

How are Schools Producing Certain Forms of Regulated Sexualities in China?

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Abstract: This paper will discuss how sexuality is constructed in China. It begins by outlining how deep-rooted Chinese traditional culture affects women's position by drawing on the Foucaultian 'power-knowledge-body' model. It is argued that in China, women are more likely to be positioned as subordinate through disciplines, presenting patriarchal power. It then proceeds to present the influence of power relations in different forms: at the level of teenage sexuality through institutional regulations, at the level of girls' bodies, and in the realm of traditional gendered perspectives.

Keywords: Gender; Sexuality; Education

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1. Introduction

Heterosexual ideas and practices are deeply constructed early in China. Since the pre-Qin dynasty (before the year 134), Confucianism has been predominating Chinese mainstream culture. It maintains that different categories of interpersonal relationships exist and extend based on the relationship of husband-wife ^[1]. This Confucian mindset hitherto impacts Chinese contemporary society ^[2]. So, it could be suggested that the men-women encounters have producing meanings and this ingrained ethics of heterosexual married couples has influenced Chinese for a long time, thus effortlessly establishing the gender binary in China. In this way, society provides spaces to support the stable construction of men and women and reduce the possibility of gender diversity ^[3].

2. How is sexuality constructed in China?

Bodies matter in sociology. It owes much to a tradition of values which has its roots in the ideas of Michel Foucault. He proposed the discipline theory that achieved through power technology, discipline shapes the personals (the body). So this section will explore his understanding of power and subjectivation and apply his theoretical framework to the Chinese context to analyze how patriarchal power constructs these notions of sexuality in China ^[4,5].

2.1. Foucault: ‘power-knowledge-body’ model

Foucault’s theories lay a foundation for explaining how disciplinary power controls the body. Before moving to the discipline theory, it is proper to refer to biopower. The necessity of this notion stems from a history that since the seventeenth century, citizens transited from ends to resources in need of socially stable development. To ensure society’s stability, the populations need to become manageable and governable to stay healthy and active, generating new forms of regulation and control. For this purpose, schools were an example during the nineteenth century when the young population was controlled and shaped into easily productive community members^[6]. Numerous institutional strategies and discursive devices were used to police the sex of children^[7]. In the state’s operation, the early forms of biopower as “meticulous” and “ponderous” are gradually substituted by “a looser form of power over the body.” Therefore, it could be argued that the population’s bodies or their sexual conduct become a business of regulation and surveillance.

2.2. Outlining sex education in China

The child’s sexuality weighs a lot at school. Egan and Hawkes considered that the social construction of the child and its sexuality need to be normalized and educated in the Anglophone West^[8]. Even though as times go by, the ideas about teenage sexuality remain the same at different periods^[9]. It could be argued that a child’s sexuality is an object of intense detection and administration.

How is sexuality educated in China? With gender-related systems being incomplete, there is only discursive knowledge regarding gender and sex^[10,11]. It is supposed that in Chinese schools, there is a lack of systematic sex education for teaching and this situation makes innocent students fail to learn about gender. Instead, they are discursively exposed to gender matters and understand knowledge of it on separate levels: in the sphere of social labor division, in the setting of family education, and in the realm of social media^[12]. As a result of that, what the young generations receive is deep-rooted gender assumptions and societal convictions^[13]. They may rarely take it seriously for what gender equality is, what gender stereotypes are, and how to handle gender matters. Rather, they merely obey gender regulations in educational institutions and are defined by certain norms from society. Accordingly, this could be described as a contemporary form of biopower that is not “meticulous” and “heavy” but “looser” to produce subjected student bodies.

Without formal teaching and guidance regarding gender, it is easier to employ regulatory mechanisms to govern student sexuality. In secondary and tertiary education, most Chinese schools carry out a cluster of gender discipline, especially for schoolgirls, such as requiring short hair, no makeup, and unisex school uniforms^[14]. The purpose of it, on the surface, seems to inspire students to concentrate on their academic pursuits, but it creates femininity blindness^[15]. Considering the women’s bodies’ productive ability, the school authorities have conceptualized childhood sexuality as “unruly.” Implicitly, adolescent romantic relationships are identified as sites for risky (heterosexual) behavior. This gives a reason for the need for sexual protection^[16]. The solution for this is, that instead of offering students a benign sex education, schools tend to construct a range of gender rules to monitor students. It is what they want to do with their bodies based on the adults’ imagination with suspect subjects and the possibility of their sexuality, hence legitimating the preemptive logic for the potential risk and threat^[17]. The gender regulations in China serve to reduce the potential for childhood sexuality to be problematic.

3. How are schools producing certain forms of regulated sexualities?

This section aims to provide a review of patriarchy in China from a historical perspective and how this conventional value leads to present gender expectations through education.

3.1. Chinese context: patriarchy power operating over body discipline

Disciplines shape the individual (the body). From Foucault's interpretation, the controlling mechanism is internally realized by individuals. Take it in the Chinese context, it could be attributed to patriarchal power and Confucianism emerged for this goal. Before the year 221, the Qin Dynasty established a feudal society. To consolidate his political power, the corresponding system, named centralization of the authority, highlighted the hierarchy meanings^[18]. This means the monarch held the supreme standing in his territory. As Foucault proposed that knowledge panders to power to make us subjects, Confucianism built up a series of pyramidal ethics to make the hierarchal power structure reasonable.

Modern sexuality, drawing on Foucault's perspective, could be held as a sign of historical construct. The traditional family values provide spaces for developing heterosexual exercise. Since conventional Confucian culture has been having a profound effect on Chinese social norms for over 2,000 years, it is not unfathomable to understand how immediate patriarchal power operates. In ancient times, to make male dominance conspicuous, Confucius set up "Female Analects" for females, entirely stressing their respect for males^[19]. In practice, the regulatory discipline reinforced women's status as adherent to men. The worth of women could merely lie in the net-like power relations of serving her father, husband, and son. Multiple disciplines reminded girls and women that their bodies never belonged to themselves. Instead, females are more concerned with the married housewife and mothering role in the spirit of the family-focused culture, which introduced productive capacity and female sexuality^[20]. Therefore, there is some evidence that patriarchy and heterosexuality have an oppressive impact on the lives of females. Drawing on the Foucaultian 'power-knowledge-body' model, disciplines facilitate men-women married couples and belittle women's positions in China. Therefore, it could be argued that the normative power of heterosexuality has existed in China for a long time. This convention reduces gender diversity in China.

3.2. Schools as a site for heterosexuality

How is the school implied in generating gendered subjects? Sex education in contemporary China is still based on heterosexuality and renders it normal. Since there is no systematic sex-bound education in formal schooling, this section attempts to recognize the discursive formation that has been deployed within the educational settings, arguing sexuality practices inscribed in it are normatively heterosexual by making use of Judith Butler's theory of the "heterosexual matrix."

3.3. The dichotomy of masculinity and femininity

How are these certain forms of sexual identities translated into students' daily lives via pedagogic practice? In response to this question, I would argue that schools stress dominant societal sex roles in which sexual identities are produced. In China's context of preschool and elementary school, it frequently happens that teachers tend to set a role model for the whole class^[21]. During this period, teachers expected students to be a docile child. Since the discourse about girls is more attached to the "civilizing influences and caretakers," they are more likely to be the example to moderate the behaviors of others^[22]. Then what the teachers usually said is "boys, I command you to be quiet like girls." Additionally, teachers are inclined to pay tribute to boys with enriched knowledge. The pedagogy is saying that girls should be tamed while boys should be informed. With regards to a fair proportion of textbooks, boys undertake the main function in adventures to present their confidence and initiative, compared with girls, who only show dependence and inactiveness^[23]. The relationships between boys and girls are segregated and their biological/social differentiation is stressed. Although it seems a mutual cooperation, it enhances institutionalized formation for their sexual identity categories. It could be recognized as a range of performances processed through discourse or language, producing normative heterosexual

masculinity and femininity ^[24].

3.4. Students performing hetero-masculinity and hetero-femininity

Judith Butler has made a significant contribution to understanding how sex, gender, and (hetero)sexuality line up with each other. She asserted: “I...characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” ^[25].

It accounts for the prevailing narratives of heterosexuality and particular identity categories. A person is evidently visible to others and in turn, others would evaluate this person’s sexuality based on what this person looked upon. The process is finished by the viewer’s straightforward visual gaze. To be more specific, a particular gender inscribes a particular sexuality for which there is a binary understanding: male/female, masculinity/femininity. Tredway indicated that if a person is read as being male and masculine, he would be recognized as being heterosexual compared with a woman, being viewed as masculine, would be identified as being homosexual ^[26]. So, it is not hard to understand why Butler uses the term “hegemonic model of gender intelligibility.” We make sense of people relying on what we see.

4. Conclusion

Heterosexuality has become a principal trend in identifying boys and girls. The adolescent identity is circumscribed by gender power relations. Banyard proposed that nowadays we are still facing ongoing and intensified (hetero)sexist sexual politics in educational settings, and girlhood is compliant with the oppressive (hetero)sexualized regulation ^[27,28]. It strengthens feminine compliance and passivity. Kehily summarized it as a product of homophobic practices inside the school. With much of the research presenting critical thinking of the “reach of hetero-normativity in schools,” it is arguably enhancing in the manner that heterosexual identity is a universally accepted norm in contrast to the sexually minor (involving lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, and queer), which turns out to be other-ed. We endorse heterosexuality only because it is what we usually see ^[29].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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