
China's sexual great leap forward

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'Scored yet?' That was the first question from several young adventurers crowded around a table at a bar in Lhasa, Tibet's colourful capital city. Between sips of yak butter tea, they trade jokes and swap tales about their latest sexual encounters. These twentysomethings on leave from city jobs could have been from anywhere in the world looking for spiritual enlightenment, romantic encounters, or both. But they were all from China, where such conversations and attitudes would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

'Why not?' said Sandy Li, a 28-year-old fashion designer from Beijing, lighting a cigarette from a candle and confessing that she took the trip to meet someone with no strings attached. 'Just for a bit of harmless fun. We don't have to behave ourselves here; we don't know anyone. Finding a proper boyfriend is a lot harder than finding a man you can go to bed with.'

Li's attitude is typical of many of the young urban middle class, whose slogan could well be *carpe diem* or rather *carpe noctem*. Apart from Lhasa, another popular pick-up place is Lijiang, in Yunnan province.

Of course, people don't have to travel to far-flung places for casual sex. Your own flat would do. Less than 20 years ago, singles had little choice but to stay with their parents. Now cohabitation, like sex before marriage, is commonplace. Before a split six months ago, Li lived with her photographer boyfriend for three years but had never introduced him to her family. 'For my parents, bringing a boyfriend home means impending marriage. I am still young. I'd like to make a splash in my career first, and explore what life can offer.'

'The singles are not talking about marriages, and lovers aren't talking about the future,' goes one popular saying among colleague students. And a joke describes the pattern of 'one-week' relationships: 'On Monday, you send out vibes.

Tuesday, you express true desire. Wednesday, you hold hands. Thursday, you sleep together. Friday, a feeling of distance sets in. Saturday, you want out. On Sunday, you start searching again.'

Youngsters' unwillingness to settle down is causing great anxiety to the older generation. In Zhongshan Park, a stone's throw from the Forbidden City in Beijing, dozens of parents, armed with photographs and information about their children, gather and search for potential partners. Some even go 'eight-minute speed dating' on behalf of children who themselves will be chatting and flirting on the internet.

'Today's young people are probably more sexually charged than their parents' generation,' said Susie Huang, author of *All About Susie*, a collection of essays about the love and sex lives of today's burgeoning bourgeois. It's China's literary version of *Sex and the City*. 'To start with, it's now safe to be naughty,' she said. 'Before you might have landed in a labour camp for conducting an extramarital affair.'

But is it safe? A more tolerant social environment has led many to experiment in uncharted waters, with mixed results. Divorce rates are climbing steadily in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai, where one in three marriages ends in failure. Syphilis has skyrocketed, with a 25-fold increase since the early 1990s. And extra-marital affairs are now common.

Maybe Muzi Mei, a former sex blogger, is an extreme example of today's restless and hedonistic crowds. Her site used to attract 10 million visitors a day before it was shut down by the government in 2003. Officials objected to her online diary, which explicitly detailed her exploits. She was forced to resign from her Guangzhou-based magazine as a sex columnist and now works for a website, but still continues her man-hopping ways.

'My sex life is very interesting. Some may find it educational as well as entertaining,' said the 29-year-old journalist over a bowl of steaming soup in a Beijing restaurant. 'I sleep with lots of men because I don't want to be imprisoned in one relationship,' she declared to the giggles of eavesdropping waitresses. 'I am a free spirit.'

She is also a romantic. In her magazine she offered tips on creating the right environment on a date and suggested playing your favourite music while making love. There are books available too, offering step-by-step guides to dating, from basic advice such as not spitting to sending flowers on Valentine's Day. Kissing, something the Chinese people once saw only in foreign films, is now part of the landscape.

A recent cover story in the national *News Weekly* concluded that 'China's love life is in a stage of revelry, featuring the emphasis on sex rather than love; on physical pleasure rather than spiritual fulfilment'.

Susie Huang thinks she knows why: 'It is a globalisation of some sort: China is becoming more westernised. And, in some ways, more human.'