is to have no descendants. This explains why women are pressured to get married and have children and same- sex couples are stigmatized against. Traditional paternalistic nature of the family can also be drawn back to Confucianism. There are “five principle relationships” stated in Confucianism, (ruler and minister, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend.) that reflect a higher presence of a male figure and never state any sort of relationships that concern females only. Finally, Confucianism believes that one should put their individuality to the side because everything done by a person should be in contribution to the greater good of everyone. Therefore, any expression of individuality could threaten the individual and the group.

### ***Government:***

The Chinese government, despite encouraging development in the country, continues to be bound to many traditional values that are paternalistic and regard strict gender norms. The government has sought to increase equality between men and women throughout history but many policies are not strong enough to protect the rights of all women in society. In law, defined offenses such as rape are vaguely stated and exclude certain women in society. Additionally, authorities have been known to do nothing for women that reach out for help concerning sexual abuse or rape. The rationale behind this is that women should keep their matters private especially if it could bring shame to their male partner. The Chinese government does not support homosexuality based on traditional norms of heterosexual marriages. In order to discourage homosexual activity, the government has censorship laws that prohibit any exhibit of homosexuality. However, in some ways, government policy contradicts traditional norms. The government's family planning policy clashes with traditional family norms of childbearing. With the restriction of the amount of children per household, the importance of childbearing has increased, sparking harsher discrimination towards homosexuality and higher expectations for women to get married. While the government has recognized a need for sexual education due to the growth of many social issues, little has been done to improve sexual education and there are strict restrictions on educational organizations and NGOs in China.

### **Social implications**

#### ***Homosexuality in China:***

Homosexuality has been extremely stigmatized based on the traditional values that have been held in China for centuries. This stigma initially rises from the traditional

family structures and ideals. As previously stated, the typical Chinese family relies on heterosexual marriages, strict gender roles, and childbearing. Of course, homosexual relationships are unable to uphold to these values, sparking dishonor within the family. Gay men particularly are prone to harsher stigma because of family expectations for males to pass on the family name, inherit family valuables, and ability to bring power to the family. Because of the pressure, many males choose to marry into “cover marriages” with women in order to hide their sexual identity and to please the family (UNDP, 2014). In the even more severe cases, families will commit their homosexual family members into psychiatric hospitals where corrective treatments, such as shock therapy, are instituted (UNDP, 2014).

Today, many homosexuals are still facing harsh discrimination in the workplace, health care system, and in education. Before 2001, homosexuality was viewed as a mental illness according to the Chinese Classification of Medical Disorders, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (UNDP, 2014). Despite being taken off of that list, most employers, medical practitioners, policy makers, and teachers do not abide by this change (UNDP, 2014). Many homosexual people often have no choice but to keep their sexual orientation a secret in order to secure a job. There are no Chinese laws or regulations that hinder discrimination in business establishments (UNDP, 2014). Homosexual injustice exists in the Chinese health care system being that there is very weak access to sexual and reproductive health for those who sexually identify as homosexual. Homosexuals are often unable to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases and infections, and HIV. If a homosexual person is diagnosed with HIV, they face higher discrimination and even fewer opportunities for treatment (UNDP, 2014). Bullying of homosexuals in school is

not uncommon in China and has shown to take negative effects on school performance on those who experience it. Discrimination is more common in rural area schools but harsh judgments from classmates and teachers may be experienced anywhere. Homosexual individuals have essentially no way to properly sexually educate themselves. If homosexuality is covered in any sexual education course, it is often depicted as psychologically abnormal and wrong.

Although harsh stigma is still held among the Chinese society as a whole, those views are changing quickly. Homosexuality has become highly accepted by the younger generations and is becoming more and more common. Going off of interviews gathered with Chinese college students, the opinions about homosexuality in the younger Chinese generations are practically identical to opinions of youth populations from many western countries.

***“In my personal opinion, I would not judge anyone for being homosexual because everyone has their own choice. My parents’ view would be very different. From the culture that they grew up with, it is not an easy for them to accept the idea.” –Female Student, age 22.***

***“I have friends that are homosexual and I don’t think differently of them. The way I see it is that it is a normal thing and a personal choice but so many people still view homosexuals badly.” – Male Student, age 20.***

With the positive embrace of the homosexual community widening among the youth generation, Chinese society will have to morph drastically to account for the well being of those who sexually identify as homosexual.

Expansion of HIV has also taken flight in China's homosexual population, particularly for gay men. This sector of the epidemic can be reasoned by the cultural/social stigma and inadequate education. Because of the overall social views in China that discriminate homosexuality, many who identify as homosexual are limited in access to proper sexual education and health care. Gay men are more susceptible to contract HIV through unprotected sex because it is easier to contract HIV through anal sex (Aids.gov, 2015). However, homosexual sexual health is never talked about during the sexual education courses that do exist in China and the government's Internet censorship regarding homosexuality eliminates all other forms of sexual education. Detrimental limits of access to HIV testing and treatment among the homosexual population, due to stigma within the Chinese health care system, suggest that if a homosexual man is carrying HIV, he is highly likely to pass it on. This is due to ignorance that he has even contracted the disease and because future sexual partners also lack knowledge of how to protect themselves.

***HIV in China and its Expansion into the General Population:***

Mass expansion of the HIV/ AIDS epidemic has hit China hard in the recent decade. Drug users and sex workers are the two highest populations to carry the disease and HIV has also inflicted considerable damage on the homosexual population. However, HIV is not limited to the three populations. The disease has managed to spread throughout the rest of the general population, becoming a nationwide concern. This

expansion is spread primarily through sexual transmission and can be explained when looking at the combined factors of rural worker migration, cultural stigma, and ultimately, the lack of sexual education. While the migration of younger women has definitely contributed to the sex industry and therefore, the HIV epidemic, the disease is very common in the male, migrant worker population(London, 2006).When working in the cities, workers have greater access to commercialized sex where it is easier to contract diseases. However, these workers are more likely to have contracted the disease prior to their move (London, 20016).Rural migrants often hold backgrounds where traditional values are taken very seriously and sexual education is nonexistent.

One study posted in *International Family Perspectives* was able to associate that people in China that hold negative demeanors toward people infected with HIV are more highly associated with sexual risk behavior. All individuals included in the study were migrant workers from rural China aged 18-30; the majority being male. Many of the beliefs held were that people infected with HIV should be kicked out of their village, distanced from, and have fewer rights to employment and education (London, 2006).The same people who had these beliefs were followed up with questions about awareness of HIV and their own sexual behaviors. It was found that the majority of those who held stigmatized beliefs towards those infected with HIV were less likely to use condoms during sex and less willing to take an HIV test. They also had had higher odds of having an STI, having multiple sex partners in the past month, and buying sex (London, 2006). The conclusion that can be pulled from this study is that ignorance due to lack of education and the cultural/social influences correlate with a higher likelihood of contracting HIV.

### ***Condom Use and Birth Control:***

In the basic sexual education courses that are administered in China, condom usage and birth control are topics that go completely uncovered. The increasing severity of the HIV epidemic in China has brought attention to the need for instruction of condom usage. However, the topic continues to be skipped over because it is considered too embarrassing and inappropriate to teach unmarried individuals. From what was gathered from college student interviews, it is not until college that condom use is formerly introduced to younger individuals when optional sexual education courses may be offered. In the coverage of the topic, condom use is encouraged as means to prevent HIV and pregnancy. Birth control is also covered in these college level courses but not in a way that would be expected. Despite having the ability to be 99% effective in preventing pregnancy alone, the use of birth control pills is highly discouraged. Birth control pills are depicted to be unhealthy because of the effects that they may take on female hormones.

***“Teachers mentioned different methods of contraception but did not encourage them. They did not encourage birth control pills. They talked about how it was not healthy and to avoid them.” –Female Student, age 22***

According to an article put out by *Time*, only 1.2% women in China take birth control pills (Jiang, 2016). This number is very low compared to many developed countries and considering that China has strict family planning policies. Condoms are sold in most convenience stores in China, but due to shameful views of premarital sex

people are too nervous to buy them. This overall lack of contraception knowledge and use among the Chinese population not only correlates with the issue of HIV, but also abortion.

*“I personally have had no experience of buying contraception but I do know a lot of people feel culturally embarrassed to buy condoms. They know how to use condoms and they know where to buy them but they still choose to have unprotected sex.” –Female student, age 18*

***Abortion:***

As one of the world’s leading countries in abortion rates, China aborts more than 13 million pregnancies per year (Jiang, 2016). In the country, abortion, when medically instituted and assured, is perfectly legal and provided as a public service by the Chinese government (**Population Policy Data Bank, UN**). Due to the Chinese Population and Family Planning law that implemented the notorious *One-Child per Couple Policy*, abortion is extremely common, usually culturally accepted, and, in many ways, encouraged by the government. The implementation of the policy has forced Chinese culture and society to shift their ideas to accept abortion. There are harsh implications for couples that exceed the limit of children. These implications most often include forced abortions issued by the State (Population and Family Planning Law of the People’s Republic of China, 2002). For those who choose not to abort the pregnancy, the Chinese government presses on burdensome fines (Population and Family Planning Law of the People’s Republic of China, 2002). Even with the recent change to the *Two-Child per Couple Policy*, abortion rates are likely to remain high. The lack of sexual education of how to prevent pregnancies among the youth population only contributes to the already

sky-high rates. While pregnancy prevention education lacks, information provided about abortions themselves is widespread. This information does not come from school but rather from advertisements that advocate for abortions.

*“Abortion is everywhere in China and is looked at as something normal. Advertisements are everywhere talking about how quick, easy and cheap it is to get an abortion and where to go to get one. The first girl I knew to get an abortion was 15 years old. She had no idea that if you have sex without a condom you will get pregnant but she did know how to get an abortion.” – Female, 19*

*“A lot of girls my age have had an abortion, including girls I know. I can even say almost 40% of my female friends have had an abortion. Usually that information is kept private but people still find out.” –Male Student, age 22.*

Nearly half of the abortions performed every year in China are on college students under the age of 25(Jiang, 2016). These numbers correlate directly with how widely accepted sex is becoming among youth and how little is known of how to protect themselves. However, the stigma of premarital sex is still very high and it holds its influence on many young women. While more than 13 million abortions are reported each year, that number does not account for the staggering number of illegal abortions. Women who become pregnant outside of marriage are looked down upon in Chinese society as dishonorable women and those who decide to keep the child also

experience harsh discrimination (Branigan, 2014). The fear of being judged for getting an abortion outside of marriage or for keeping the child creates conflicting decision-making, often pushing women to alternate, unsafe choices of abortion. Other women may even hide their pregnancy and abandon the child after birth (Branigan, 2014).

When discussing abortion with one female college student, age 18, she explained how relevant the pressure of unplanned pregnancy was for girls her age. She shared one shocking story of a girl her age that she knew in Kunming.

***“It is quite common to have unplanned pregnancies and abortions but abortions outside of marriage are looked at very badly. In one case, a girl became pregnant and hid the pregnancy. When the baby was born, she killed the baby so that no one would find out. She made that choice because she was so scared of getting an abortion and of anyone finding out she had a baby outside of marriage.”***

There are so many instances in China where females are expected to take more responsibility in sexually related issues. When discussing abortion with the college students, almost all of them stated that females should be responsible for purchasing condoms and protecting themselves during sex. Therefore, if a girl gets pregnant, it is her own fault and she should face the consequences on her own. These results relate to one traditional value that stands among all generations in China; male dominance.

### ***Sexual Abuse and Rape:***

Forced sex and rape are issues within Chinese society that are continuously pushed aside. In law, the definition of rape is limited and vaguely stated, leaving much room for interpretation and a lack of enforcement by authorities. In the definition, rape is stated as: "...behavior employing violence, coercion, or other means to force sexual relations on a women and girls under the age of 14." (Tanner, 1994). Prior to 2015, the sexual assault of males was not included but due to the increase of same- sex rape and the difficulty to file cases, reform was passed (Cowburn, 2015). Despite this improvement, Chinese law does not acknowledge sexual violence and rape in marriage. In 2016, the Chinese government passed the country's first law to combat domestic violence. While it was a significant stride in improving jurisdiction, the law is faulted because it does not cover sexual violence (Chen, 2016). Further speaking on law, most sexual acts outside of marriage, such as attempted rape or other un-clearly defined offenses, are often prosecuted under to Article 160 of Criminal Law pertaining to "hooliganism" (Tanner, 1994). Hooliganism covers an extended range of offenses, leaving a lot of room for interpretation. For any sexual misconduct that does not legitimately fall under the Chinese definition of rape, the offender has a better chance of getting off with a lighter punishment when convicted of "hooliganism".

The bigger problem with issues regarding rape in China is that most people keep their sexual abuses and rapes a secret based on the traditional values. Being that sexual matters are private matters, it is difficult to reach out for help because not many are willing to listen. Women face harsh pressures to remain silent due to society's expectations that a woman must remain dedicated and obedient to her partner. Therefore,

if a woman reaches out about being sexually abused by a stranger or her partner, she is thought to have brought it upon herself and risks being viewed as promiscuous. It is difficult for men to reach out about sexual abuses due to the stigma of homosexual activity in Chinese society. Because of the stigma, authorities may not even care or be willing to help.

*“No matter what problems are happening to a woman in her marriage [if she’s being abused or cheated on] she will not choose to get a divorce. Women who get divorced are considered shameful in society and will not be able to get married again.” –Female, age 30*

*“I’ve heard of relationships where the guy will threaten his girlfriend to break up or worse if she says she doesn’t want to have sex with him. That kind of thing is supposed to be kept private in the relationship but I know it happens all of the time.” –Male, student, age 20*

*“ Forced sex is very common. There are different definitions of what rape is so no one has to feel guilty depending on what they think of the definition. Like what is considered willing or not? I think the US definition is a lot better.” – Female student, age 22*

***“It is considered a duty of the wife in marriage to have sex with her husband. Rape happens but is looked as ‘a shame to be raped’. A woman is not looked at as a victim so most of the time she keeps it a secret.” –Female, age 36***

Lack of sexual education plays a key role in sexual abuse and rape because people do not know how to protect themselves or make choices to help avoid dangerous situations. However, some leeway is being made by one organization [that will be further discussed under *Human Trafficking and Prostitution*] to help teach younger people to recognize dangerous situations. An interview was conducted with a woman named Denise, an American woman who works specifically to educate and prepare Chinese students for consequential situations that they may face in life. The program that is ran, spans over six, non-consecutive weeks, to gradually teach students self- value, defining good and bad choices and those consequences, and the dangers and risks of the world. The lessons focus on recognizing emotions of anger, sadness and lust, and how to make choices during those high emotional times. Groups are also broken down in order to discuss choices relating to peer pressure, judgments of others, and sex.

While, the program does not specifically cover sexual education, it provides opportunities for younger people to talk openly and ask questions about sensitive subjects in a comfortable environment. The program is also more directed to help individuals avoid human trafficking but the context is useful for a span of other sexually related topics. Sexual violence and rape are not distinctly mentioned in these lessons but there may be a potential push underway to implement the topic into curriculum.

### ***Human Trafficking and Prostitution:***

In recent decades, prostitution has resurfaced in China with even greater force. During the years under Mao, prostitution was nearly wiped out completely when brothels were shut down as a health prevention of STIs in China (Zheng, 2011). However, the sex industry picked up almost immediately after the death of Mao and has drastically grown in correlation with the marketization of the economy and rapid urbanization. The result of China's economic development has been mass amounts of migration consisting of mainly younger generations; with more women than males (Suttherland, 2012). Although there are higher rates of female migration, job opportunities are less available, compared to men, leaving a greater labor surplus of women. Expansion can therefore be explained by this female labor surplus filtering into the sex industry. Because family support is an important traditional value, the many women who work as prostitutes often have financial reasoning to support themselves and their families. Most money that is made is sent home to help provide and take care of family members left behind due to migration.

However, not all women choose the life of prostitution. Human Trafficking is a global issue that has significantly struck China and has contributed to the ever-increasing sex industry in the country. According to the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Rights (UNAIP, 2016), 800 articles reported human trafficking cases between 2007 and 2008, which is indicative to how extensive the problem is (UNAIP, 2016). While human trafficking in China does not necessarily exclude males, women and children are more likely to be trafficked as means of sexual exploitation. After being trafficked, many Chinese women become trapped in a life of prostitution that many are unable to escape.

One organization is making small strides to tackle the issue of human trafficking and rescue women from the life of prostitution. Positioned in places like Myanmar, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Kunming, this Christian business-organization[that prefers to remain anonymous due to political sensitivity] works to provide stable job opportunities in their jewelry company for former sex-workers. Housing, education of life skills and decision-making, child-care, and medical care are also provided to these women. The business-organization functions by setting up organized teams that seek out prostitutes on the streets of red light districts and in brothels. The teams work to collect contact information of the women they meet and gradually develop trusting relationships with them. After a sense of strong trust is built up, team members explain the organization's intentions and offer jobs to the women. Once women are able to stabilize in the positive work environment, the organization is able to help them find other jobs. While some women are unable to stabilize and may return to the life of prostitution, the organization has succeeded in lifting many women out of the risky lifestyle of prostitution.

Regardless if the life of prostitution was chosen or not, the risks are equally detrimental. In the life of prostitution, risky sexual behavior is the only sexual behavior. Condoms are rarely used, abortions are frequent and so are sexually transmitted diseases, infections and HIV. Women that choose prostitution have no idea of these risks or how to protect themselves because they have not had formal sexual education. The women trafficked into prostitution have no idea of what to expect when someone is trying to traffic a person or how to avoid the situation because they lack sexual education. Traditional values are also conflicting when applied to the life of women in prostitution and how they are viewed. Women who choose to be sex workers do so based on their

values to support their families. Yet, they are viewed as dishonorable. Women that have had no choice or control in the matter of their lives face the same dishonor.

**Conclusion:**

No matter whom you are, traditional values based on where you are from, your family, history, culture, political influences, or whatever else, will, without a doubt, hold some influence on the life you lead. Nonetheless, this is progressive world where change is inevitable and there are new ideas sprouting around every corner. The current changes occurring in China are drawing lines between modern and traditional thought while the view of sex in Chinese society is the clearest indicator of this division and its consequential outcomes.

While more rights have been given to Chinese women in the recent decade, the overall traditional ideals in Chinese society are still heavily paternalistic. Regarding sex and relationships, women are still judged based on their sexual purity and loyalty to men. Women have very little voice regarding sexually related issues that have a direct effect on them. In many situations concerning sexual abuse and rape, jurisdiction is too vague or exclusive to account for all women in society. Additionally, a woman, despite being the victim, risks being viewed as dishonorable by society if she voices her abuse. If an unexpected pregnancy occurs in an unmarried woman's life, she is viewed as the only irresponsible party in the situation and faces stigma if she decides to have an abortion or keep the child; contributing to China's already high abortion rates and other tragic alternatives of child termination. Those who identify as non-traditional sexual orientations face damaging discrimination from their families, society and government.

This discrimination has its greatest effects on one's personal health and on the increase of the HIV epidemic in China.

Due to the strongly held traditional values of Chinese society, the youth generation's progressive views of relationships, pre-marital sex, and sexual orientation lack essential elements required to bloom through a healthy process; the most essential element being sexual education. Throughout Chinese history, sex has only been viewed in coherence to family norms and never as an outlet of expression; formulating it into a taboo subject outside of the traditional norms. Chinese society does not view pre-marital sex favorably making it a subject that is believed to be unnecessary to talk about or teach to younger generations. Many Chinese parents expect their children to follow traditional values of sex and marriage. They then feel like they don't need to worry about talking about sex from home. Now that sex is becoming viewed as a form of expression and is more widely practiced outside of marriage, the outcry for more sexual education is becoming louder and louder; as reflected in the inflation of social issues in China. Nevertheless, sexual education continues to be disregarded because of China's unwillingness to let go of traditional norms.

With Chinese social issues such as the growth in the HIV epidemic and the continuously high abortion rates, youth must be informed of the consequences of unprotected sex before there is any chance of them taking that risk. Additionally, in-depth lessons on contraception use must be implemented into the sexual education courses that are introduced prior to college. The use of condoms is crucial knowledge that should be obtained in order for younger people to understand how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancy. The use of birth control should

be promoted rather than discouraged because of its higher ability to prevent pregnancy. Along with lessons on risky sexual behavior, consequences, and preventions, sexual education in China must include lessons that focus on other sexually related dangers and risks, deciphering good and bad choices and their consequences, and self-value. These lessons are vital for ensuing knowledge of how to recognize situations that could result in human trafficking, work in prostitution, or sexual abuse and rape. While these lessons are not specific to the topic of sex itself, they regard situations that would ultimately result in sex; and therefore, the result of the negative social implications in relation to sex. Finally, it is that important sexual education courses start as early as secondary school and that all courses be required everywhere in China, due to the amount of youth starting to have sex earlier.

Nonetheless, before any drastic change can be made to sexual education in China, government policy and society itself must reform. Policies regarding rape should be clearly defined and inclusive to everyone in the population. Censorship of homosexuality and other sexual topics should be dropped, and educational organizations or NGOs should be more widely accepted and have more freedom to work in China. Traditional values of pre-marital sex, marriage, family structures, and gender roles should be alleviated or dropped altogether. Unfortunately, the likelihood of any of those reforms taking place any time soon is low. While the government has recognized the various social issues that have risen in relation to sex, it has done very little to combat them. There is hope that society will eventually flush out many traditional values regarding sex, but even so, many generations will have to pass through before that is possible. Until

then, it is the best to hope that Chinese youth will continue to recognize their need for sexual education and do their best to try and get it from wherever they can.

**Suggestions for Further Study:**

A major difficulty found while conducting this study was the interpretation of laws and policies pertaining to sexual education. In the *Population and Family Planning Law of the People's Republic of China*, education is definitely mentioned in relation to sex related matters but policies are vaguely stated and ambiguous to the extent of which they are enforced. A suggestion for solving this issue for further research on the topic would be to acquire an interview with an education official who specializes in sexual education. In this interview, not only could current policies in law be clarified but also information regarding any potential improvements that may or may not be in the process of implementation. Personal opinions from an official would also be extremely valuable to gauge the level of concern of social issues correlated with sex from within the system.

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