

Social and Cultural Prohibitions against Sexual Activity among Teenagers in a Chinese City

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Despite stringent fertility control policies, Chinese schools provided almost no sex education for teenagers in the 1990s. The mass media were not even allowed to display condom ads until 2003. Parents were also unlikely to provide sex education to their children. Yet pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases were remarkably rare among teenagers, due to sociocultural prohibitions that prevented sexual activity among teenagers. Based on 27 months of participant observation in the schools and homes of Chinese teenagers that I conducted between 1997 and 2002 in the northeastern Chinese city of Dalian, this paper examines several case studies of how these prohibitions worked.

Romantic relationships between were prohibited at Chinese high schools, junior high schools, and elementary schools. Even the student romances that did develop usually did not lead to sex. Most teenagers had little unsupervised time or space in which to be sexually active. Parents carefully guarded their children's chastity because those known to have had premarital sex were seen as less desirable on the marriage market than those presumed to be virgins. This was especially true for women, but also true for men.

Romantic relationships between students (*zaolian*, literally "early romance") were prohibited at Chinese high schools, junior high schools, and elementary schools. While some teachers declined to enforce this prohibition, others worked hard to keep boyfriends and girlfriends from spending time together during school, and informed parents about their children's forbidden romantic involvements. Most teachers and parents claimed that romantic relationships would distract students from their studies, and top students agreed. Student romances tended to be least common at the most prestigious schools, where discipline was strictest, students were the most obedient, and constant studying left no time for leisure. This pattern reinforced the widespread belief that abstinence from romance could improve academic performance.

Most teenagers spent the bulk of their time in school. They could not afford cars or hotel rooms. Most parents were home during the few hours of the day and week when students were not in school, and only allowed teenagers to go out with friends of the same gender, or large groups that included both genders. Unemployed parents were home almost all the time. Thirty-four percent of the 2,169 teenagers who responded to a survey I conducted in 1999 indicated that they had at least one parent who was laid off or retired. Many parents kept careful track of their children's activities by gathering information from their children's teachers, friends, and friends' parents. Teachers informed parents when students were truant. Parents and teachers considered the need to find a spouse the only acceptable reason for dating. Spouse seeking was supposed to begin in one's 20s. Women younger than 20 and men younger than 22 were legally prohibited from marrying, and state enterprises gave bonuses to employees who married when they were at least two years older than the legal minimum. Prior to 2001, regular college programs that were not geared toward adult education did not accept married students or allow their students to marry. Young people were expected to enter the marriage market only after finishing their education and finding steady work.

For all these reasons, pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases were rare among Chinese teenagers, even though China's family planning policies, education, and distribution of contraceptives focused almost entirely on married adults. Below, I illustrate how teenagers experienced sociocultural prohibitions against premarital sex by telling the stories of three girls who (as far as I can tell) remained virgins throughout their teens, despite having several romantic relationships. While it is impossible for me to know if they actually were virgins, it is clear that they were considered virgins by everyone they knew. I can only tell stories from girls' perspectives because most boys were not comfortable about discussing romance and sexuality with me. However, I did know these girls' boyfriends and their parents well enough to see that they also valued chastity, though not as greatly as the girls and their parents. Almost all of the teenaged girls and most of the teenaged boys I knew who lived with their parents in Dalian seemed at least as chaste as the teenagers in these stories. Many teenagers, particularly those enrolled in prestigious, time-consuming keypoint high schools, never even had romantic relationships.

Sun Wei, Yang Shu, and their Boyfriends

I first met Yang Shu and Sun Wei in 1998, when both girls were 14. Yang Shu sometimes invited her boyfriend Jiang Yi, Sun Wei, Sun Wei's boyfriend Teng Fei, and me over to sing karaoke on her home entertainment system. Other times, we went together to malls, restaurants, and video game parlors. The teenagers' parents encouraged them to take me along on outings, hoping that I would serve as a chaperone.

Yang Shu and Sun Wei had been best friends since first grade, when they shared a desk and chatted so much that no teacher ever allowed them to sit together again. They lived on the same street, and walked to and from school together every day. Yang Shu ate dinner at Sun Wei's home when Yang Shu's mother had to work late at her store. Yang Shu's boyfriend Jiang Yi and Sun Wei's boyfriend Teng Fei were best friends as well, and the two couples went everywhere in a merry quartet.

Yang Shu's Heartbreak

Yang Shu asked me not to tell her mother she had a boyfriend.

"What do you think of my daughter's little friend?" Yang Shu's mother asked me one day as we chatted in her store.

"Sun Wei's very nice," I responded evasively, pretending not to know that the term "little friend" was a euphemism for "boyfriend."

Recognizing my discomfort, Yang Shu's mother laughed. "That little thing told you not to tell me how she is with Jiang Yi, didn't she? Her homeroom teacher already told me. I've told my daughter not to waste her time on boys, but she does it anyway. There's nothing I can do to stop her. I just want to know what you think of him."

"He's very nice too," I said.

"What good is that? I hear he's an even worse student than she is. He's a waste of her time. The school prohibits dating for a reason. She's just a child! What use is it for her to have a 'little friend'? She's smarter than anyone else in her class, but she's wasting

all her potential. She should hold on tightly to her time and use it to study for the entrance exam. Tell her that. Maybe she'll listen to you."

I told Yang Shu that I agreed with her mother that she should spend more time preparing for the high school entrance exam. "Just make a decision to study hard these last few months before the exam," I advised her. "After that, you can play all summer long."

"I know," Yang Shu said. "But I just need to relax sometimes. Some people get so nervous about the exam that they end up panicking and doing worse than they would have if they had relaxed, like I'm doing."

I was watching a TV show with Yang Shu when her mother came home in tears from the parents' meeting at Yang Shu's school. "You ranked near the bottom of your class!" she yelled at Yang Shu. "I was so embarrassed, I couldn't even look at the other parents. I wanted to run out of the room. How do you expect to get into a college prep high school with such low scores? Do you think your Pa will help you? One of these days he'll have a child with his new wife, and he'll forget all about you. And if you score too low, there's no amount of money that will make a college prep high school take you."

"What use are college prep high schools?" Yang Shu replied. "I hear that even college graduates can't find jobs these days."

"If even college graduates can't find jobs, how do you expect to find a job?" her mother sobbed. "Do you expect me to support you the rest of my life? Do you just want to take over my store after I'm old and bedridden? There's no future in that! I want something better for you!"

"Don't worry," Yang Shu said. "I'll think of a way to get ahead no matter what happens on the exam."

"How?" her mother demanded. "How will you get a good job if you don't study hard? Do you expect to sit at home all day while a rich husband supports you? You might get a man to marry you just for your looks, but after a while he'll just be annoyed at you and say you're no use. Then you'll fight and he'll divorce you. Then what will you do?"

Hoping to keep their friendship group together, Yang Shu, her boyfriend Jiang Yi, Sun Wei, and her boyfriend Teng Fei selected the same college prep, professional, and vocational high schools as their top choices.

When the time came, Yang Shu's mother left a relative in charge of the store and spent both days of the high school entrance exam standing in the rain outside the exam hall, along with hundreds of parents waiting for their children to come out for meal breaks.

Yang Shu only scored high enough to qualify for a vocational high school that was not even her top choice. She was willing to enroll at that school, but her parents sent her to a private, all-girls boarding school instead. "I like this school because it's strict, and has the style of an army training camp," Yang Shu's mother told me. "My daughter's smart, and she'll be a good student once she grows up and understands things. This school hires the best teachers, and the curriculum is the same as the kind at the college prep high schools. If she still doesn't get into college after that, I'll send her to college abroad. She'll get further abroad, where what matters is ability, not just exam scores."

Yang Shu's mother was happy about Yang Shu's apparently increased devotion to her studies at the private school. "I knew it was a good idea to send her to the private school," Yang Shu's mother told me. "It's giving her the discipline that I never had time

to give her.” Yang Shu’s mother was pleased that her daughter had finally broken up with her boyfriend. “She’s finally growing up and realizing that she shouldn’t waste time playing around with a boy!”

Yang Shu was less pleased. She told her mother that she chose to break up with Jiang Yi because she wanted to focus on her studies. But she told me that Jiang Yi had dumped her because he had fallen for a girl at his vocational high school. “How could he be so fickle!” she sobbed to me. “I was nicer to him than I was to myself. But then he forgot about me as soon as we stopped attending the same school. I thought he loved me! I can’t believe I was so foolish. I should have listened to my Ma! She said that men are unreliable, and she was right! Maybe if I hadn’t wasted so much time playing around with Jiang Yi, I’d be in a college prep high school, getting a better and less expensive education. From now on, I’ll just focus on studying. I never want to have a ‘little friend’ again!”

Yang Shu is now 20 years old, and living with her parents while attending adult education junior college. She told me that she has not had a boyfriend since she broke up with Jiang Yi. She told me that she intends to marry someday, but also that she does not intend to start looking for a fiancé till she is in her late 20s. In the meantime, she is preparing to study in Europe.

Sun Wei’s Chaste Dating

Unlike Yang Shu’s parents, Sun Wei’s parents refused to follow their daughter’s homeroom teacher’s advice that they forbid Sun Wei to see her boyfriend. “I know your friends are important to you, and I know you can’t be with the rest of them without also being with Teng Fei,” Sun Wei’s mother told her. “Just make sure you’re always with the group and never alone with him.”

After taking the high school entrance exam, Sun Wei was accepted to her top-choice vocational high school. In vocational school, Sun Wei missed the tight circle of friends she had in junior high school. “I’ve made some new friends, but I still miss my old friends,” Sun Wei said. “Junior high school friendships are less complicated, and more real, than high school friendships.” She was still dating Teng Fei, who had gotten his parents to send him to her vocational high school just so he could continue to be with her. But Sun Wei’s parents were more suspicious of her relationship with Teng Fei now that Sun Wei’s friends Yang Shu and Jiang Yi were no longer around, since they attended different schools and Yang Shu had broken up with Jiang Yi.

Sun Wei was angry with Jiang Yi for dumping Yang Shu, and Teng Fei also disapproved. Still, Teng Fei remained friends with Jiang Yi, and this caused tension between him and Yang Shu. Sun Wei and Yang Shu still called and visited each other during vacations, but they no longer went out together with Jiang Yi and Teng Fei. Fearing what might happen if their daughter went out alone with her boyfriend, Sun Wei’s parents seldom let her see Teng Fei outside of school.

“Never go out alone with him,” Sun Wei’s mother warned her. “Things can happen if you’re alone with a boy. Your chastity will be your capital when it’s time for you to marry, and that’s at least ten years away! There’s no guarantee you’ll be with Teng Fei for that long! And at this point, you don’t even know how successful he’ll be.

He's a nice boy, but he's bad at studying, and maybe all he knows is how to spend his parents' money."

"Stop nagging," Sun Wei replied. "I'm a good girl. I'm having fun with Teng Fei, but I understand things. I'll be careful. Don't worry."

Sun Wei continued dating Teng Fei throughout vocational high school. They broke up when Teng Fei left Dalian to attend a four-year college in another province, while Sun Wei continued living with her parents while attending adult education junior college, but they remain on friendly terms. According to Sun Wei, Teng Fei, their parents, and their friends, both Sun Wei and Teng Fei are still virgins. Both of them are now 20 years old, and both have told me that they intend to focus on their studies and avoid new romantic relationships until they start seeking spouses in their late 20s.

An Jing's Search for a High Quality Boyfriend

I first met An Jing in 1998, when she was 18. Her parents and teachers praised her for her good moral character, but they also scolded her for not focusing on her studies. She had scored so low on the high school entrance exam that she could not get into a public college prep high school. Since her parents were poor factory workers who could not afford to send her to a private college prep school, An Jing attended a vocational high school, which was designed to prepare students for low-level jobs in the service sector. After graduating from vocational high school, An Jing worked as a salesclerk while continuing to live with her parents. She could not get professional and managerial jobs that called for "high quality talent" (*gao suzhi rencai*), since those jobs required college degrees. Still, An Jing felt that she had high quality, because of her honesty and integrity. "My supervisors like me, because they know I have high quality and would never embezzle money or do anything bad like that," she told me proudly.

An Jing took an English class at night, hoping to get a certificate of English proficiency that would improve her career opportunities. In this class, she met Jiang Hai, a college student two years older than her. She started dating him. When she introduced him to me, she said with admiration, "See, college students have high quality!"

At first, An Jing seemed pleased with Jiang Hai. His wealthy parents gave him a lot of spending money, and he often treated her to expensive meals. He also told her news and anecdotes he had heard from his college classmates, or from people he met on the internet. "I can learn a lot from him," An Jing told me.

After a few months, however, she told me that she felt uncomfortable with his desire to have sex with her. She did not want to have premarital sex. "I want to be a good girl, and do right by my future husband," she explained. An Jing also worried about disappointing her parents, who considered good moral character her greatest strength, and a redeeming factor that compensated for her academic failures.

Just half a year after they started dating, Jiang Hai broke up with An Jing. He had found a new girlfriend: his college classmate Wu Qiong. An Jing was furious, especially after she heard a rumor that Jiang Hai had told his friends that An Jing's quality was too low for him, and that he looked down on her because of her low educational attainment.

Though devastated that Jiang Hai had rejected her, An Jing gradually came to the conclusion that his quality was in fact too low for her. "He's good at taking exams, but

that doesn't mean he has high quality," An Jing told me. "If he had high quality, he wouldn't have wanted to sleep with me. I'm lucky I didn't give up my chastity for him!"

An Jing felt that her assessment was confirmed when she heard from Jiang Hai's friend that Jiang Hai and Wu Qiong were living together and presumably having sex in a room off campus. "You see, not all college students have high quality!" An Jing told me triumphantly. "They're hooligans, both of them!"

A year later, An Jing started dating Kong Rong, a fellow salesclerk who had also graduated from vocational high school. An Jing told me that Kong Rong respected her desire to avoid premarital sex, and that he was kinder and more honest than Jiang Hai. "Kong Rong has much higher quality than Jiang Hai!" An Jing said.

An Jing is still dating Kong Rong. According to An Jing, Kong Rong, and their parents and friends, both An Jing and Kong Rong are still virgins, and they plan to remain so until they marry each other next year.

Conclusion

Unlike in most other societies, extramarital births and teen parenthood are almost nonexistent in China. This is partly due to China's fertility control policies, which mandate abortions for extramarital pregnancies and teen pregnancies (since teenagers are not legally allowed to marry). But my research suggests that the primary means of preventing extramarital births and teen parenthood in China is not state-mandated abortion but rather sociocultural prohibitions against premarital sex.

The experiences of teenagers like Yang Shu, Sun Wei, and An Jing suggest that sociocultural pressures were very effective in keeping urban Chinese teenagers from having sex. Most young adults in Dalian live with their parents, and thus remain chaste, at least until they marry and/or need to go far away for work or education. Young adults who live far away from their parents, however, are increasingly likely to have sex. As the economic reforms have intensified, more young adults have been drawn to sex work, young adults have become more likely to pursue work and education far from home, hotels and rental housing have become more available and affordable, global cultural flows glamorizing extramarital sexuality have become more widespread, young adults have increasingly postponed marriage, and officials at universities, work units, and hotels no longer have political incentives to police the sexuality of people who live in their housing. Though most of these factors will not affect teenagers, they are likely to cause unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases to rise among young adults, especially if Chinese schools and parents continue to avoid providing sex education.