

Secrets Revealed: Set Talk Under Mao's Communist Puritanism

Huai Bao

Abstract—Memory matters because it documents history “off the record” especially in a culture and/or a time period under state politics that suppresses free expressions and hinders distribution of knowledge. Through qualitative interviews and case analysis, this study reviews narratives by informants born in the 1950s and early 1960s around non-mainstream sexualities during and shortly after the Cultural Revolution in the PRC, and interrogates the demonization of Western influence since the beginning of the implementation of Deng’s “Reform and Opening-up” policy.

Index Terms—Sexuality, communist puritanism, Chinese.

The sexual instincts are remarkable for their plasticity, for the facility with which they can change their aim...for the ease with which they can substitute one form of gratification for another.
Sigmund Freud

I. THE UNTOLD AND THE UNFORGOTTEN

While there is barely any scholarship or media coverage on gender and sexuality in contemporary North Korean society, so many questions always draw my curiosity of private lives in the bedroom: How sexually creative and experimentative can people over there be? This study is not about North Korea, but about the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the particular period of time which resembled its communist neighbour.

Previous research on the history of gender and sexuality in modern China has left me with data and inspiration for reorganizing and examining the individual and collective memories of the generation coming of age in the transitional period in the PRC from late Mao Zedong’s era through Deng Xiaoping’s reign. Many “hard-core” stories of recent and not-so-recent past remain untold in mainstream media under strict ideological scrutiny and censorship. In a traditionally prudish society with Confucianism as the predominant ideology in history and with the communist propaganda prevailing across the country, refusing Western influence and precluding modern knowledge from mass distribution, how did the young people in the PRC realize, acknowledge, accept, and embrace their sexualities?

The past has not only become the past; it has also become part of the present because remembering the past is impacting the present and the future and establishing new meanings of the past for the upcoming generations. The gap from the largely untold memories of the previous generations accounts for the attitude in intergenerational communication, in that

individuals may form an identity based on their perception and assumption of past generations and vice versa when memory operates in a vacuum intersection between the untold (set of facts) the unforgotten (symbolic representation).

Memory that operates on the collective level can be documented publicly after individual and external screening. While its reflection tunes up the particular period of time in recent history, it lacks graphic details captured in that moment and inscribed in memory that signify its “personalness” and meaningfulness.

For this study, individual memories matter more because each of them records personal history that is hardly seen elsewhere from official sources, especially in a culture and a time period that totally prohibited free expressions and hindered distribution of modern knowledge on sexuality.

Through qualitative interviews and case analysis, this study reviews narratives by informants born in the 1950s and early 1960s around sexualities during and shortly after the Cultural Revolution in the PRC, and interrogates the demonization of “outside” influence—influence coming outside of mainland China—since the beginning of the implementation of Deng’s “Reform and Opening-up” policy.

The names used here are a mix of real names and pseudonyms. Most of the informants choose to remain anonymous or to use a pseudonym for content that they perceive as “sensitive.” For that reason, I may use both the real name and a pseudonym for the same informant according to the sensitive nature of the information they provide, as I believe that their privacy should be respected.

II. ERASING THE FEMALE GENDER

Drawing on Marxist theories, Vladimir Lenin was one of the first feminist-minded leaders in the Socialist world. When the Soviet Union was established, he asserted the importance of equality between men and women, claiming that it was “necessary...for women to participate in common productive labor” [1]. Feminism in Soviet societies achieved substantial gains for women in labour, education, benefits and suffrage, though women did not hold core political roles [2].

Influenced by the Soviet ideology, feminism in the PRC during Mao’s era not only aimed at abolishing class difference rather than mere gender inequality and patriarchal and masculine dominance, but also at eliminating gender differences [3]. In 1953, *Women of New China* published Joseph Stalin’s talks on working women, setting a paradigm for the PRC to follow [3]. As Sino-USSR relationship worsened from the 1950s through the 1960s, Mao proceeded

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Huai Bao is with Chinese at Syracuse University in USA, USA (e-mail: hbao07@syr.edu).

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with his own feminist politics, which led to his theatrical reform campaign [3], [4]. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Mao and his wife, Jiang Qing, employed theatre, ballet, and film as a propagandistic tool to promote a socialist feminism of Mao's style. Through examining and reorganizing the repertoire, artists, and the regulation of theatres, the country kept the so called eight newly created "model plays" while banning those with "harmful" feudal content, which did not portray the proletariat and the peasant masses as heroes. The eight productions were five modern *jingju* (Beijing Opera) plays—*The Legend of The Red Lantern* (filmed in 1970), *Shajiabang* (filmed in 1971), *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (filmed in 1968), *Sweeping the White Tiger Regiment* (filmed in 1972), and *On the Docks* (filmed in 1973), two ballets—*The Red Detachment of Women* (filmed in 1971) and *The White Haired Girl* (filmed in 1972), and one symphony, *Shajiabang* (first recorded in 1971). More modern *jingju* plays were subsequently added to the revolutionary repertoire, such as *Song of the Dragon River* (filmed in 1972) and *The Azalea Mountain* (filmed in 1974). During the Cultural Revolution, these films were basically the only ones all Chinese people could see.

Most of these plays feature a revolutionary heroine who represents a role model of Mao's romanticized feminism. While these characters strike audience members with idealized revolutionary qualities such as fearlessness, inner strength, and faithfulness to communism, which override femininity, they are also depicted as asexual or with an unclear marital status, as none of them is shown in a marriage or in a romantic heterosexual relationship. In addition, the stylized impersonation of these characters all employs masculine bodily movements, usually belonging to male characters in the tradition of *jingju*. This de-gendering means suggests that women's liberation requires the destruction of "the traditional concept of female sexual stereotypes" [5]. Women's true emancipation is to be achieved only by participating in the class struggle led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) [5].

Such a Mao-style socialist feminism mobilized by the state leadership through artistic production had a profound influence on people's sexual lives during that period of time. The de-gendered and asexualized images of women were widely regarded as ideal, normative, and pro-revolutionary. In some sense the masculinization of women also erased women's sexual desires. And, in erasing women's sexual desires and covering their secondary sex characteristics, it also prohibited men's sexual interests.

As mentioned before, one outcome of the socialist feminism is that women are often seen doing jobs that are traditionally occupied by all men. The fact that women in Soviet Union were sent to do "menial" heavy work has raised criticism on the lack of shame and compassion in enacting gender equality politics [6]. While some people may perceive this as "liberation" of women, I view this as exploitation of women laborers in the name of "gender equality."

Another outcome, which is closely linked to the focus of this study, is gender erasure and the making of de-gendered and asexualized female images as ideal and normative. The socialist feminist stereotypes became the target for derision later in the socialist world. Post-Mao's media derision of such female politicians in the PRC, for example, often present a

female commissar that resembles Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, with short hair, wearing a unisex outfit, and sometimes wearing dark-framed glasses accompanied by a serious demeanor. The Chinese film, *The Hibiscus Town* (Dir. Xie Jin, 1986), portrays Li Guoxiang as a cold-blooded female commissar and a distorted human with normal desires, while the Soviet comedy film, *Office Romance* (Dir. Eldar Ryazanov, 1977), has Lyudmila Karugina, single and unattached, working as a director proudly leading a state-owned institution. Both enter the scene as a gender-ambiguous person (or maybe a masculinized or unnatural woman, depending on the subjective perception of the audience), while the latter transforms into femininity after the mid-point of the story when she falls in love with her male subordinate.

I certainly did not only wish to study that part of history from cinema and existing literature, and thus I have vigorously conducted interviews for the past few years.

Born into a military family in Beijing in 1955, one of my interviewees, Li Qing, joined the army as a teenage girl and trained at military medical facilities to become a nurse. Now at the age of 63, she claims to remember things from decades ago better than things that happened in the previous day. As a huge fan of designer fashion brands, she is nicely dressed and well-kept for her age, and loves collecting Victoria's Secret lingerie. Curiosity arose when I first met her, as I could not link the lady sitting in front of me to a girl coming of age during the prudish and sexually suppressing Cultural Revolution.

It is every girl's dream to look pretty and dress beautifully; there is no doubt of it because it's human nature. But at that time [from the 1960s through 1970s], there were basically no choices [to beautify yourself] because beautiful and fashionable clothes, shoes, accessories, make-up and hairstyling were all considered bourgeois. People who were born into affluent families before 1949 [the year the PRC was founded] could be ashamed and even scared of their family background and were all eager to hide their family history.

Chairman's "red guards" set a standard look for every boy and girl across the country, and everyone was wearing unisex military uniforms with a Chairman Mao badge on the chest. And, most girls usually wore their hair in two short plaits. Many also cut their hair very, very short, just like boys.

I joined the army when I was 15 years old and started to wear military uniforms for the most of my adult life before I retired from the army hospital. Outside of the army, girls around my age had more choices for what they wore, but usually there were just blue, green, grey, white, just plain and simple. Our shirts and outfits were mostly quite loose and baggy to hide our body curves. We never had anything like bras, since they were representative of the decadence of bourgeoisies. We wore slightly tight tank tops inside as an underwear. Most girls would flatten their breasts with that tank top, so from outside you cannot see their secondary sex characteristics. It was not good to attract men's attention.

While femininity was suppressed socio-culturally, the consciousness of the female gender was not totally erased, as evidenced by the fact that within the domain allowed and tolerated women could still showcase their creativity and

enjoyed it to the fullest. According to Li Qing, it is a woman's nature to look more attractive regardless of the socio-political climate.

Just because we lived in such a colourless period of time doesn't mean there was no fashion and we did not want to look more beautiful. There was fashion by our standard—it was not fashion in any Western sense, but in a revolutionary sense. For example, when Azalea Mountain was released in the theatre, Ke Xiang's [the female protagonist and a communist leader] handsome short hairstyle became quite fashionable and was copied by millions of women. If we had long hair, we could also trim our fringe on our forehead a little bit to make it more stylistic. And, even though we didn't have much beautiful clothes, we could highlight the contour around the waist through tailoring; we could match a snow-white shirt worn inside with a blue outfit on the outside. I agree that women seemed "equal" to men under Mao's feminist thought, but that equality was not exactly what we wanted. As women we still want to look beautiful, but not as a person without a gender.

One of the most informative and progressive-minded interviewees, Han Chen always appears to be extremely enthusiastic about the topic of this study. Born in 1961 in Beijing with parents both being aerospace engineers, he developed an interest in instrumental and vocal music at a young age and went to study in Vienna, Austria, in the 1980s on a limited-term scholarship. A self-claimed womanizer like Wei Xiaobao in *The Deer and Cauldron*, a novel by the renowned *wuxia* novelist, Jin Yong, Han affirms that he is a living testimony of the (a)sexuality during as well as shortly after the Cultural Revolution. He is also a friend of some of my other interviewees, including Li Qing and Wang Jian'guo, who will appear later in this text. Han's observations have largely confirmed Li Qing's narratives., albeit from a man's perspective.

I was only five years old when the Cultural Revolution started, but I remember a lot clearly. I grew up in that asexual era. There was not any information about sexuality, and 800 million people were watching eight model plays on the large screen on a daily basis.

When the Cultural Revolution began, I had no idea of why adults seemed so obsessed with the few model play movies, and I thought, growing up watching them watching the model plays, maybe it was the norm.

Living with my parents both on exile in Jiangxi as the so-called reactionary bourgeois academic authorities, I had the chance to observe the "class enemies" in the re-education camp. The local peasants and PLA soldiers lived around us. If you ask me about "gender equality," well, that was not more like gender assimilation, as women were just a smaller version of men, dressed in the same way and doing the same kind of work. The only difference was they were smaller, shorter, weaker, and had to give birth and raise children.

Young people started to have more sense of fashion and genders in the late 1970s when the Cultural Revolution was coming to an end. I had a girlfriend who studied English at college, and once when I was visiting her, there was a young man called Wang Jian'guo at her home learning English from

her. Although every man in China was wearing the Mao suit of the same colour and form, his suit was a little special. Most Mao suits were baggy, wrinkled, and worn out, but he was wearing a polyester suit very well tailored and nicely contoured around his bodyline, especially around his waist, making his waist look quite slim.

Shortly after Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping seized power from Mao's successor, Hua Guofeng, and led the country through implementing "opening-up" and market-economy reforms. While Western influence gradually entered post-Mao China, Li Qing, Han Chen, and their peers around started to experience a sexual awakening period. After all, people had been suppressed for too long.

After the Cultural Revolution, mainstream feminist discourse in the PRC has shifted its focus to challenging stereotyped and gender-based double standard between men and women mostly in the categories of sexual mores, realizing that Mao's gender-equality was not one that women really desired. Li Yinhe, a celebrity scholar in the PRC who attracted public attention for her pioneering research on (homo)sexuality in China, has been running a personal blog constantly criticizing the double standard that sets stricter codes of sexual morality for women. During an initial meeting with her in 1999, she observed that Chinese had been going through an "underground" sexual revolution, but still had a long way to go, largely due to the inadequate support from top down. In one of her blog entries, she interrogates the gender-discriminative double standard in the government's decision to tentatively blacklist Tang Wei, the actress in Ang Lee's erotic espionage thriller, *Lust, Caution*, for the explicit sex scenes, while Tony Leung, her male counterpart in the those scenes, appeared to be immune to such a punishment [7].

III. COMMUNIST PURITANISM

Several interviewees mentioned the immense popularity in China of the Japanese film, *Sandakan No. 8* (Dir. Kumai, 1974). Nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, the film depicts the history of Japanese women who were forced to work as prostitutes in Southeast Asian brothels during the early 20th century. Dubbed in Mandarin and re-edited to suit the Chinese audience, it was released to the public in China in 1978, drawing crowds of people to movie theatres like never before. What attracted the Chinese audience members, according to them, was not the excellence of the filmmaking, but the minimized prostitution scenes remaining in the cut version, which Chinese audience members received as pornography in a fashion that an adolescent is eager to explore sexuality. Today, people may laugh when they recall that part of history, ascribing it to the ten years' suppression of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution.

The dictatorship of the proletariat requires a harsh order of gender roles and sexual relations, sets strict moral codes and establishes sexual constrains in everyday life against the bourgeois lifestyle. Following its Soviet role model, the CCP is ideologically an example of emphasizing and reinforcing asceticism, moralism, and moral repression in its disciplines, as in Puritanism with communist heroes and Puritan saints

being “similar and comparable in terms of, first, asceticism...” [9], in that they see sex as “potentially dangerous, disruptive force” [10]. Not only Puritanism of the Stalinist hero constitute a set of “totalitarian values and controls,” the long history of neo-Confucian repression of sexuality made its inertial contribution to the CCP’s “Communist Puritanism,” surpassing its Soviet precedent and parallel.

With Mao’s model plays being the most representative examples, interestingly, none of the prominent characters is depicted as in a marriage or a romantic relationship. Grandma Li in *The Legend of The Red Lantern* is widowed. Her adopted son, Li Yuhe, is single. Li Yuhe’s adopted daughter, Li Tiemei, is a teenage girl without any romantic attachment. In *Shajiabang*, Aqingsao is married, but her husband’s whereabouts remain unknown. In *On the Docks*, Fang Haizhen is a female CCP branch secretary whose marital status is unknown, so is another female CCP leader, Jiang Shuiying, in *Song of the Dragon River*.

This kind of “lovelessness” in theatre and cinema started before the Cultural Revolution. The 1962 feature film made prior to its ballet version of the same title, *The Red Detachment of Women*, directed by Xie Jin, one of the most respected Chinese film directors, is a widely known example where love and romantic scenes were deleted during government pre-screening, since it was considered risky, especially after the Anti-Rightist Movement, to depict love and romance in a “revolutionary” film [11]. The romantic clues, however, remain in the finalized version, which is sometimes perceived as a temperate “Confucian” style that Xie Jin utilized under his “wisdom for surviving” [11].

Han Chen describes his boyhood as spent in a religiously asexual society where sex was a taboo topic. There was no sex education, no exposure to anything slightly suggestive of romance or sexual intimacy, and where no one dared to talk about sex, not even in private. He mentions the Italian film, *Cinema Paradiso*, saying,

Have you seen that film? The priest orders the projectionist to cut all the romantic scenes in films before the public screening. The China where I grew up was worse – we even did not have movies to watch; only model plays whose melody everyone in China could hymn. We did not have any knowledge about sexuality. Parents never talked about it. Every kid around me experienced a frightening and confusing puberty.

Han Chen believes that the more suppressed people are, the more eager people will become to explore in their own terms, and that people can teach themselves “out of basic instinct.” He recalls his first intimate experience,

We are still human beings with basic instinct who need not being taught. My first experience happened in 1976, the year when the Cultural Revolution ended. It was with a high school teacher who taught my class English. She was 18, and I was 15. Neither of us had had any sexual experience before. She liked me a lot, and often asked me to stay in the classroom after school so she could make up the lessons I had missed. I liked her, too. She was kind, pretty, and gave me so much attention. One day, we stayed in the classroom till very late and the lights went out due to a power outage. We had never

seen anyone kissing before, not even a picture, but out of instinct, we both reached for each other’s lips. Without any prior knowledge, we did it. She grabbed my hand and brought it into her clothes. I couldn’t find that part but she guided me all the way down there... We were both nervous and excited. In the following days, we did it again, and again, until she got pregnant. The school called my parents and then fired her. Pre-marital sex was extremely unusual and extremely stigmatized and shameful in China back then, let alone a teenage schoolteacher with a teenage student.

About sexual ignorance, Guo Bei, a Beijing woman born in 1965, does not believe that one can initiate such intimate activities as kissing and oral sex without being “taught” first. She remembers the first time Chinese people around her were exposed to an image showing mouth-to-mouth kissing between a man and a woman. On the back cover of *Popular Cinema* (*da zhong dian ying*), the fifth volume in 1979, was a photo from the 1976 British musical film, *The Slipper and the Rose*, of Prince Edward kissing Cinderella on the lips. *Popular Cinema* was one of the most widely distributed Chinese magazines back then, and so such an action was shocking, leading to a nationwide debate triggered by a lengthy complaint filed to *Popular Cinema* and *People’s Daily* by a CCP member in Xinjiang, Wen Yingjie.

In the letter, Wen expressed how “offended” he was by the photo,

I have seen the movie still on the back cover of the fifth volume in 1979 that you have compiled and published, and am very wrathful! I have been restless for a long time. I had never imagined that such a thing would happen in this socialist country created by Chairman Mao—a country that has been baptized by the Cultural Revolution. It is a pity that you have decayed to such an extent that it is no different from bourgeois magazines! I can’t help but ask: What are you doing???

...

And, I am not against love. We should promote the love of the proletariat. We should promote the love of the Chinese nation. I believe that we’d better not promote the love of the decaying people, the love of those who hug and kiss, as they are more harmful than beneficial...[12, translated by Huai Bao].



Fig. 1. The controversial back cover photo of *Popular Cinema* in 1979. Obtained from the public domain. http://js.ifeng.com/humanity/cul/memory/detail_2014_02/24/1892101_0.shtml

Popular Cinema published the entire letter in its eighth

volume that year, soliciting comments from readers across the country, which were to be published in the ninth and tenth volumes. Of the over 112,000 letters they received from readers subsequently, it turned out that fewer than 3% of them would concur with Wen. Guo, then a 14-year old, was confused about her own stance regarding the debate. She remembers,

None of the adults around me, including my parents, responded naturally to the photo [of kissing on the back cover of Popular Cinema]. They would just make a big fuss over it, saying, "Oh, Good Heavens!" However, none of them was really offended by it. I remember that volume sold very well, and some daring young people would tear the back cover off and post it on the wall to decorate their bedroom. In fact, it was from that photo that I learned about mouth-to-mouth kissing! I have always thought that mouth-to-mouth kissing was a Western thing! I have never seen images [of mouth-to-mouth kissing] in any ancient Chinese paintings or sculptures, and probably you'd rarely see any depictions of it in ancient Chinese literature. For a long time, I just couldn't stop wondering if my parents had ever kissed each other like that. I can't imagine them doing deep French kisses, because their generation had no exposure to Western cultures. To be honest, I even wonder if the older generation like my parents would take all their clothes off when making love. With Chairman Mao's pictures, statues, and slogans around, would they feel guilty for being bourgeois and debauchery if they did so?

While Han Chen believes that the best teacher of sex education is basic instinct, for Guo and many girls her age, the enlightenment for romantic kissing during coming-of-age was the photo on the back cover of *Popular Cinema*. Perhaps the "basic instinct" that would never need a "teacher" was waiting for the trigger?

Han Chen believes that between "needing a teacher" and "not needing a teacher" is a thin line, depending how explorative and experimental nature of the individual. He believes that the more sexually suppressed people are, the more impulsive and transgressive people can be under certain circumstances. He also contributes two "shocking" stories that took place during his childhood, when his parents were in a re-education camp in Jiangxi in the middle of the Cultural Revolution. They lived in a village nearby a military camp, a totally secluded place.

One day, when I came back home from school, our neighbours were spreading a story they had just heard. A soldier was caught having sex with a pig in a pigsty where he was working. He was later punished by death penalty. No trials, no charges, no convictions. He was just shot to death. I was then way too young and too naïve to understand what had happened and why it would result in a death penalty. People were disgusted by the activity and took the death penalty for granted, but no one was sympathizing the young soldier's short life.

Nowadays, Han keeps bringing that story up once when he discusses human nature. In his belief, human beings are first of all sexual beings, and an open, free, liberal, and well-regulated society is probably healthier than a closed,

suppressed, and strictly monitored and scrutinized one.

Han's other story, as he believes, should be made into a feature film, as he claims, "No one can make up such a story if it has never happened in your life."

I was only five years old. My parents were both working, so sometimes they would ask one of my cousins, Fangfang, to look after me. Fangfang was a 25-year young woman, dressed like any other women during the Cultural Revolution. She was just an average woman, maybe a little nerdy, conservative, and serious-looking, always wearing those Jiang Qing style dark-framed glasses. She was kind to me, always voluntarily serving as my babysitter when my parents were out of town.

One day, Fangfang came to pick me up and took me to her room in a tube-shaped apartment assigned by her work unit. There was only one bed, and she had to share the kitchen with other people living in the apartment. After we had dinner, she washed my face and feet, made bed for me, and asked me to sleep, saying it was bedtime.

I fell asleep. After what seemed like a couple of hours, a loud noise of the bed shaking woke me up. I opened my eyes and was shocked and confused by what I saw. Fangfang was bending over the edge of the bed, facing me. A tall, skinny, man, was standing and pounding her from behind. Both of them were totally naked, and sweating.

Seeing that I woke up, Fangfang was a little embarrassed. She smiled and ordered me softly and yet firmly, "Close your eyes and sleep!" I dared not watch that scene, as I thought that the man was bullying her, but she didn't seem to be hurt or resistant. On the contrary, she seemed quite cooperative, letting him do what he was doing. I closed my eyes, and tried so hard to fall asleep again, but how could I?

I pretended to be asleep for most of the time I could remember till I fell asleep again. After a while, I started to hear again their deep breath, their loud moans and groans. I slightly opened my eyes. I was shocked at what I saw. Fangfang was kneeling down on the floor and sucking on that man's big penis, with used toilet paper thrown all over the floor. The man also bent down repeatedly to reach for her lips and kiss her, revealing his yellow, crooked teeth. Perhaps they were too invested in it, since neither of them noticed that I was watching.

The next day, I became even more confused. We got up quite late in the morning. The man was still sleeping on the couch when Fangfang made lunch for us. It was a time when meat was rare and eating meat was a luxury. Fangfang made a dish of stir-fried potato slices with diced pork. When we were eating, she constantly added meat to the man's bowl, saying to him, "Have more meat! Don't worry, Chen doesn't like meat." It just drove me crazy, as meat was my life! I shouted, "I want meat!" I had no idea of why she was so nice to someone who bullied her all night, but now I understand.

Interestingly, prior to our conversation, Han Chen ran into Fangfang on the street. They had a brief chat. Fifty years having passed by, Fangfang is now in her 70s. Single, alone, and childless, she looks plain, old-fashioned, and conservative. In Han's words, one can hardly connect her current appearance to the sexually wild and liberated young woman that night. Drawing on this case and others alike, Han

affirms that “we are all wearing a disguise in public,” and [Communist Puritanism] only “created more monsters.”

As has been covered, Guo Bei doubts that her parents’ generation could be as imaginative and explorative as the younger generations due to the isolationism, the communist ideology, and its “Puritanical” style moral codes. Unlike Guo, however, Han believes that the “creativity” in sexual activity does not necessarily have to be acquired but is oftentimes a natural consequence of intensified physical intimacy and ecstasy regardless of the social circumstances. He emphasizes in our conversation,

I bet that [in the PRC] in the mid-1960s, Fangfang and her lover probably had never been exposed to any erotic images or texts. But they behaved as though they had learned a lot from Western pornography. They’d return to “normal” afterwards, as if nothing had happened. Since then, whenever I see people dressed in the conservative Mao suit and talking about communist ideals and patriotism, I just can’t stop imagining how different they could turn out to be during intense sex.

Han also shares with me numerous other stories, including one that took place in Europe in the early 1980s where a group of Chinese students, government officials, and businessmen were engaged in a sex orgy party with East European sex workers in Ostrova, Czechoslovakia. He recalls it as “wild and hilarious,” as though everyone had been confined for too long until one day, they all got “liberated.”

Nowadays, while the PRC Government leaves consensual sex between adults as a personal matter outside of jurisdiction, it may still punish those organizing or participating in group sex under the “group licentiousness law.”

In 2010, Ma Xiaohai, a 53-year-old computer science professor was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for organizing orgies. Eighteen other participants were sentenced up to two and a half years in prison [13].

IV. FEMMOPHOBIA AND HOMOPHOBIA

While depicting heterosexual romance in films and plays was forbidden especially during the Cultural Revolution, homosexuality, which was largely interchangeable with transvestism and transgenderism due to inadequate knowledge, was even more of a taboo than heterosexuality. The long tradition of male-to-female cross-gender performance in indigenous Chinese musical theatre was associated with homoerotic culture, which could be a reason for that terminological interchangeability. While cross-gender performance was perceived as the theatrical norm in late imperial China as well as in the Republican era, it was removed from the stage and the large screen during the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, homosexuality was not only considered representative of the “decline and the evil of western civilization” [14], but also was treated as a severe crime, sometimes punished by the death penalty [8]. In *The Legal Status of Chinese Homosexuals*, Li Yinhe notes that during the Cultural Revolution individuals involved in homosexual acts were convicted of “sodomy” or “hooliganism” [8].

While many individuals with homosexual tendency or

involved in same-sex acts can be straight-acting or downplay or conceal their “gayness,” many others fit into the gay stereotypes about how gay males are expected to look, act, and behave. Wang Jian falls into such a category. Born into an artistic family in Beijing in 1957 with both parents being opera singers, Wang spent his childhood learning ballet and the classical Chinese dance, and eventually joined the army at the age of 17, continuing to dance as a military art worker. He moved to Canada to study fashion design in 1984. Starting from the early 1990s, he began to split his time between China and Canada, running his joint-venture fashion design and manufacturing business. Currently, he is semi-retired in Pattaya, Thailand. Self-identified as gay, he acknowledges that he experienced his confused and struggling coming-of-age boyhood and young adulthood in the PRC from mid-1960s till 1984, when he left his homeland behind for Canada.

I first felt a strong desire to become a girl at the age of five. There was no family influence, and there was not much effeminacy exposed to me. I remember around the time I was hitting puberty I had a sexual impulse towards women. I was a naughty boy. Whenever I had a chance to swim in a public pool with women around, I loved to pretend to bump into women’s breasts.

But that interest didn’t last long, as I gradually developed interest in girls’ stuff. I enjoyed doing embroidery, knitting, and playing with dolls, and envied girls for their beautiful skirts. I also played games with girls, always imagining myself being one of them... Because of this I often became the target of bullying by other boys who called me “sissy,” and my brother would serve as my bodyguard.

As I grew a little older into young adulthood, I became more assured that I was not like other boys around me. I realized that maybe I was not normal. I even fantasized about a sex change surgery at some point. But later I decided I should as a man as I enjoyed the feeling of having a penis swinging from side to side. My interest in women’s breasts turned into men’s pecks. I was quite confused, because I knew I was not like other young men, but deep inside I knew I didn’t want to be a real woman, either. Besides, I have never liked being called “brother,” but preferred to be called “sister.” I guess my mentality is more on the female side.

In the 1970s and maybe early 1980s, most people in China were either not aware of homosexuality or associated it with men’s femininity. People thought sissy men were not normal. I remember once a colleague of my mother said to her, “Your son is so girly. Why don’t you educate him [to be a man]?” My mother in turn asked me, “Are you alright? Why does everyone keep telling me you are behaving like a girl?” I really hated her. I think as a mother you should accept whomever your child is. My parents both died of cancer. Neither of them knew I was gay in their lifetime. I didn’t tell them because I knew they wouldn’t understand... They were both vocal artists and were classified as “intellectuals.” If they were so ignorant and biased, what about average people?

I think the term became more known to average people when China started to open itself to the outside in Deng’s time. As a teenager and a young man in my early 20s, I did not know any others like myself, nor did I have any access to knowledge [about homosexuality]. The first time I discovered there were other men like myself was when a colleague of my

parents brought a magazine from America. I saw gay pictures. I was shocked, excited, and yet inspired! I realized that I was not alone, and I aspired to go to the West to be with others like myself.

Currently, Wang Jian is writing his autobiographic trilogy about his life before leaving China, in Canada, and after returning to China. He particularly observes the social, political, and cultural changes of the Chinese society from a gay man's perspective. Considering him one living fossil of the gay subculture in the PRC since the Cultural Revolution, I conducted lengthy interviews with him during the writing of my book, *Cross-Gender China*, which was published by Routledge in 2017.

Another informant, who confesses to be a closeted gay man, Mo Jun, is a retired military officer born in 1958, married with one adult son. While Wang Jian was raised in an artistic family in Beijing, he was born in a small, backwater town in Henan province. Mo joined the army at the age of 17 and later attended a military academy to become an officer. His story is typical among people of his generation.

Growing up in our town and with my family [in the 1960s and early 1970s] was no different than living in a prison, as the only source of information was the radio and government-run newspapers. I didn't realize that my sexuality was different from other boys until I joined the army at the age of 17. One day, several new soldiers and I went to the public bathhouse to take a shower together. Our leader came and joined us. He was in his early 20s, muscular and handsome. Maybe jokingly, maybe just to show his friendliness to us newbies, he teased each of us by spanking each person's backside. No one was offended at all. It just brought us closer to him. However, I was the only one that got turned on, and I tried so hard to hide it. That night, I was thinking all night if there was anything wrong with me. That confusion haunted me for many years till the 1990s, when I started to watch pirated DVDs of gay themed movies. Then I had access to Internet and started to search English language information online. The Internet has changed China as well as myself.

According to Mo, the connotation of homophobia in the PRC has changed overtime. In the 1960s and 1970s it would mean the fear of being perceived as "abnormal," immoral, and indecent, while nowadays it carries more of the fear of being labeled and framed into negative stereotypes as shaped and reinforced by media associated with effeminacy, AIDS, hedonism and sexual indulgence. Although one type of phobia has replaced another, he believes that the phobia that stems from isolation, moral restriction, and inadequate knowledge during his boyhood and young adulthood was more terrifying and suppressing, since all individuals as sexual beings were victims of confusion, self-denial, and internalized sense of shame and guilt in such a forbidden realm.

Does the societal change allow more people like Mo to come out to family, friends, and associates? The answer is no. Up to this day, Mo has remained deeply closeted to his wife and other family members. It is likely, according to him, that he will bring the secret along to his casket. The "Communist Puritanism" may be institutionally over, but the residue of

historical homophobia is still there, which stems from what has shaped the Chinese mind collectively in the long past. Unlike Western traditions, in the Chinese culture, it is more of a shame than a sin, a shame to the individual and his entire family and ancestors. It is also an invitation of the peculiar looks of curious, investigative, and judgemental bystanders that are always ready to laugh, joke, pity, ridicule, condemn, and frame him into the stigmatized imagined image.

V. CONCLUSION

Although there is not a uniform opinion in scholarship as to whether the PRC has undergone a "sexual revolution" in the Western sense since the launch of Deng's reform and opening-up policy after the Cultural Revolution, it is widely observed and agreed that Chinese sexual attitudes have changed dramatically in the past decade. While my interviewees all maintain that contemporary Chinese society is becoming more tolerating of sexual expression as compared to the extreme "Communist Puritanical" years during the Cultural Revolution, and that sex is increasingly considered to be personal and private nowadays, predominant state ideology which has a tradition of treating human bodies as biopolitical factors sustains its sexual ethics to some extent in media censorship and the Communist Party's internal discipline inspection and regulations.

Personal accounts operate in our deepest isolation, helping us articulate our most private desires and visions. Individual memories have specified, personalized, and deepened our understanding of the existing collective memory of the particular period of time in the history of the PRC—a period that is often compared with Puritanism with its communist similarities in its belief and disciplines regulating sexual morality. These accounts also serve as a guideline for us to rethink human nature, mores, and ethics, inclusiveness and societal tolerance, and the line between personalness and the subject to legal regulations. While the rule of man and by law often finds it necessary to emphasize the collective psychological, mental, cultural, and historical differences between nations to stabilize the regime, my study on individual memories with a collective reflection of a particular time period in the PRC has unfolded to me the wide commonality between humans as sexual beings regardless of their place of origin and their environment. People should be increasingly aware of the line between personalness and publicity of a sexual matter purely built on its nature seen through the legal, ethical, and consensual lenses.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

I, Huai Bao, am the solo author of this paper. There is no collaborative work from other authors.

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Huai Bao received his Ph.D. in the Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University in Canada. After completing his postdoctoral fellowship at University of Toronto, he is currently a visiting assistant professor at Syracuse University in New York, USA. In 2017, Dr. Bao published his first monograph, *Cross-Gender China*, with Routledge (London, New York and Oxfordshire).