

ANT 265: Contemporary Chinese Society and Culture
Fall 2008 M,W,F 10:30-11:20 am, Chambers 3084

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Lecture Notes, 3 December 2008

Sex and the Return of the Individual?



- Individualism is not natural; in American/Western culture, we have elevated individuals (individual rights, etc.) to the highest position; in China, and in other cultures, the individual is not taken as the starting point (even Pope Benedict – issue of individual rights vs. individual responsibilities)
 - Sublimation of the individual to the state; the mobilization of people to create socialism involved essentially recasting Chinese subjectivity away from one defined by family, etc., to one defined in relation to the state
 - One of the greatest impacts of postsocialist reforms has been the rise of individualism – through consumerism, penetration of Western ideologies, reaction to socialist period
- Farquhar’s main point in this section on sexuality: “...the reform era works that turned toward the individual soul and the private bedroom are not a return to natural human preferences after decades of collectivist distortions. Rather, I suggest that private love and sex were constructions, laboriously formed as a reaction against the regime that had made such a success of collective love” (Farquhar 2002: 171).
 - In the chapter “Writing the Self,” (unassigned, below is summary) Farquhar is essentially examining how biographies (hagiographies?) have returned with a new appeal to people in China; gone is the selfless sacrificing individual (see picture above), but instead individual experience was valorized



- We’ve talked about this earlier in terms of romantic love (from Yan); it’s not an accident that all these trends are happening in the postsocialist period – but how do we understand them?
- consumption of popular culture and individualism: music, clothing, etc.
- militarization of popular culture in service of state-building
- New “me generation” in postsocialist China



- why examine sex? on the one hand, sex is an important cultural process that is linked to marriage, family, and kinship; on the other hand, sexual practices as a cultural process reflects wider political, social, and economic changes
- changes in the US: from early-twentieth century domestically oriented practices of ‘calling’ to consumption-oriented practices of “going-out” and dating”

- idea of sex and dating also linked to the development of “leisure” as a cultural category – sociologist Norbert Elias links the demarcation of leisure as a part of social life (think of the “weekend”) to what he calls the “civilizing process” and the development of modern, capitalist societies; leisure, in the West, also gradually became commodified; Farquhar stresses that sex has become a marker of individualism and modernity in China
- in China, the public discourse on sex exploded during the postsocialist period; remember Chinese ideas on love and romance in traditional China, practiced “arranged marriage”; the idea of romance from the first part of early twentieth century “May 4th” movement, call for modernization; functionalized during socialist period; **commodified** during postsocialist period

“Once an integral part of a complex in which families ensured continuity and wealth through a complex politics of kinship and marriage, sex changed its functionality when the Maoist state [emerged] Sex became a tabooed subject for language, and erotic attention turned toward cooperative production for the state” (Farquhar 2002:215)



- It has also been “scientific-ized”: “...sexuality [has] come into being in China in a specific relationship with global modernity. Science ... mediates this relationship... In collusion with certain reifications and reductions typical of the scientific method, the ‘sexuality’ that is emerging in the Chinese popular cultural mainstream is increasingly naturalized and normalized. History is turning into nature...” (Farquhar 2002:218-219)

