HS4008 Literature review - Sexual Discontinuities: A Review of the historical political shifts and their impact on sexuality in Shanghai

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**Introduction**

Shanghai’s ‘history of sexuality’ is a complex one, with the city having a significant, but rather discontinuous history as a global metropolis. Nonetheless, this paper shall attempt to provide a sufficiently competent review of the history (since the mid-1800s) of shifts in political institutions, and their impact on Shanghai’s sexual landscape. This paper shall begin with an overview of sexual script theory, and its concomitant limitations, in order to frame the direction and rationale of this review. Subsequently, the implications of the Europeans, Kuomintang, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Maoist and post-Maoist periods on the sexual landscape shall be touched on. Furthermore, given Shanghai’s position as a global city, this paper shall attempt to focus on the ramifications these shifts have had on the heterosexual male expatriates living there. Finally, this review shall rely on the sexual interpretations of shifts in political institutions that have been used in existing literature.

**Sexual Script Theory: An Overview**

John Gagnon’s and William Simon’s (1973) book, *Sexual Conduct*, marks one of the pioneering attempts at theorizing sexuality and sexual practices through a social constructionist lens, which assumes that sexual behaviour is socially scripted (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Wiederman, 2015). Simon and Gagnon (1986) conceptualise sexual scripts on three, distinct but interrelated levels; the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic. The cultural script is the macro-sociological layer of sexual scripts that includes both the institutional and discursive elements of society, and functions as abstract “instructional guides that exist at the level of collective life.” (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, p. 98). Cultural scenarios are interpreted heterogeneously (Bourdieu, 1977; Blumer, 1969), and is as such contingent upon the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels of sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Interpersonal scripts involve intersubjective co-performances between individuals within the cultural context they are situated in, while the intrapsychic refers to how, what, and why individuals
subjectively internalise, and externalise, based on the situations they find themselves in (Jackson & Scott, 2010; Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

**Limits of the theory**

Theoretically, the three levels of sexual script theory “operates to bring the individual and the collective together.” (Allison & Risman, 2014, p. 104). However, attempts to successfully inscribe sexual script theory within sociological scholarship has encountered resistance. Firstly, research utilising the sexual script theory has been heavily limited to the US and Europe (Wiederman, 2015). Furthermore, while the theory posits the three levels of sexual scripts to be fluidly interwoven, research has been unable to assuredly articulate just how the individual’s interpersonal or intrapsychic scripts affect, and are affected, by the cultural scripts (Weis, 1998a; Wiederman 2015). As such, sexual script theory has even been scathingly condemned as a “dramaturgical metaphor” that serves as “a good example of a simplified model of reality” that lacks sufficient scientific grounding to be considered theoretically sound (Bancroft, 2009, p. 12). This critique has been amplified by the tendency of researchers to ‘forcefully slot’ the ethnographically derived interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts into the cultural ones in a bid to artificially validate the theory (Wiederman, 2015). Indeed, Wiederman argues that past research approaches has made it clear that one “cannot assume correspondence between” the three levels (p. 19).

**Moving Forward**

The limited coherence between the three levels of sexual scripts makes it imperative to systematise the research process, by focusing on one distinct layer of the theory at a time, to strengthen the theory’s sociological significance. By noting the criticisms laid out, this review shall now focus on developing an understanding of Shanghai’s structural context. If this step is successful, it will be possible for subsequent research to draw upon this review, and
additional forms of content analyses, to outline the cultural layer of sexual scripts in Shanghai that will have invariably influenced the performance sexual roles and identities of expatriate men in the city.

**Pre-Kuomintan Shanghai’s Socio-Sexual Sphere**

China has been pejoratively described as ‘semi-colonised’ at various stages of her history (Conceison, 2004). After subjecting the Chinese to defeat in the 1841 *Opium War*, European imperialists appropriated and urbanised sections of Shanghai in their pursuit of economic gain (Hochstadt, 2012). As a result of this urbanisation process, Shanghai’s status as the cosmopolitan metropolis of the ‘East’ began to cement itself (Wakeman Jr., 1995). Indeed, Shanghai was bustling with ‘western’ establishments, and was firmly situated as a crucial centre for (mostly European) commerce and industry (Hershatter, 1989). Yet, as Wakeman Jr. (1995) notes, the modernization of Shanghai was not without its problems. This capitalist project was jarringly confronted by rising levels of vice. The growing influx of expatriates was accompanied with the development of (at the time) new “forms of nightlife”, including nightclubs, gambling dens, and brothels (p. 22).

**The Kuomintang fails: 1927 to 1937**

As Shanghai’s notoriety for the consumption of narcotics and gambling escalated, the *Kuomintang*, which ‘recovered’ the city in 1927, guised themselves as ‘cultural bastions’ focused on ending these vices without compromising economic modernisation (Wakeman Jr., 1995). One such attempt to purge social vices incarnated itself through the invasion of the private spheres of the Shanghainese to construct a sense of collective civic mindedness. Wakeman Jr. critiques this as an entirely top-down attempt at social engineering. The *Kuomintang* supplemented this ‘cultural project’ by policing Shanghai’s gambling dens, brothels, and sites of drug consumption, though the gains were few. However, various
problems the *Kuomintang* encountered not only originated outside of Shanghai, but also preceded their governance of the city. The Bolshevik Revolution and the accompanying fracturing of the Russian economy, for instance, flooded Shanghai with “8, 000 White Russian prostitutes” (Wakeman Jr., 1995, p. 28), many of whom were ruthlessly trafficked into the sex industry (Scully, 2011). Similarly, rural Chinese families afflicted by famines and floods were circumstantially forced to sell their adolescent daughters to brothels (Wakeman Jr., 1995). Amidst this chaos, the *Kuomintang* opted to license and regulate the gambling dens and brothels in the hope of retaining some semblance of control.

**The *Kuomintang* fails (again): 1937 to 1949**

World War II (WWII) caused cataclysmic shifts to Shanghai’s socio-sexual context. Wakeman Jr. (1995) notes that, from 1937 to 1945, the Japanese occupied sectors of Shanghai. In their bid to economically exploit the city, the Japanese muscled into the narcotics, gambling, and sex industries that the *Kuomintang* had previously pocketed from. Not only were the Japanese drawing monthly dividends of $750, 000 from these industries, they had also embarked upon a “‘narcotization’ policy that was expected to raise $300, 000, 000 per year” (p. 35). After Japan’s defeat in 1945, and the subsequent arrival of American troops into Shanghai in 1945 was accompanied with “an extraordinary demand for prostitutes” and the establishment of unregulated brothels throughout city (p. 37). The collective impact of these surges undermined the *Kuomintang’s* ability render the rule of law over the city. As such, Wakeman Jr. notes that the series of tenacious national and international events, and their own incompetence, forced the *Kuomintang* to govern itself into “delegitimation”, allowing the CCP to seize control of Shanghai (p. 22).
Mao Ends the Parties

In fear of their ‘social decadence’, the CCP immediately sought to expunge the ‘sexual proclivities’ of Shanghainese (Wakerman Jr., 1995). The sex industry was practically shut down, with numerous sex workers arrested and confined to “labor reform camps” under the pretext of rehabilitating them (p. 37). Accompanying the shut down of the sex industry was the abolishment of Shanghai’s nightlife (Farrer & Field, 2012). This became most profound from 1958 to 1976, during which the CCP’s economic and social reforms (The Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution) resulted in the stagnation and regression of the nation’s economy, crippling much of the population. As Farrer and Field note, it was in this period when the CCP moved against any hints of ‘western’ social activities. As such, not only did this effectively kill Shanghai’s commercial nightlife, the expatriate population that once resided no longer lived there.

Socialist Desexualisation

The Cultural Revolution of the Maoist era mobilised anti-occidental discourses to function as a ballast against the decadence of both ‘western’, and ‘archaic’ values (Zhang, 2015). This was an ideological strategy to legitimise socialism as superior to both capitalism, and the Chinese empires of the past. Zhang notes that the CCP considered virtually any form of sexual liberation as consequences of “‘Western imports’ and ‘feudal remnants’” (p. 104). Furthermore, the Cultural Revolution was also used as a means to postulate the CCP has harbingers of Marxist egalitarianism to the nation’s gender relations.

However, as Roberts (2010) discusses, this involved conscientiously masculinising women, and attempting to reframe them as non-feminine, asexual individuals. Roberts argues that the CCP achieved these political-cultural aims by forcing asexual dressing styles on women, through “the erasure of gender in the mass media” and by rendering discourses of
sexual desire invisible (p. 17). Thus, while women may have indeed received more opportunities in the labour force, the price to pay was the disintegration of the highly salient gender identity. Quite ironically, however, despite the CCP’s active attempts to desexualise China, the memoirs of individuals living both in Shanghai and across the nation during the Cultural Revolution contain candid reflections of sexuality (Honig, 2003). Among other findings, Honig’s analysis of these memoirs reveals the jarring contradictions of sexual desires, pleasures, and activities within this officially non-sexual period. The Cultural Revolution ended with Mao Zedong’s death in 1976. Two years later, Deng Xiaoping rose to power, and began a series of reforms that erupted into the ‘sexual revolution’.

**Back with a Bang: The ‘Sexual Revolution’**

The ‘sexual revolution’ was first deemed to have been an inevitable consequence of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms (Pan, 2006), which were in their early stages in 1978 (Shirk, 1993). Pan, however, strongly contests this teleological view and essentially chastises it as myopic. He states that this conventional view reckons increasing sexual openness to be a byproduct of economic openness, and the concomitant diverse (i.e. ‘western’) values that ‘enter’ into Chinese society, and ‘break away’ the chains of sexual conservatism. In rejecting this view, however, Pan postulates that the Chinese ‘sexual revolution’ is a latent consequence rooted in the CCP’s domestic policies, rather than ‘western values’. Chief among these is the one-child policy.

**The One-Child Policy**

Introduced in 1980, the one-child policy was “an emergency measure to slow population growth at the start of Chinese economic reforms” (Wang, 2005, p. 2). It was a formally rational population control strategy aimed at curbing competition for resources (Fong, 2002). The official ratification of the one-child policy meant that sexual activity became
radically decoupled from procreation (Pan, 2006). This in itself was revolutionary, given that Chinese marriages have historically been patrimonially defined, wherein the overwhelming emphasis was placed on the perpetuation of the male lineage (Hamilton, 1990). Traditional Chinese marriages, after all, cared little for abstract notions of love, with the focus being on establishing strong family units (Pan, 2006). Remarkably, however, divorce rates have increased tenfold, from 1980 to 2000, in Shanghai (Farrer & Sun, 2003). Pan (2006), therefore, contends that the CCP’s one-child policy has been central to the shift towards increasing cultural acceptance of (some) non-traditional sexual practices, including interracial (male expatriates and Chinese women) relationships.

**The Re-Emergence of the Nightlife & the Rise of Interracial Relationships**

By the 1980s, the nightlife establishments in Shanghai began re-emerging alongside the economic reforms (Farrer & Field, 2012). Since then, the number of expatriates living in Shanghai, as consequent of Deng’s economic reforms has risen “from several hundred to several tens of thousands.” (Farrer, 2010, p. 70). Both Farrer (2010), and Farrer and Field (2012) emphasise that the nightlife establishments in contemporary Shanghai have not merely multiplied numerically in comparison to the pre-Mao period. Crucially, this numerical increase has been accompanied by an unprecedented expansion of the dynamism of Shanghai’s socio-sexual sphere, in that it facilitates, and allows for increasingly diverse, interracial intermingling to take place. This appears to be reflected in how bars in Shanghai have undergone a ‘sexual jolting’ of their own (Farrer, 2009). Since the 1990s, bars catering to the ‘elite’ strata have risen in prominence, with the space enabling ‘western’ expatriates to mingle with high-income Chinese women. Of significance is that Farrer’s (2009) study appears to offer continuity to the fact that single Shanghainese women earn more than their Chinese male counterparts (Fong, 2002).
Furthermore, Farrer (2010) discusses how contemporary sexual nightscapes function as ‘safe’ fields that allows for both ‘western’ men and Chinese women to demonstrate their own sexual capital towards each other, and engage in casual sexual relations with one another. This, Farrer argues, is a significant development from the 1980s as at the time (pre-‘sexual revolution), Chinese women were stigmatised and labelled, among other derogatory terms, as ‘whores’ for just dating non-Chinese men. Given these difficulties, many expatriate men “restricted their dating to other foreign women” (p. 79), and only began engaging in interracial relationships after “Chinese state agencies eased up on the regulations of non-marital sex”, once the ‘sexual revolution’ was in full swing (p. 81). Thus, the explosion in the number of bars and nightclubs, and the dynamic intermingling opportunities they offer, have been termed as Shanghai’s “ethnosexual contact zone” (Farrer, 2011, p. 751) (Farrer & Field, 2012, para. 11).

Conclusion

Thus, concludes the review. The totality of the political shifts outlined constitute a mere portion of the ever evolving sexual landscape in Shanghai. The Europeans, Kuomintang, and the CCP have each etched their own legacies, though not in equal proportion, into city’s sexuality. The fundamental belief underpinning this review is that some understanding of historical institutional shifts are necessary to appreciate sexuality in Shanghai (and indeed, anywhere in the world). Following this review’s structural analysis, it would be prudent for subsequent research to develop upon, or supplement the ‘findings’ here with a content analysis of sources (newspapers, online forums, mass media) to develop a firm understanding of the cultural layer of the sexual script theory in Shanghai. Subsequently, the focus could shift to the interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts of heterosexual expatriate males in the city by way of grounded ethnographical research. This way, it may be possible to strengthen the sociological significance of sexual script theory.
References


