

## Sorting Out Sex, Culture and Business in China and Cuba

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In 2013 I joined a delegation of current students, graduates and friends of my alma mater, The Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality for several meetings in mainland China. It was the second time for me to visit a communist country, the first being Cuba in 2003. In Cuba I attended the World Association of Sexology's Biannual Conference, presented a paper on swinging and absorbed much of the sexual scene. Prior to the 1959 revolution Cuba had been a stone's throw from Florida and an American playground for all sorts of debauchery. Prostitution was rampant and there was an unsettling divide between those with access and resources and everyone else. During my visit, Cuba was in the midst of growing pains; it's mission to feed, house, educate, and provide full healthcare for all of its citizens was constantly being compromised by the black market in US dollars. Dollar-bearing tourists such as ourselves were admonished to patronize certain markets, restaurants and shops. Dating and partnering patterns of Cuba's youth appeared to be heavily impacted by the big brother style government. Young people felt little pressure to work things out with their sweethearts in that a pregnant girl could receive all that she needed re: health care, housing and education from the state. In that professional salaries were capped at levels barely above those of janitors, there was little incentive to excel at anything. The restaurant fare was largely mediocre; talented musicians and artists dreamt about defection to Europe and North America.

Visiting China in 2013 was a whole other story. While the government keeps an ever present watch over unauthorized reproduction, forcing even near-term mothers to abort, capitalistic enterprise is celebrated. Manufacturing of a grand range of products goes literally unchecked and there is much government support for startup research and innovation. We were taken to a burgeoning industrial park in Hangzhou which felt a bit like Beverly Hills. There people dressed to the nines and sported fancy cars and cool motor bikes. As for sexual expression, the country was buckling at a crossroads. Despite its rich tradition of finely illustrated pillow books offering graphically precise instructions for engaging erotic pleasure, contemporary Chinese carry memories of having had their heads hammered down by the anti-erotic individualism-quashing ideologies promulgated by the now defunct Cultural Revolution. It was unsettling to hear this in that I hold fond memories of thumbing through Chairman Mao's inimitable red book as a 1960s high school student in search of righteous answers for how society should be organized and power distributed. It was difficult to consider that Mao had caused such harm.

The Chinese young people we met, while seemingly shy about flirting and under-schooled about sexual pleasure for its own sake, were enthusiastic team players who exude a cooperative spirit rarely seen in the Western world. From what I was able to gather, contemporary Chinese marriages exist for social reputation (e.g. the generation of acceptable extended family ties), financial security as well as to produce a single child. The single child law is regarded by some as having been a panacea for China's economy, enabling burgeoning levels of prosperity. Ironically, during the last 40 years independent and ruthlessly capitalistic Hong Kong also lowered its birthrate, not by government dictate but simply as a response to the rising costs of living.

Much of the focus of our delegation's visit was to usher in an Institute sanctioned spa business for women. The story behind it is quite fascinating. In that marriages are utilitarian affairs in China, Western romantic dreams of supreme partner communication and erotic satisfaction are often absent. The government's heavy-handed meddling in reproductive choice has forced births beyond a single child to either be aborted or for impossibly stiff fines to be levied. The net erotic impact has led many post-birth couples to be wary of marital sex. In tandem with anxieties about postpartum sex, a huge sauna complex has emerged. Housed in hotels and in free-standing venues, male patrons can rent a room and several hours of service from an attentive female for about \$100 a session. Spa girls begin by carefully pampering the man, cleansing each part of his body and soothing it with nurturing touch. They then provide oral sex and offer intercourse if he desires. The experience is ultimately very different from a traditional Western encounter of male seduction of a female where he gauges her readiness for intercourse, offering her oral sex and even his saliva when extra lubrication is needed. Here the man is at affect; the sole purpose is for him to receive pleasure. Following this model, women's spas are being generated in China for rich women who seek erotic fulfillment. The model for these spas is three-fold: the woman must love herself, care for her body and have access to pleasure. I attended the opening of one such spa, fireworks were released at the building's entrance and then again at the unveiling of the plaques that cite the Institute's endorsement. The excitement brought tears to my eyes and goose bumps my arms; the Chinese so know how to celebrate!

No one really explained what might really transpire in the rooms of this first spa center (as well as the thousands of others slated to open throughout China). I sense something reminiscent of my feminist-inspired 20s. My American wave of pleasure-centered sexuality could find its way into the hearts and minds of some very excited Chinese women! I questioned several of the young women associated with the enterprise about their thoughts about Western vs. Chinese sexuality. Beginning with a lot of giggling they report they've never been with a Western man but nonetheless believe they would be better lovers! From what I can gather, these women's spas would offer education on pleasure oriented sex and clients might access orgasms via mounting a *Sybian* (a saddle style vibrator). I wonder whether the wealthy women for whom such spas are being designed would prefer an attentive man who personally delivers touch, pleasure and orgasm or if that would be considered risky in that these pleasure-starved women might too quickly generate inappropriate emotional attachments. As I continue to ask questions of Chinese friends and colleagues beyond the promoters of these centers, I am reminded of the exclusive Korean bars where a wealthy woman can "purchase" expensive bottles of champagne that are served by super-attentive hot guys who engage her in flattering conversation. One colleague informs me that this practice occurs in China as well and thus the new women of means have already begun to openly purchase attention, flattery and pleasure.

With my anthropological lens in place, I began to wonder if the Chinese in fact have it right and that we Americans with our penchant for soul connected love, romance and eroticism are the ones barking up an impossible tree. China with its centuries of sophistication regarding the human condition might once again have uncovered the answer to that age old question of what women really want. Perhaps confidently paying for a sure-fire delivery of attention, touch and expertly executed orgasm could be immensely more satisfying than waiting out an otherwise occupied boyfriend or husband!

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