

Dr Sex steams up Chinese screens.

By *Lijia* McLeod,
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IN THE small hours of Sunday morning, Dr Ma Xiaonian is broadcasting sex advice across Beijing's flickering television screens. "Fear of sexual intercourse on one's wedding night can be easily overcome," counsels Ma, "if people understand human anatomy."

Clad in an unfashionable Mao jacket, the earnest Ma appears an unlikely successor to Ruth Westheimer, the diminutive sex adviser who took America by storm. But Ma's weekly show *Life, Birth, Living* is topping the ratings, despite being broadcast at 1.40am after moves by the authorities to push it further into the early hours.

China is undergoing a sexual revolution and Ma is there to guide the curious millions through it, holding forth about contraceptives and venereal disease and giving graphic descriptions of sexual acts. "Young girls fear pregnancy after being kissed by their boyfriends," said Ma, who was inspired to start the programme after a year as a visiting scholar in Britain.

"One couple came to my clinic seeking fertility treatment, but the wife turned out to be a virgin. They thought sleeping next to each other was all they needed to do."

Ironically, the strict one-child policy that was introduced in 1979 lifted the mysterious veil that had hung over sex in China. "It was embarrassing for family planning officials to ask about required condom size or frequency of sexual intercourse," said Pan Suiming from the People's University, one of China's leading sexologists. "But once the ice is broken, everything is easier."

Family planning also forced people to admit that sex could be solely for pleasure, especially after couples had met the one-child quota.

The new mood is in evidence at Adam and Eve, Beijing's first sex shop. White-coated staff lend a discreet medical air to displays of condoms, pills and bedroom toys such as love sprays to avert flagging, and wind-up dragon-headed vibrators.

China's sexual revolution has also borne bitter fruit, however. Although only about 10,000 HIV cases have been reported, the true figure is believed to be closer to 250,000. Prostitution, wiped out in the 1950s after the communist takeover, has resurged to become China's fastest-growing industry. But even liberalism has its limits. In 1994 when Ma produced a videotape on intercourse skills for newlyweds, the government censored the passionate shots of two westerners, replacing them with wooden stick figures in the missionary position.

Homosexuality also remains taboo. Chinese law still does not admit the existence of homosexuality and gays are treated like mentally ill degenerates if caught. And, for all his boldness, it is a subject that even Ma is reluctant to broach.

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