The discussion of sex, Chinese and Western scholarship suggests, is emblematic of the seemingly absolute distinction between the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the subsequent post-Mao/economic reform period. During the Maoist Cultural Revolution, when politics was in command, to discuss any aspect of personal life, romantic relationships, or sex was considered bourgeois and hence taboo. Throughout the more recent decades, however, sex—how to do it, with whom it is appropriate, at what age it is acceptable—has exploded as one of the major topics of public debate and is featured as the subject of fiction, films, newspaper and magazine articles, and scholarly research. Personal testimonies and memoirs, filled during the Maoist years with chronicles of political consciousness and struggle, have become more reflective about their authors’ romantic and sexual histories. This shift has produced, ironically, a sexing of the Cultural Revolution—an insertion of sexual discussion, practice, and preoccupation into the history of a period long presumed to have been dominated by political concerns.

Cultural Revolution memoirs of the past decade (a minor cottage industry in their own right) have startled readers by their often frank reflections about sex and sexuality. Anchee Min’s autobiographical account Red Azalea, for example, describes the residents of Red Fire Farm as being far more concerned with the pursuit of romantic and sexual pleasure than with political struggle (Min, 1994: 58-59). Rae

AUTHOR’S NOTE: I would like to thank Gail Hershatter and Elizabeth Perry for their critical readings of earlier versions of this essay. I am particularly grateful to Kay Ann Johnson for insightful comments on the gendered dimensions of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution.
Yang’s *Spider Eaters*, too, offers memories of an adolescence spent in the Great Northern Wilderness, where the struggles of the Cultural Revolution were interspersed with her emerging sense of herself and her classmates as sexual beings (R. Yang, 1997). Likewise, *Blood Red Sunset*, Ma Bo’s account of life as a sent-down youth in Inner Mongolia, is punctuated by reflections on his romantic liaisons and sexual fantasies as well as the clandestine affairs of others (Ma Bo, 1996).¹

Not all memoirs are so positive in their reflections on Cultural Revolution sexuality. *Report on Love and Sex among China’s Sent-Down Youth*, a three-volume work published in 1998, aims to document the more tragic dimensions of sexuality and to present stories of severe sexual repression. “We were robbed of our youth, ideas, hopes, and love,” the editors lament. “In terms of love, people were criticized and struggled against, put in jail. . . . All books about love were labeled pornographic, all songs about love labeled low-class. Men and women in love were considered hoodlums” (Zhang Dening and Yue Jianyi, 1998a: 2). Even in detailing horrific punishments inflicted on youth accused of inappropriate romantic relationships, however, the hundred-odd memoirs insert and implicitly insist on sexual preoccupation as being at the center of experiences of the Cultural Revolution.

It is tempting to interpret these reflections on Cultural Revolution sexuality as a rewriting of events as viewed through the lens of contemporary concerns, as a projection onto the past of the post-Mao preoccupation with sex, romanticism, and erotics.² These memoirs, like all memoir literature, surely do represent the past through the concerns of their authors’ present, and it is hardly coincidental that individuals writing during a time of intense public discussion of sexuality would highlight that part of their experience. However, to reduce the emphasis on sexuality to a projection of the present onto the past, or even to a writing of the past as skewed by the terms, language, and passions of the present, presumes a total disjuncture between the Cultural Revolution and the post-Mao period: it takes for granted that what prevails now did not and could not have existed then—that just as fervently as sexual issues are discussed in the present, they were silenced in the past.

Economic, political, and even many social policies of the reform era do radically depart from and in some ways explicitly reject Cultural Revolution policies. But the current denunciation of Maoist
policies may obscure underlying social continuities. I do not mean to suggest that there is state policy, on one hand, and social reality, on the other; the state made discussion of love and sex taboo, but in reality sex was discussed and performed in contexts not sanctioned by the state. Nor am I suggesting that discussions of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution and post-Mao era are identical. Rather, my point is to examine the specific contexts in which sexuality became an issue during the Cultural Revolution and to acknowledge that the reflections about sexuality in contemporary memoirs may be more than a projection of the present onto the past.

This article, then, aims to offer a preliminary exploration of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution. Despite the proliferation of new, revisionist studies of the Cultural Revolution by both Chinese and Western scholars, the subject of sexuality—and personal life in general—has been completely ignored, an oversight that replicates, perhaps unwittingly, the presumed repression of personal life during the Cultural Revolution itself (Joseph, Wong, and Zweig, 1991; Perry and Li, 1997; Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, 1996). As materials about the Cultural Revolution increasingly become available—not just memoirs but also archival materials and collections of documents—they are revealing the variety of niches in which sexuality was part of the life of the Cultural Revolution. They also suggest the gendered dimensions of sexuality, the divergent ways in which men and women perceived sexual issues and experience. What emerges from these materials is not a simple story of state silencing and popular submission or of state prohibition and popular resistance. State “policy” about sex during the Cultural Revolution is far from clear, and popular attitudes and behavior are full of contradictions.

STATE SILENCE AND THE SILENCING OF SEXUAL DISCOURSE

The Maoist state, it is commonly assumed, actively silenced discussion of personal life in general and of sexuality most particularly. “What often got erased,” Mayfair Yang asserts,

were not only women’s bodies and female gender but also sexual desire itself, through a combined process of repression and an emptying out
of public discourse on sex. . . . There was a dearth of both public and private discussion of sex during the Cultural Revolution. [M. Yang, 1999: 44]

The historian Harriet Evans’s study of sexuality in post-1949 China persuasively challenges this assumption by documenting the far-ranging discussion of sexual issues that took place in official publications during the 1950s and early 1960s (Evans, 1997: 2). Nevertheless, even her study presents us with the Cultural Revolution as the single period when the Chinese government suppressed this discussion. From 1966 to 1976, Evans writes,

The slightest suggestion of sexual interest was considered so ideologically unsound that gendered tastes in hairstyle and dress were coerced into a monotonous uniformity of shape and colour. A kind of androgynty, a sexual sameness, based on the defeminization of female appearance and its approximation to male standards of dress, seemed to be the socialist ideal. [Evans, 1997: 2]

The state, presumably, was responsible for this explicit and aggressive policing of sexuality.

Any analysis of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution requires a closer look at the state and its role in governing sexual discourse and prescribing acceptable (and unacceptable) behavior. What emerges from such an analysis is a state that said remarkably little about sexuality while appearing to criticize, arrest, and punish individuals for transgressing sexual norms.

Issues of sexuality were not placed high (if anywhere) on the Cultural Revolution’s agenda, and state policies and proclamations did not generally concern themselves with issues of sexuality. The state did, however, withdraw from its own earlier—albeit limited—participation in a discussion of sexuality. So, for example, government-sanctioned booklets and manuals about female hygiene, marital relations, and sexual health, which had some circulation during the 1950s and early 1960s, were no longer published (Evans, 1997: 441-44).

Perhaps more noticeable to the reading public was the elimination of romantic relationships from official reports and stories and their transformation into asexual comradely associations. Thus, in the model operas, the main characters were invariably single, or else their...
marital status remained unclear. When male and female characters were together, they spoke only of work, the revolution, or class struggle, and they referred to each other as “comrades” (Bai Ge, 1993: 227).4

The author Dong Landi, a sixth-grade primary school student when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, recalls the first time she heard people describe Jiang Qing as Chairman Mao’s wife. Certain this was a rumor fabricated by the “uneducated masses,” she searched all official publications for evidence of a husband-wife relationship between them. All she could find was the frequent statement that “Comrade Jiang Qing is the close comrade-in-arms of the great leader Chairman Mao” (Yang Jian, 1993: 325). In other words, it appears that the state silenced sexuality not by issuing laws prohibiting it but by becoming silent itself.

That this was not a neutral silence was made clear by the punishment of those who failed to honor it. Although there is no evidence of a law prohibiting the publication of certain categories of texts, publishers understood that manuscripts about romantic or sexual themes could not be published. Authors, for the most part, did not write about love or sex, except for those who wrote the unpublished “hand-copied volumes” (shou chaoben) that were widely circulated clandestinely. But to write stories that touched on themes of love and sex, even under a pseudonym, was risky. For example, Zhang Yang, author of the well-known hand-copied story “The Second Handshake,” was arrested and imprisoned in 1975 for “opposing Chairman Mao’s revolutionary line.” Although Zhang had strategically prefaced this story of a romantic liaison between two intellectuals with a quote from Engels honoring the long history of romantic relationships, Yao Wenyuan—a member of the Gang of Four—spearheaded an extensive search to identify and arrest this author guilty of propagating the “concept of bourgeois love” (Liu Xiaomeng et al., 1995: 619-25; Yang Jian, 1993: 327).

Even if the state expressed little explicitly regarding issues of sexuality, local, popular constructions of state policy in general and of the Cultural Revolution agenda more specifically did make sex a major issue. This concern is evident first in the context of the Red Guard movement. One of the official goals of the early Cultural Revolution was the elimination of “the four olds”: old thought, culture, customs,
and practices. Although an attack on “old culture” might have targeted ideologies such as female chastity, it instead focused on “bourgeois ideology and culture.” As Kay Ann Johnson points out, many of the ideals of the “original ‘antifeudal’ cultural revolution” associated with the May Fourth Movement of the early twentieth century “became targets of attack as manifestations of ‘bourgeois ideology’” (Johnson, 1987: 179).

Hence, when Red Guards at the No. 2 Middle School of Beijing posted their influential “Declaration of War on the Old World” on 19 August 1966, they concentrated on eliminating decadent capitalist practices, particularly those associated with Hong Kong. “We must eradicate the warm bed and young buds of capitalism,” declared the Red Guards, whose text repeatedly called for the destruction of pornographic literature.

We propose to the revolutionary workers in such professions as barbering, tailoring, and photography not to do Hong Kong-style haircuts, not to tailor Hong Kong-style clothing, not to shoot lurid photographs, and not to sell pornographic publications. . . . We want to, in the shortest time possible, eliminate Hong Kong-style clothing, shave off strange-looking hair styles, and burn pornographic books and pictures. [Quoted in Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, 1996: 65-66]

Likewise, Red Guards at the Beijing No. 26 Middle School, in their “One Hundred Items for Destroying the Old and Establishing the New,” commanded bookstores to “immediately destroy all pornographic children’s books” and forbad the “telling of dirty jokes, uttering profanities, and doing vulgar things” (Schoenhals, 1996: 216, 220). Whatever the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership’s original intent, then, the Red Guards’ constructions of the campaign to destroy the “four olds” highlighted pornography as emblematic of the “decadent capitalist culture” that must be destroyed.

As the Cultural Revolution developed and as class enemies were identified, sexual immorality became one of the most commonly invoked “errors” for which they were attacked. The ways in which the accusation of sexual immorality (often signaled by the appellation “broken shoe,” or “whore”) was invoked to legitimize broader political attacks, usually against individual women, are described in some
detail by Neil Diamant (2000: 281-312) in Revolutionizing the Family. Attacks on prominent women ranging from Wang Guangmei (Liu Shaoqi’s wife) to Jiang Qing and Nie Yuanzi (the Party branch secretary of the Philosophy Department at Beijing University, whose character poster launched the Cultural Revolution) all included accusations of inappropriate sexual liaisons and behaviors (Ling, 1972: 198-214; Zhai, 1992: 126; Schoenhals, 1996: 102-9; Yue and Wakeman, 1985: 207).

At a popular level as well, political attacks on individuals were often framed by the charge of sexual immorality. Zhang Zhimei, for example, was accused of having been a spy because she maintained relationships with people she knew in East Berlin, where she had been assigned in 1951 as part of a trade delegation. In the earliest criticism sessions of the Cultural Revolution, however, she was first accused of sexual immorality. “You’re an immoral woman, a fox spirit!” a student yelled at her. “How many men have you had? Tell us everything! You’ve corrupted party cadres, and now you’ve got your hands on one of the revolutionary teachers.” The students then whipped her. One of her own former students led her away from another criticism session but then demanded, “Do you accept that you are an immoral woman?” He then began trying to kiss her (Zhang, 1992: 143-46). Although later forced to confess to having had a romance shortly after being divorced, she was grateful to be spared the humiliation of being paraded through the streets with a string of worn shoes around her neck (literally displaying a euphemism for a “loose woman”), a punishment that she saw inflicted on many women accused of extramarital sex (Zhang, 1992: 162).

The label whore became one of the most frequently used against women. In her account of the Red Guard movement in Shanghai, Ziping Luo describes an attack on two “spinsters” and their 80-year-old mother: “They kicked and spat on the women whom they should have revered as grandmothers. Instead, they shouted ‘Whores!’ ” (Luo, 1990: 27-28). Jin Yihong, recalling the activities of young Red Guards at the famed Middle School for Girls in Beijing, related the frequency with which they captured young women “hoodlums,” brought them to the school for beatings, and hurled at them the accusation “loose woman” or “whore.” She described as well the lengths to which students went to construct evidence that a particular teacher whom they
attacked had been having an extramarital affair with a male teacher at the school (Jin Yihong, interview with author, Nanjing, 1996).

In all of these accounts, Red Guards were the ones who invoked sexual “errors” as part of broader political attacks on “class enemies.” It is difficult to determine whether they were responding to state injunctions or instead played an independent role in establishing codes of proper sexual conduct. Neil Diamant argues that a concern with sexual purity, particularly the sexual morality of women, has been a common feature of youth and nationalist movements, including the French Revolution and the Nazi movement in Germany (Diamant, 2000: 285). The invocation of sexual morality to discredit opponents has precedents in the history of the Chinese revolution as well: Nationalists used this approach to assail Communist women leaders such as Xiang Jingyu, and later the CCP did the same in attacking alleged rightists, such as Ding Ling (Gilmartin, 1995: 211-12; Ding Ling, 1989: 43).

But comparative and historical precedents do not explain the specific causes of these particular allegations. Any explanation of why the Red Guards accused women of sexual immorality has to consider the broader social and political context in which the charges were made. One must wonder whether campaigns of the early 1960s against bourgeois culture, as well as the specific criticisms of “decadent” and “promiscuous” women in the film Early Spring in February (Zaochun eryue) screened in late 1965 and early 1966, instilled in young people the idea of attacking women as “whores.” In addition, as the discussion below will illustrate, the accusations of sexual immorality directed at female “class enemies” were articulated at precisely the same time that “revolutionary” female Red Guards, free from parental control and protection and free to travel throughout China, on one hand, were able to engage in sexual experimentation and, on the other hand, were vulnerable to extraordinary levels of sexual abuse. In other words, while some groups of women were subject to molestation, others were implicitly held responsible for sexual morality. Whether there is a connection between these two phenomena requires further research.

Even if a quest by the Red Guards for sexual purity explains some of the attacks on allegedly immoral sexual liaisons, it does not account
for the full range of those that occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Throughout these accounts, the line between popular codes of morality and state regulation is blurry: while little evidence exists of laws or policies issued or imposed by the central government, there are myriad instances of local government agents propagating their own, often informal, policies and arresting or punishing those who violated them.

For example, cadres in urban work units frequently punished workers who engaged in nonmarital romantic relationships. In one such case, a female factory worker who had been selected (based on her excellent job performance) to be trained as a nurse at the local hospital befriended a male medical student. The hospital leadership instructed her that romance was forbidden and eventually accused her of having an affair. The woman lost her chance to become a nurse and was sent back to her original factory, where she was assigned the least desirable job. From then on, only “hoodlum types” would talk to her (Li Yinhe, 1998: 30). At another urban factory, the Party secretary called an assembly to criticize four young, unmarried people for romantic liaisons. They were not accused of having violated any specific regulations; rather, the cadre claimed that love would interfere with their work and could undermine the state’s policy of encouraging late marriage (Bai Ge, 1993: 277).

Accounts of punishment for “inappropriate” romantic or sexual relations most frequently concern sent-down youth. They usually display a combination of “unwritten rules” prohibiting love and popular censure of those who did fall in love. One of the most detailed accounts features the story of a young woman, Xiao Qing, sent to a state farm in 1968. There she was very well liked for her hard work, warmth, and generosity, and she eventually became the company’s political instructor. “At that time there was an unwritten rule on the state farm,” she recalled. “Smoking was prohibited and love was prohibited. At every meeting, large and small, the leadership reminded us of these prohibitions and warned us.” Nonetheless, she and the company leader, Xiao Gang, fell in love. During Spring Festival, when most of the educated youth had returned to Shanghai, they got drunk and “let things get out of control.” A month later, Xiao Qing realized she was pregnant. Her boyfriend wrote to his parents in Shanghai,
asking them to help arrange for an abortion there. Unfortunately, their response (marked “urgent”) was opened and read by the local leadership, which issued “three points” for handling the situation: Xiao Qing would not be permitted to have the abortion in Shanghai, she and Xiao Gang would be the focus of a special “revolutionary criticism meeting,” and both would be removed from their positions and sent to labor in the fields to reform their thinking.

On the day of her abortion, the state farm leadership stipulated that no one could accompany her, and the only way for her to get to the hospital—100 li from the state farm—was by riding in the back of a fully loaded truck. When she returned she was allowed to rest for one week, but no one was permitted to bring her special foods. Another girl “couldn’t stand it any more” and brought Xiao Qing noodles from the cafeteria. The girl was then criticized for “having sympathized with the ‘winds of bourgeois thought,’ of not being able to distinguish right from wrong, or to draw a clear line between herself and her classmate.” A week after the abortion, the state farm organized a major criticism session: all the men gathered in one group to criticize Xiao Gang, while the women formed another group to criticize Xiao Qing. They focused on the couple’s “corrupt bourgeois trend,” their “bankrupt morality,” their “hoodlum-like tendencies,” and their “pornographic thinking.” The two were then sent to separate companies and not allowed to have any contact with each other. Finally, when educated youth began to have opportunities to return to the city, their “error” made Xiao Qing and Xiao Gang ineligible (Jin Yonghua, 1995: 77-79).

Another account describes two educated youth who fell in love. The army unit to which they had been assigned had an “unwritten regulation” that sexual relations between educated youth would be punished by the denial of a “family visit vacation.” Xiao Wang, the young woman, became pregnant. Fearful of losing her only chance of remaining connected to her family in the city, she desperately tried to conceal the pregnancy by engaging in physically arduous labor and tying a piece of cloth around her waist. Meanwhile, one of her classmates, who was the work team’s health worker, realized what was happening and offered to help Xiao Wang give birth clandestinely. Ultimately, however, Xiao Wang gave birth by herself, wrapped the
newborn boy in green army cloth, and placed the “package” in the river. When it was discovered by a local child, Public Security officials came to investigate. Xiao Wang and her boyfriend were both accused of murdering an infant (Jiang Renwen, 1991). In yet another case, a young woman sent to the Northeast fell in love with a “handsome intellectual” from Shanghai. One evening, strolling by the river, they “embraced and had sex in the grass.” She became pregnant, but he had meanwhile fallen in love with another sent-down youth and refused to get married. When the child was born, she gave it to a local peasant family. However, both she and the young man were “severely criticized” (Liu Yida, 1994-1995: 69).

None of these accounts contains any reference to laws or policies prohibiting romantic or sexual relations among sent-down youth. Instead, they all describe “informal” or “unwritten” rules and a local leadership—from rural state farms to urban factories—that had the authority to punish individuals who engaged in such relationships. For many people, though, it was not punishment by cadres for romantic liaisons that was most damaging but rather the censure by colleagues, classmates, or friends. One young woman recalled receiving a love letter from a male classmate after she had returned to middle school from several years in the countryside. “I can never forget your big eyes,” he wrote. “I’ll always think of you.” Not realizing there was anything problematic about these sentiments, she discussed them with a classmate. Almost immediately, it seemed, the entire school knew the contents of the letter. “No one would pay attention to me after that,” she recalled. “They would spit on my desk, or write ‘big hoodlum’ with chalk, and puncture my bike tires” (Li Yinhe, 1998: 31). Likewise, Jung Chang, in her memoir Wild Swans, recalls a fifteen-year-old classmate who had become pregnant while traveling with a group of Red Guards at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. “She was beaten by her father, followed by the accusing eyes of the neighbors, and enthusiastically gossiped about by her comrades. She hanged herself, leaving a note saying she was ‘too ashamed to live.’ ” Describing the “militant puritans” of the Cultural Revolution, Chang also tells of a female classmate who received a love letter from a sixteen-year-old boy. She wrote back, calling him a “traitor to the revolution”: “How dare you think about such shameless things when the
class enemies are still rampant and people in the capitalist world still live in an abyss of misery!” (Chang, 1991: 316-18). And a woman sent to a tea plantation in Zhejiang recalled how she and other educated youth would hang a broken shoe from the bed of a woman in their dorm room who went out to have sex at night (Yao Yongzheng, interview with author, Shanghai, 1999).

Taken together, all of these phenomena—the removal of romantic or sexual references from official publications; the imprisonment of individual authors who clandestinely wrote about such subjects; the criticism sessions, punishments, and popular censure to which people who engaged in nonmarital sexual relations were subjected; and the allegation of sexual “immorality” against “class enemies”—suggest that the Cultural Revolution was indeed an era of extreme sexual repression. Yet this image must be qualified in several ways.

First, insofar as there is a story of repression to be told, the role of the state is not altogether obvious. This was not a state that issued declarations prohibiting nonmarital romantic or sexual relationships; even when the leaders of factories or state farms punished individuals, the punishment was most often for the violation of “unwritten” rules. To the extent that the state played a role in “silencing sexuality,” it did so through its own silence, which must have spoken volumes to local leaders and ordinary citizens. That silence certainly registered with the Red Guards, who from the outset of the Cultural Revolution made “immoral behavior” one of the most significant crimes for which one could be attacked.

The emphasis on immorality is related to the second way in which the image of the Cultural Revolution as a period of severe sexual repression must be revised. It would be more appropriate to describe it as a period characterized by a profound conflation of political and sexual impurity. Finally, although accounts of individuals being punished for the transgression of rigid sexual “norms” reinforce popular conceptions of the Cultural Revolution, they by no means represent the entire history of sexuality during the period. To further explore that history, we must move away from a focus on the state and sites of repression and look instead at how sexuality was woven into the daily life of the Cultural Revolution in ways that were distinctive to and enmeshed in its political and social movements.
SOCIALIST SEX

For young people in particular, the Cultural Revolution represented a time of dislocation from parental control and protection, particularly with respect to sexuality (Young, 1989: 239-40). During its earliest phases, Red Guards traveled throughout China to “exchange revolutionary experiences.” Long train trips, one woman recalls, provided opportunities for teenagers to experience love and sex in ways that would previously have been inconceivable (Liu Bohong, interview with author, Santa Cruz, CA, 1997). As one of the above accounts suggests, it was not unheard of for young women to return from their travels across China pregnant after sexual encounters that were sometimes desired and, presumably, sometimes not (Chang, 1991: 316-18).

For urban youth, however, it was the years spent in the countryside that represented the most important context for sexual encounters, experimentation, and abuse. No studies of the sent-down youth movement focus on issues of sexuality (or personal life more generally) (see Bernstein, 1977). In Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China, Kay Ann Johnson describes the experience of living in the countryside as being sexually constraining and repressive for urban youth, as the “traditionally conservative village morality of their peasant hosts was coupled with the stringent ultra-leftist outlook.” The result was that “they were afraid to talk in public with members of the opposite sex unless their work required it” (Johnson, 1987: 183).

Interviews and personal memoirs provide a very different view of how sent-down youth perceived and experienced “peasant morality.” One account describes a sixteen-year-old girl, Wang Yuanyuan, sent to Inner Mongolia.

Once after work she was lagging behind and saw something by the side of the ditch. She snuck up and noticed that it was a man and woman “doing it.” At that time the class struggle was very intense, so she earnestly reported this affair to the production brigade leader. The old peasants, though, didn’t treat it as anything and just laughed. [Zhang Dening and Yue Jianyi, 1998b: 95]

A number of women complained about the difficulty adjusting to the discussion and display of sexuality among their peasant hosts,
which was far more open than anything they had ever encountered in the more cautious and restrained atmosphere of the cities. As Liu Liliang, a young woman sent from Nanjing to a work team in Lishui (Jiangsu), recalled,

Some of the peasants’ customs were hard for us to get used to. For example, when it was hot, women wouldn’t wear any clothes on top (except unmarried women wore a cloth over their breasts). And men didn’t wear any clothes at all—not even pants. We couldn’t stand it. We finally went and talked to the brigade leader because it was hard for us to work with those men. The brigade leader made the men wear something around their waists. At first they didn’t like it, but because of us sent-down youth, they had no choice.

Urban youth like herself, fearful of the sun, covered themselves in long pants, long-sleeved shirts, and hats (Liu Liliang, interview with author, Nanjing, 1997).

Jin Yihong, who grew up in Beijing, told of a similar situation in Hainandao, where she had been sent for seven years. On one hand, she described how horrified peasants would be when female educated youth appeared in bathing suits to swim. To them, wearing a bathing suit was equivalent to nudity. On the other hand, she recounted the difficulty sent-down youth experienced in adjusting to the local customs of dress: women often wore no clothing above their waist when working, and in some places peasant men did not wear any pants to work in the rice fields. For entertainment as they labored, peasant women sometimes ganged up to strip a particular man, while both men and women broke the monotony of work by telling “dirty jokes about sex all the time”—practices that initially horrified sent-down youth (Jin Yihong, interview, 1996). One young man, sent to the countryside in northern Jiangsu as an adolescent, recalls peasant women visiting his room at night and offering to have sex with him. At first, having had no previous sex education, he was perplexed by their invitations, but several months of listening to peasants banter and joke about sex helped him gradually understand.

For a number of urban youth, years spent in the countryside provided their first, albeit informal and haphazard, sex education. One account describes several adolescent girls sent to the countryside who one day saw two donkeys rolling around with each other and making a
A lot of noise. Knowing nothing about mating, they were perplexed and immediately asked some older peasants to explain this seemingly strange behavior. The peasants all laughed but said nothing. The girls demanded an answer, until finally one elderly peasant man said, “They have fulfilled their marriage!” The peasants could not stop laughing, until at last the girls figured it out (Wu Jiaoping, 1999: 278-79).

A final source of sexual knowledge for sent-down youth was literary. Although no official publications discussed romance or sex, a prolific and widely circulated underground literature developed during the Cultural Revolution, consisting largely of hand-copied volumes. These stories, literally copied by hand into notebooks and surreptitiously passed among friends, were extremely popular among sent-down youth—the most popular being stories that focused precisely on themes of love, romance, and sex. Some hand-copied volumes were actually versions of pre-1949 publications that had been banned after Liberation. Tali de nüren (Woman in the tower), for example, had been written in 1944 and was then banned in the early 1950s. During the Cultural Revolution, groups of sent-down youth, fearful that the book would become “extinct,” copied it into notebooks for circulation. One young woman reportedly organized twelve young people in her fiancée’s attic and divided them into groups to copy the book (Wumingshi, 1984: 1-6; Yang Jian, 1993: 334).

More often, hand-copied volumes contained stories written during the Cultural Revolution. One of the most widely read, “A Maiden’s Heart” (“Shaonü de xin”), chronicled the love between a sixteen-year-old beauty and her strong, handsome cousin, describing their rather wild sexual frolicking in vivid detail. After many scenes in which the young woman is overwhelmed by the “pure pleasure of the act,” the story finally ends with a homily about the bliss and harmlessness of premarital sex (hardly a theme one associates with Cultural Revolution literature). In another hand-copied story, “Sister Xia” (“A Xia”), a young woman, upon learning that her boyfriend has been unfaithful, decides that women, too, should be entitled to multiple lovers. She proceeds to have an affair with the Party secretary of her factory, who she learns has been sleeping with all the attractive women workers. She then harbors the fantasy of becoming a Party secretary herself, so that she could seduce any of the handsome male workers she desired.
(Link, 1989: 17-36). According to some reports, a sizable number of sent-down youth, after reading these and other hand-copied stories, “made mistakes” (i.e., had sex). One tells the story of a young woman who, after reading “A Maiden’s Heart,” had sex with a boy but was horribly disappointed that it was nowhere near as pleasurable as the story had portrayed (Yang Jian, 1993: 326-36).

For many sent-down youth, life in the countryside provided not only their first knowledge of sex but opportunities for their first sexual experiences as well. Undoubtedly, there were instances or locales, such as those cited above, where sent-down youth felt that any expression of romantic or sexual interest between unmarried men and women was prohibited, repressed, or likely to be punished. But there were also many instances in which life on a production brigade or state farm—where tens to hundreds of young men and women in their teens or early twenties lived collectively, away from their families—provided unusually favorable conditions for sexual encounters outside the context of marriage. And even when cadres tried to prohibit romantic relationships, they were not always successful. At one state farm, where the leader was described as a “feudal bureaucrat” who spied on boys and girls gathered near the bridge at night, sent-down youth invented a secret path, referred to as the “Ho Chi-minh trail,” where romantic couples could secure privacy (Zhang Dening and Yue Jianyi, 1998c: 90).

For educated youth, life in the countryside was punctuated by flirtation and sex. From the perspective of young men, negotiations about sex and romance were crucial to enlivening an otherwise dreary existence. A young man assigned to a production brigade of Xilong Commune in Sichuan recalled that educated youth commonly sat on a table near the commune store, where they smoked and discussed women: they cracked jokes about peasant women and evaluated the features of all the girls on the production brigade, assigning each points for her respective merits (He Shiping, 1992: 4-5). Youth assigned to the army corps could not always count on the presence of women. As the authors of a history of the People’s Liberation Army—sponsored “production and construction corps” note, “Life was dull, work was arduous, and people needed some spiritual spark. ‘When boys and girls are together, working is like lifting a feather’ (nannü dapei, hanhui bulei).’” They point out that the leader of a Heilongjiang regiment
reported that the sent-down youth complained about the absence of a female brigade. “If a team of women could be transferred here,” the young men pleaded, “we could tolerate being here the rest of our lives.” The sympathetic leader subsequently arranged to have a group of female educated youth sent to this single-sex brigade. “The impact of the girls was immeasurable,” the leader reported. “From the time the girls arrived there was much less gambling and drinking, less swearing; more careful dressing; more time spent crafting love letters. Guys who had hardly bathed now began to use fragrant soap; guys who never read now began studying vocabulary from books” (Shi Weimin and He Gang, 1996: 270-71).

Stories by girls sent to the countryside correspond to this portrait of male youth who made a sport of seeking female companionship. A girl born in Beijing and sent to the countryside at the age of fifteen, for example, described how as soon as she arrived, boys who had been sent the previous year “began to chase after me.”

Those older school-leavers were good to me. When I went home to see my family, they helped me buy the ticket, got a seat for me, carried my luggage. . . . They did everything. Why? Just so that they could see a bit more of me. They liked to get a seat beside me so that when the bus went over a bump they’d be able to lean against me.

Vying for her attention, these “older boys” often brought her chicken or dog meat that they stole from peasants and then cooked. Eventually, she became attached to one boy in particular. He had broken his foot while their team was trying to “remould the commune’s land” as part of the movement to “learn from Dazhai.” Feeling sorry for him, she would take him food and chat with him.

I can’t say how it happened. I don’t know how he had the face. But anyway, he asked, and I gave myself. I was sixteen years old. I used to think that it would be something very important—when it happened, I found that it was nothing at all. I was a girl beforehand, and when I got up I was still the same girl. I hadn’t turned into a grown woman. But all the feeling I’d had for that boy disappeared after that. There was nothing left. I waited anxiously for my period because I was afraid I might be pregnant. I didn’t feel very pleased with myself but I didn’t feel guilty either. I hadn’t really liked the boy, it was just curiosity and confusion. I
couldn't help it. I never thought that we would get married. [Zhang Xinxin and Sang Yue, 1987: 317-18]

Some women not only had their first sexual encounters but also cohabited with young men, a practice that would have been unimaginable in the cities and that apparently was often ignored by cadres in the countryside. A daughter of Beijing intellectuals tells the story of falling in love with a sent-down youth from Shanghai during the time she was in the countryside. He was relatively weak, and as team leader, she often helped him. Furthermore, he reminded her of her younger brother. During the time he returned to Shanghai for a one-month “family visit,” she realized she was in love with him. When he returned, she rushed to embrace him and then “gave him her virginity.” From then on, they lived together. “Up to today, I have no regrets about this,” she said.

She became pregnant, and despite her efforts to induce a miscarriage, the baby was born. “Luckily,” she recalled, “it was relatively common for unmarried people on the state farm to give birth. We both endured disciplinary action within the team, but then our relationship was more open.” Sent-down youth who cohabited or had babies preferred not to marry, she explained, for once married they sacrificed the possibility of ever returning to the city. When she was given the opportunity to return, three years after her daughter’s birth, she was issued a permit only for herself. She then realized the impossibility of the situation: “With no residence permit, my daughter would have no legal status. If I took her back to Beijing she would never have a legitimate life.” She, like many others in her situation, gave her daughter to a local peasant family to raise. “I went back to Beijing alone. As soon as I got off the train I burst out crying and couldn’t stop. But I knew, rationally, that I had to sever myself from that phase of my life and begin anew” (Deng Xian, 1992: 106).

Like this woman, others emphasized how common it was for unmarried male and female sent-down youth to live together and how common it was as well for unmarried women to become pregnant. Another woman described sleeping with a fellow sent-down youth and then living with him without getting married. “That’s what lots of people did,” she recalled. She, too, became pregnant and gave birth to a girl. When her daughter was 2½, the woman had the opportunity to
return to Chongqing. Realizing that her daughter would have no legal status in the city, she decided to give her to a local family, who actually paid 200 yuan as a “birth fee” for the young girl (Deng, 1992: 106-7). Wang Xiaoling, raised in Nanjing, recalls that when she was in Inner Mongolia, an educated youth had an affair with a local man and bore a baby girl. Although the young woman soon returned to Nanjing, the man’s family happily kept the baby, for to them it was very glorious to have a “Nanjing baby” (Wang Xiaoling, interview with author, Nanjing, 1997).

Scattered statistics suggest the frequency of cohabitation and pregnancy: a 1973 investigation of the Yunnan Production and Construction Army Corps showed that in one regiment alone, there were 114 cases of “male-female relations,” 26 pregnancies, 18 abortions, and 20 babies born. In another regiment, 162 young women had gone to the hospital for abortions in just one six-month period. In a third regiment, 32 babies were born (Shi Weimin and He Gang, 1996: 278).

The frequency with which unmarried sent-down youth cohabited and became pregnant is also attested to by the number of babies abandoned when, in the mid-1970s, massive numbers of educated youth were allowed to return to the cities. In one case, a young typist recalled cleaning up the waiting room of the Kunming train station after the departure of a large group of sent-down youth and discovering a package under a row of benches. Puzzled that it had no name or address, she was about to put it in the lost and found. When she picked it up, she felt the contents move, opened it, and found a baby inside. Along with 100 yuan was a note saying, “Kindhearted person: if you will keep this child we will be forever grateful to you. Signed, a pair of bitter-fated sent-down youth” (Deng, 1992: 107-8). According to one report, in Kunming alone, in 1979 (when educated youth were still returning to cities), close to a hundred abandoned babies were sent to orphanages (Deng, 1992: 108).6

It would be misleading to suggest that sex was always voluntary or desirable for sent-down youth. The prevalence of rape of sent-down youth, an issue that figures prominently in post-Mao Chinese writing about the Cultural Revolution, is beyond the scope of this article. But it is important to highlight the contexts in which young women sent to the countryside experienced sex not as an opportunity for pleasure but
rather as something forced on them, or as one of the few commodities they had to exchange for privilege.

Post-Mao era accounts of the Cultural Revolution dwell on the rape of educated youth in part as a metaphor—both literary and political—for the abuse of power by local officials during the Cultural Revolution. They are, therefore, highly melodramatic in their portrayal of women as the pathetic victims of “perverts” or “sex wolves” who subverted the rustification movement. From one such report, we learn that a 30-year-old cadre from Guizhou raped, sexually harassed, and behaved obscenely toward some 115 educated youth at a state farm in Yunnan; moreover, there were some 365 cases of rape reported at an army unit in Heilongjiang and 247 cases at a unit in Inner Mongolia. Male sent-down youth were vulnerable as well, as the same report cites the commander of a troop in Yunnan, “a husband and father, who used deceit, seduction, and force to sodomize more than twenty male educated youth” (Deng, 1992: 44). Another self-consciously melodramatic account emphasizes the extent to which young women “used their flesh in exchange for permission to leave the countryside.”

A female sent-down youth apathetically opened the door of the production team leader’s door. One step at a time she slowly enters the room. There is food on the table, and the paperwork bearing permission for her to return to the city for work. The girl stands there, her eyes spiritless, like a lamb sent to the sacrificial altar. The production team leader doesn’t even close the door or turn off the flickering oil lamp. He just laughs coarsely, rips open the girl’s shirt, and shamelessly fondles her barely developed breasts. Then he throws her on his sweat-covered wooden bed. The girl doesn’t cry out, for fear that someone will hear. As soon as she gets up from the bed and puts on her clothes, the team leader affixes his red seal on the papers. [Ba Shan, 1992: 58]

So common was it for women to trade sex for privilege that young women who returned to the city either to work or attend university or who had obtained Party membership were assumed to have lost their virginity in the countryside. It became particularly difficult for these women to marry. In one case, a woman worker in Shanghai was beaten by her husband and thrown out of the house on their wedding night when he discovered she had lost her virginity to the Party secretary of her former production team (Ba Shan, 1992: 58).
Although these exposés are part of a broader post-Mao condemnation of the Cultural Revolution, one in which the rape of women was deployed to symbolize the suffering of all Chinese people, the sexual abuse of women cannot be reduced to a retrospective allegorical phenomenon: many accounts of rape and sexual abuse were written during the Cultural Revolution itself. For example, a 1973 diary entry of a young woman from Beijing sent to Inner Mongolia described her initial horror at the extent to which the nomads with whom she lived engaged in illicit sexual relations. “But now I have seen that some higher cadres are just as awful,” she wrote. “Some even surpass them in evil, but are not as public about it. Furthermore, people underneath don’t dare criticize them.” She then described the head of an army unit in Inner Mongolia who had sex with more than 30 female sent-down youth (Shi Weimin, 1996a: 218). Likewise, in a letter to a friend written in March 1972, a young woman describes girls who were the victims of cadres and political instructors who sexually abused them and warns her friend to “be careful” (Shi Weimin, 1996b: 159).

In some cases, it was state officials who reported on sexual abuse of women in the countryside. The Party secretary of one company of the Inner Mongolian Production and Construction Army Corps wrote a letter complaining that “there are some cadres who use their power to rape and damage female youth. In our regiment, 7 percent of the cadres have done this.” His letter was distributed at a 1973 meeting to discuss problems of sent-down youth in Inner Mongolia, where abuse of female sent-down youth had become a major concern of parents (Shi Weimin, 1996b: 321-22).

During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government itself was worried about the sexual abuse of sent-down youth and devoted many reports and meetings to investigating this problem (Liu Xiaomeng, 1996). In May 1970, a national meeting to discuss the situation of sent-down youth produced “Document 26,” the first policy concerning sent-down youth promulgated by the Central Committee since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Document 26, among other things, stated that “anyone who is guilty of raping female sent-down youth shall be punished according to the law. Those who force female sent-down youth into marriage shall be subject to criticism and struggle” (Liu Xiaomeng, 1998: 263-64).
The regulation was immediately publicized on the front page of the *People’s Daily*, and government organizations at every level were instructed to carefully look into the problems in their locale as well as to organize meetings to determine punishments (Liu Xiaomeng, 1998: 165). In Jilin province, for example, between June 1970 and June 1972, 2,080 cases of harm against sent-down youth were revealed. Of them, 1,839 were “managed”; 22 people were executed, and 508 were sentenced to jail. The vast majority of these cases involved the rape of female sent-down youth, and most of the offenders turned out to be low-level rural cadres. These “local lords,” the report stated, believed that the “maidens from the city were their personal playthings” (Liu Xiaomeng, 1998: 267). A 1973 report on sent-down youth estimated that since 1969, there had been some 16,000 cases of rape. The report presented detailed accounts of several cases, including a discussion of the problems encountered in investigating the incidents and collecting evidence (Liu Xiaomeng, 1998: 304).

To be sure, Document 26 had some unintended consequences. Any sexual encounter between a man and woman might be interpreted as rape. For example, one woman who had had an affair with a local man became pregnant and, just at the time that Document 26 was promulgated, was discovered returning to Beijing to have an abortion. The man with whom she had had sex was arrested and put in jail (Zhang Dening and Yue Jianyi, 1998b: 100). Another sent-down youth recalled that “when the Central Committee’s Document Number 26 was issued, any local person who had a relationship with a sent-down youth was arrested and sentenced to 10 to 15 years in jail” (Zhang Dening and Yue Jianyi, 1998c: 125-27).

It would also be misleading to assume that sex was invariably heterosexual. Little has been written about homosexual relationships during the Cultural Revolution, with few exceptions—Anchee Min’s (1994) fictional autobiography *Red Azalea* being the most glaring. In this account, Anchee, sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, describes the relationship developed with her superior, Commander Yan, with whom she casually began to share a bunk at night.

She covered us with blankets. We breathed each other’s breath. She pulled my hands to touch her chest. She caressed me, trembling herself. She murmured that she wished she could tell me how happy I made her...
feel. . . . I moved my hands slowly through her shirt. She pulled my fingers to unbutton her bra. . . . The moment I touched her breasts, I felt a sweet shock. My heart beat disorderly. A wild horse broke off its reins. She whispered something I could not hear. She was melting snow. I did not know what role I was playing anymore: her imagined man or myself. I was drawn to her. . . . I was spellbound by desire. I wanted to be touched. Her hands skimmed my breasts. My mind maddened. . . . I begged her to hold me tight. . . . As I hesitated, she caught my lips and kissed me fervently. [Min, 1994: 128-29]

One could argue that the sensational nature of this account was in part intended to satisfy the imagined interests of an English-speaking audience, to celebrate a site of resistance to Maoist dogma, or, as Wendy Larson suggests (1999), to sexualize the spirit of the revolution. And yet, a self-identified Chinese lesbian passionately defended the book to me, applauding it as the single account suggestive of her own sexual experiences with women during the time she spent in the Hebei countryside. One of the women interviewed by the sociologist Li Yinhe about her sexual history explained that her first knowledge of lesbians came from her time on a state farm, where two female sent-down youth were in love. “One was very delicate, like a girl,” she recalled, “and the other very coarse, like a boy.” Other girls gossiped about how “those two have mated,” how they insisted on sleeping together under a single mosquito net, and how they would watch each other bathe (Li Yinhe, 1998: 218). And in his account of being part of a group of 100 male youth sent to the Sino-Soviet border in 1972, a young man described how because they were not allowed to leave until they were age 30, some had homosexual relationships (others, he said, committed suicide) (Zhang Dening and Yue Jianyi, 1998b: 7).

In other instances, the sexual nature of an encounter between two women (or men) may not have been clear. For instance, one friend recalled that when she was in the Anhui countryside, it was common for teenage girls from the city to sleep in couples, a practice criticized by their cadres (presumably because it was “abnormal”) but one that they defended by arguing that they had left the protection and comfort of their families and therefore needed to comfort each other. Likewise, in her memoir of the Cultural Revolution, Nanchu describes an instance when, on the Heilongjiang Military Farm, another girl offered to share her warmer quilts.
At night Su came and slipped under the small mountain of covers. Inside, she took off her undershirt and helped me to take off mine. It was warmer wearing no clothes when sleeping, she said. Our faces were so close that we felt each other’s breath. In her warm eyes, I saw compassion and friendship. I put my hand on her bosom and felt her heart jumping. . . . I felt a strong urge to hug her tightly, I so much wanted physical intimacy with another human being. . . . I was surprised to find that my feelings, like a clear spring running smoothly in the deep valley, came directly from the very bottom of my heart. It must be that the party’s propaganda machines had forgotten this plot of primitive land. It was like a wildflower in secret bloom, pure and exotically fragrant, unpolluted. The sense of purity generated by physical closeness with another young girl was bewitching. [Nanchu, 2001: 148-49]

We must not assume that the sexual encounters of sent-down youth were necessarily or only heterosexual.

For sent-down youth, then, years in the countryside included a range of sexual experiences. Some had brief sexual encounters with a boyfriend or girlfriend, while others actually cohabited for long periods of time. Some, knowing nothing about sex, were lured into satisfying the sexual desires of local cadres; some were forced to have sex with cadres; and some either offered sex or consented to it so that a local official would approve their request to return to the city to work or attend university. Some experimented with same-sex sex. To be sure, in some cases, sent-down youth were criticized or punished for pursuing romantic or sexual relations, but the story of such repression is only one part of the broader history of Cultural Revolution sexuality.

SEX AND THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

While studies of the Cultural Revolution tend to treat sent-down youth as representing the experience of all young people, a discussion of the specific contexts in which sexuality was part of Cultural Revolution life must also consider the experience of China’s urban population. This included factory workers, students belonging to the generation just younger than those sent to the countryside, and individuals permitted to remain home because their siblings had already gone to the countryside. We know far less about the sexual experiences of
urban dwellers, in large part because they have been far less prolific than sent-down youth in the production of memoirs.

From some of the above accounts of individuals criticized for “inappropriate” sexual liaisons, we know that it was not altogether uncommon for urban workers to engage in nonmarital affairs and that sex became a central issue in political discussions. Ken Ling, in his memoir of life as a Red Guard, describes his experiences at the Amoy Textile Mill in Fujian. Women workers there, he complained, “had become so friendly with the troops stationed in the Amoy area that the factory had become a sort of camp prostitution house.” He was so angry that he devoted his seventeenth birthday to an attempt to rectify this situation. He immediately ordered the construction of a barbed-wire fence to block soldiers’ access to the girls. “The flames of [his] anger shot ten thousand feet high” when he discovered that the male students stationed at the factory had decorated their dorm room walls with photographs of the young girl workers. “When one student offered to introduce a few girls to me,” he remembers, “I pulled off my glove and slapped him. I detested most seducing girl workers.” He then called an assembly of the girl workers, at which he admonished them to “maintain the honor and reputation of their country,” to “remain pure” (Ling, 1972: 268-71).

Scattered surveys of factory workers conducted during the Cultural Revolution confirm these anecdotes. For example, a survey of students assigned to factories in Shanghai in the early 1970s reports that “random male-female relationships” (along with raping and humiliating women, living a “degenerate” lifestyle, and picking pockets and stealing) was one of the major problems (“Shanghai laodong ju baogao,” 1975).

Yet none of this seems specific to the Cultural Revolution; such problems were reported throughout the early 1960s. For example, a 1964 report from the Shanghai Textile Bureau complained that at the Number 15 Cotton Mill, workers frequently talked about “obscene matters,” especially before and after meetings; in the bathroom, showers, and dressing rooms; and during the night shift. “Most of what they talk about are dirty things between men and women. . . . Some workers not only talk about these things, but perform them as well. Once, during the middle shift, several women workers suddenly pulled the pants off of a male worker.” One woman worker was described as having
had affairs with at least five men; another woman had had so many affairs that when she had a baby, even she did not know who was the father; the union head allegedly had more than 100 pornographic books at home, which he would lend to neighbors and to women workers in the factory, and had raped the female servant next door ("Shanghai fangzhi ju baogao," 1964). Another 1964 report described a 23-year-old woman worker guilty of "improper" relations with at least eleven men (Shanghai zhijin ju tuanwei, 1964b). Yet another lamented the number of older workers who were already married and had children, yet were pursuing extramarital affairs with women at work (Shanghai zhijin ju tuanwei, 1964a).

More specific to the context of the Cultural Revolution was the experience of urban youth who remained in the city, often with no parental supervision. Bai Ge, author of a Chinese study of "ordinary people's" lives during the Cultural Revolution, stresses the importance of recalling those who were middle school students at that time. "To speak of the average," he writes,

they were not "good children." In fact, one could actually describe them as "little hoodlums" (xiao liumang), or "youth who lost their footing." Early love was the rule among them, and because of it they would steal, destroy classrooms, and wreck public property. In class they would send notes to female classmates and then intercept them on the way home. [Bai Ge, 1993: 280]

A young girl who entered middle school in 1969 recalls the extent to which relationships between male and female classmates shattered the asexual comradely stereotype. "Obviously by the time we were at middle school, we weren't completely innocent about sex," she recalls,

but we didn't know all that much either. I was aware that several of the boys fancied me. I couldn't help knowing. They were always trying to please me and showing off. How did they do this? Well, for example, whenever I had a period, I was sure to find a big bar of chocolate in my desk. You see, when I had a period I didn't do morning exercises. . . .
That meant the boys could work it out. I still don’t know who used to leave it for me. [Zhang Xinxin and Sang Yue, 1987: 316]

Another woman remembers that among young people remaining in the city, “making boyfriends” was a major occupation—so much so that when she ran into one of her childhood friends years later, the friend asked her how many boys she had slept with during that time (i.e., the Cultural Revolution) (Zhang Xinxin and Sang Yue, 1987: 65).

In addition to middle school students, urban neighborhoods were populated by numerous street gangs that emerged during the Cultural Revolution. They are frequently referred to in memoirs, which describe the pursuit of love and sexual exploits—along with petty theft—as the major occupation of gang members. For example, Liang Heng, author of Son of the Revolution, recalls his own participation in a neighborhood street gang in Changsha in 1968, a time when his parents had been sent to cadre schools, his sisters were gone, and he was home alone (Liang and Shapiro 1983). He describes the variety of gangs that proliferated during those years, including pre-Liberation professional gangs that reappeared, newly formed gangs of young people who had no school obligations, and gangs (such as the one he joined) composed of children of high-ranking officials. After swearing blood brotherhood before a picture of Chairman Mao, he and fellow members spent their days learning to fight, drinking, smoking cigarettes, and pursuing girlfriends. Liang describes his friend in the gang, Cheng Guang, whom he helped craft letters to a girlfriend. When a rival gang knocked Cheng’s girlfriend off her bike and insulted her, Cheng and Liang’s gang instantly prepared to fight in revenge (Liang and Shapiro, 1983: 148-53).

Jung Chang (1991), in her memoir Wild Swans, recalls her twelve-year-old brother’s participation in a Chengdu street gang during the early years of the Cultural Revolution.

Xiao-hei’s brothers [i.e., members of his gang] were also obsessed with chasing girls. The twelve- and thirteen-year-olds like Xiao-hei were often too shy to go after girls themselves, so they became the older boys’ messengers, delivering their error-riddled love letters. Xiao-hei would knock on a door, praying that it would be opened by the girl herself and not her father or brother, who was sure to slap him across the
head. Sometimes, when fear got the upper hand, he would slip the letter under the door.

When a girl rejected a proposal, Xiao-hei and other younger boys became the tool of revenge of the spurned lover, making noises outside her house and firing catapults at her window. When the girl came out, they spat at her, swore at her, shook their middle fingers at her, and yelled dirty words which they did not fully understand. Abusive Chinese terms for women are rather graphic: “shuttle” (for the shape of her genitals), “horse saddle” (for the image of being mounted), “overspilling oil lamp” (“too frequent” discharge), and “worn-out shoes” (much “used”). [Chang, 1991: 371]

Some girls, according to Chang, “tried to find protectors in the gangs, and the more capable ones became helmswomen themselves. The girls who became involved in this male world sported their own picturesque sobriquets, such as ‘Dewy Black Peony,’ ‘Broken Wine Vessel,’ and ‘Snake Enchantress’ ” (Chang, 1991: 371).

Neighborhood gangs preoccupied with pursuing women were so common that one provincial government issued a report complaining about youth gangs harassing young women, attributing the problem to the “influence of bourgeois ideology” (Schoenhals, 1996: 178).

As the above account demonstrates, there are two almost opposite stories of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution: one, more frequently told in the past, emphasizes the punishment of people who transgressed sexual norms, engaged in premarital sex, or had extramarital affairs; a second story emphasizes the extent to which people did precisely those things. The former highlights the silencing of public discussion of sexuality; the latter stresses widespread popular engagement with issues of sexuality. My point is not to resolve these two contradictory versions by arguing that one is more “true,” “more accurate,” or “more typical.” The contradictory images can be partly attributed to differences in when particular accounts were written (e.g., those produced in the late 1970s—a time of widespread condemnation of the Cultural Revolution—are far more likely to emphasize sexual repression than those that appeared in the 1990s, when public discussion of sexuality had become much more prominent). They might also be partly explained by institutional context, as state farms, production and construction corps, army units, and village
production brigades had vastly different “sexual climates” (village production brigades being far less subject to control than were state farms and the military production and construction corps). It is also possible that the two “stories” are intimately related: perhaps it was precisely because of the uncontrolled opportunities for sexual liaisons that local officials attempted to assert control. Likewise, perhaps it was because some Red Guards were sexually exploiting women that others felt compelled to make sexual purity one of their primary missions.8

The simultaneous proliferation of sexual activity and regulation are both part of what now can be seen as the continual negotiation of sex and sexuality at the core of the Cultural Revolution. One could argue that the very act of conducting a so-called criticism session against two people for romantic or sexual liaisons in itself constituted a discussion of sexuality.

It is important to point out that popular experiences of sex and sexuality during the Cultural Revolution were deeply gendered. Both men and women were victims of political scapegoating, and both were agents of sexual pursuits. Yet women had particular vulnerabilities as objects of sexual scorn (being labeled “broken shoe,” for example), as victims of sexual attack, and as supplicants expected to trade sexual favors for basic needs. They also faced the particular risks associated with pregnancies resulting from sex (desired or undesired) outside of marriage. In this context, sexual experiences of the Cultural Revolution both reflected and perpetuated women’s subordination to men (despite the Cultural Revolution state propaganda proclaiming that “men and women are the same”).

Finally, we should return to the broad assumption, alluded to at the beginning of this article, that the post-Mao era represents a total, complete reversal of Cultural Revolution policies and social practices (sometimes with the implication that “there was death, and now life”). One of the important findings of research on sexuality is that phenomena usually assumed to be particular to the economic reforms (or to pre-1949 China)—premarital sex, extramarital affairs, pornographic literature, rape, prostitution, abandoned babies—in fact existed during the Cultural Revolution as well, even while their causes and specific forms were often profoundly different. Ultimately, it is those specificities that are most crucial.
NOTES

1. Films of the 1990s also emphatically inserted sexuality into reflections on the Cultural Revolution. See, for example, Jiang Wen’s *Those Brilliant Days* (Yangguang canlan de rizi) and Wang Xiaoyan’s *The Monkey Kid*.

2. Wendy Larson extends this analysis by suggesting that the emphasis on sex featured in recent accounts of the Cultural Revolution, particularly ones written for an English-speaking audience, is in part an effort to modernize China by rewriting the Cultural Revolution as an erotic experience (Larson, 1999).

3. Only in 1974 did the booklet *Funü baojian zhishi* (Knowledge about women’s health) appear—and even it devoted less than a single page to women’s “sexual life,” included in the section on family planning. It described sex as a “natural biological desire” among physically mature adults, an activity appropriate to married couples. The brief presentation focused on the circumstances under which sex should be avoided (when a woman was menstruating or when either person had consumed alcohol or was ill) and how it should conform to a plan (“once or twice a week is normal”) (Shanghai diyi yixueyuan, 1974: 9). This book appears to be a revision of a 1970 publication.

4. Harriet Evans points out that when the story, “The White-Haired Girl,” was revised to be performed as a model opera, both the romance between Xi’er and Daichun and the rape of Xi’er by the landlord disappeared (Evans, 1997: 7). For a highly nuanced analysis of the erasure of sexuality from “The White-Haired Girl,” see Meng (1993).

5. I am grateful to Carolyn Wakeman for this observation.

6. The commonness of cohabitation is also attested to by the frequency with which sent-down youth sought abortions. Liu Liliang, sent to Lishui in Jiangsu, recalls that many knew of educated youth who, having become pregnant, went to Nanjing for abortions or who tried to find personal connections that would enable them to get an abortion at a nearby hospital. Otherwise, they would use Chinese medicine, but that, she believed, was dangerous and risky (Liu Liliang, interview with author, Nanjing, 1997).

7. This regulation reinforced a pre–Cultural Revolution (1964) Central Committee document commanding local cadres to attend to the widespread problem of female sent-down youth being forced or tricked into marriage and sexually abused (Ding Yizhuang, 1998: 321).

8. It is worth noting, too, the possible relationship between the phenomena described here and the extensive sexual “adventures” of Mao Zedong, as described in *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (Li Zhisui, 1994).

REFERENCES


Shanghai diyi yixueyuan fushu zhongshan yiyuan nüchanke [Gynecological Department of the Zhongshan Hospital attached to the Shanghai Number One Medical College] (1974) Funü baojian zhishi (Knowledge of female health). Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe.


Shanghai zhijin ju tuanwei [Youth League of the Shanghai Metallurgy Bureau] (1964a) “Guanyu dangqian qingnianzhong yixie buliang zhixiang de fanying” (Reflections on current bad tendencies among contemporary youth). Shanghai Municipal Archives, #B112-4-105. 22 May.

——— (1964b) “Ta de yinluo” (Her degradation). Shanghai Municipal Archives, #B112-4-105. 18 Sept.


Emily Honig is a professor of women’s studies and history at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is the author of Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949 and Creating Chinese Ethnicity: Subei People in Shanghai, 1800-1949. She is currently working on a study of gender and sexuality during the Cultural Revolution.