



“Vision without action is merely a dream”: a conversation with Li Yinhe

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Li Yinhe (born 1952) is a nationally and internationally-known sociologist and sexologist in China and a prominent LGBTQ rights activist. The material for this article is drawn from an interview with Dr. Li conducted in Beijing on October 9, 2018.

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Q: All your life, both in your research and your activism, you have been motivated by a profound desire to promote social justice and personal well-being. Where did this passion come from?


A: To answer this question, I have to tell you about my family, particularly my father, Li Kelin, for that is where my worldview originated. Because of my father's experiences, I developed a profound empathy towards those who were punished unjustly, but who wondered what their “crimes” had been.¹

Q: Not long after your father joined the Communist Party, he was arrested. What was his offense?

A: My father was devoted to the communist cause from a very early age. He joined the Communist Party in 1933 but was arrested in 1936 for having been involved with a non-communist organization in Shanxi called the *Xi Menghui*, an anti-Japanese resistance organization that was not supportive of the communist movement. He was imprisoned for about a year for having deviated from the “straight path.” As a condition of his release, he was required to prepare a repentance report in which he was to confess his political failings. At first he resisted publically, but he finally relented. In spite of this experience, he remained faithful to the Party in its efforts to repel the Japanese invaders and to overthrow the Kuomintang. Sufficiently rehabilitated, he was allowed to join the communist forces in Yan'an in 1937.²

Q: What roles did your parents play in supporting the liberation of China from the Japanese and later from the Kuomintang?

A: Both of my parents graduated from normal universities and became teachers. Because of this background, they were regarded as members of the intellectual elite,

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¹The renowned Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong reported having a similar experience:

[In 1959], no one would publish anything I wrote...It was intellectual stagnation. And I began to become suspicious of myself. Was I really right or wrong, after all? Was I protecting the bourgeois class? What was wrong with me? It wasn't clear. But I didn't think they were wrong either. That was the trouble. (Quoted in Pasternak 1988, 647).

²During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Li's father was accused of the same offence. For this, he was sent to a May 7th Cadre School. These “schools” were labor camps established during the Cultural Revolution that combined agricultural work with the study of the writings of Mao Zedong.



Figure 1. Li Yinhe, Beijing. Courtesy of Li Yinhe.

and so, both were invited to join the fourth cohort of the “*Kangda Siqi*,” the Red Army University Fighting against the Japanese.³

Q: What responsibilities did your parents have in Yan’an?

A: They were appointed to a high-level intelligence unit because of their university education. Most members of the Red Army were peasants who had little or no education. My father, Li Kelin, traveled to Yan’an (Shaanxi province) in 1937 and my mother, Lin Wei, in 1938. That is where they met. By 1938, both of my parents saw themselves as career revolutionaries. They served in the Eighth Route Army during the War of Resistance against Japan.⁴ They were married sometime in 1939. In May, 1943, my father was appointed Minister of Propaganda of the Shanxi County Party Committee – a very high position. In 1946, my parents joined the Communist Committee of Taihang District.⁵ In that

³Approximately 200,000 people graduated from the Anti-Japanese Military and Political University between 1937 and 1946. See Cleverley 2000, 83.

⁴The Eighth Route Army was created on September 22, 1937 when the communists and nationalists formed the Second United Front against Japan. The Eighth Route Army was commanded by Mao Zedong and General Zhu De.

year, they were also involved in the founding of the *People's Daily* newspaper. When the Red Army won control of Beijing in 1949, the important communist leaders were moved to Beijing, including my parents who continued to work for the Party's newspaper.

Q: Did your father's history of service to the Party mean that his political troubles were over?

A: Hardly. In 1957, following the brief six to seven week period of liberalization called "The Hundred Flowers," my father was suspected of "leaning to the right." Then in 1959, he and General Peng Dehuai, the supreme military commander of China, were placed together on a stage for a "struggle session." He was forced to wear a "right opportunist hat" in a Qinghai labor reform camp and was not rehabilitated until 1962. This struggle session left a bad mark on his record and created trouble for him during the Cultural Revolution. Curiously, my father was allowed to return to his work at the *People's Daily*. He left the newspaper in 1965 when he was transferred to the Policy Research Office of the State Construction Commission.

Family life and the Cultural Revolution

Q: What was your family life like?

A: I was born on February 4, 1952 in Beijing, the youngest of four children. I had a very close relationship with my very supportive parents. Later in my life, I came to realize how proud my mother was of my development and career. I come from a highly-educated family. All of my siblings were very bright students. For example, my two older sisters went to the National University of Defense Technology. My older brother's daughter went to Tsinghua University when she was only fourteen and at eighteen, gained admission to Duke University. She later taught at Johns Hopkins University.

Q: Did the Cultural Revolution disrupt your family?

A: My parents were not deeply affected during the Cultural Revolution. They were, however, sent to a May 7th Cadre School to do labor work and to receive training and education from peasants and workers. My parents were not picked out for special punishment. Everyone who was a senior official had to go to such a school. However, they were separated. If I remember correctly, my mother was sent to a school in Xinyang, Henan Province, while my father was sent to another May 7th Cadre School associated with his National Construction Committee. The family was reunited around 1976 by which time I had returned from Inner Mongolia.

Q: You were only seventeen at the outset of the Cultural Revolution. Were you enamored with some of the military aspects of the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement"?⁶

A: I really wanted to be assigned to an army camp in Inner Mongolia rather than to a village because I thought that there was something romantic about serving in the military – wearing a uniform, being a revolutionary soldier, and sacrificing my youth for my country. At the time, we young people thought it was an honor and a duty to work for

⁵The Taihang District, located in Shanxi's Taihang mountain range, was a revolutionary base established by the Communist Party in the winter of 1937.

⁶Beginning in 1967, more than sixteen million urban youth were resettled in rural areas of China to "learn from the peasants." This massive movement of people, known in Chinese as 上山下乡运动 (*shang shan xia cun yundong*), lasted until 1979.

the country in that way. Because my father was perceived as being something of a “rightist,” I was seen as having a reactionary family background. As a result, I was assigned at first to Jilin province in northeast China. When representatives from Inner Mongolia came to recruit “soldiers,” I wrote an appeal in my own blood pleading to be sent to their region. Eventually, my application was approved. I concluded that my family was not so bad that I could not cultivate the border areas!

Q: How quickly did your feelings plummet from idealism to disillusionment?

A: We who went to Inner Mongolia worked hard yet received no praise. We were even scolded by the local herdsmen, who accused us of destroying their land by introducing sand where grass had grown. We were very demoralized. We worked until we bled but, instead of producing results, we wrought destruction. We don’t like hearing other educated young people say that “youth has no regrets” because our youth was thrown away for nothing. Many felt so dispirited that they experienced mental breakdowns. Psychologists say that work with absolutely no purpose can drive people insane. It is exactly this sort of purposeless work on which we wasted our youth.

Q: Why were you permitted to return to Beijing in 1972? Who made that decision?

A: Everyone in my camp wanted to return home. Some even ran away to the train station, but were caught and returned. Normally, I would have had to stay for seven or eight years, but my social network helped me. My mother knew a high-ranking military officer who was in charge of the Inner Mongolia military camp. She talked to him and, as a result of his influence, I was able to return through the “back door” having served only three years.

Q: Did this experience have any long-term effects on you?

A: When I returned to Beijing from Inner Mongolia, I felt dazed and confused. I felt those years had been wasted. This experience was a nightmare for me even into my thirties and forties. Something seemed to have been taken from my life while I had been stationed there. I thought that some of the finest things in my heart had been destroyed and lost. This feeling filled me with pain and regret. Perhaps it was not exactly regret but a feeling of having left the idealism of childhood and entered into the hard realities of adulthood.

Q: Were you strengthened in any way?

A: Although the fragile truth and beauty in my heart was dispersed and buried, I felt more pragmatic than before, more mature, and more powerful. From this hardship, I felt that there was no kind of life that I could not bear, no kind of suffering I could not withstand, no kinds of people who could dupe me easily.⁷

Shanxi University years

Q: What did you do after your Cultural Revolution assignment in Inner Mongolia?

A: After some time in Beijing, I returned to Qin, the town in Shanxi province where my father had been born and where my uncle lived. These two factors made it possible for me to enter Shanxi University once it reopened.⁸ Because I had little to do in the meantime, I occupied myself mainly with farm work. Everyone regarded me as a “good girl” and a hard worker but that would not have been enough for me to have received a recommendation

⁷Li Yinhe 2015, 49–50.

⁸Most universities in China were shut down from 1966 until 1972.

for admission to the university. I also needed good social connections. If my family had not known officials at the county level, I would never have been recommended. Many young people wanted to go to university but spots were very limited.

While awaiting admission to university, I read all sorts of books. My parents had books at home, and I was also able to borrow others from my parents' colleagues who had libraries. Back then, higher-level officials in China had special access to famous world literature. The books were divided into two kinds – “black-covered books” and “yellow-covered books.” The former included works in politics and philosophy; the latter consisted of stories and novels. Families could only keep a book for a day or two and then would have to pass it along to another family. Of course, there were risks. I can still clearly remember the nervousness I felt when I was reading Orwell's *1984* for every “reactionary” sentence in the book could lead to my being criticized by the public and even thrown into prison.⁹

I also spent time writing journals in which I recorded observations of country life. Frequently, I focused on topics such as weddings, maternity and the one-child policy, reincarnation, karma, and agrarian reform. Already some of the themes in my later work had begun to emerge.

Q: What were the admission procedures to Shanxi University when you applied?

A: I applied to enter university for the first time in 1973 when I was 21. In 1974, I took the university entrance exam. However, in those days admission depended more on recommendations from workers, peasants, and soldiers. I assume that I was recommended for two reasons: first, I had worked hard on my family's farm, and second, my father had been born in Qin.

Q: What was the quality of education at Shanxi University at that time? Had it suffered badly during the Cultural Revolution?

A: At the beginning of the the Cultural Revolution, Shanxi University – like all other universities in the country – stopped accepting students. In 1973, it resumed enrollment. I entered the school in 1974. The level of education was quite low. As the teachers were not very good, I had to do much of my learning on my own. I developed an extensive reading program for myself. Reading has always been important to me.¹⁰

Q: Were other students eager to pursue their studies?

A: Alas, my classmates did not contribute to a positive learning environment! Members of my cohort came from different counties in Shanxi. When they graduated, they formed “benefit societies” to help other students from their own town. If one of your fellow graduates became a government official, he or she would help you find employment. It was simply a *guanxi*-type relationship. Nobody was there to learn, but only to build relationships.

Q: You graduated from Shanxi University in 1977 with a degree in history, but after graduation, you have said that you thought history was “a discipline with no life.” Is that still your view about history?

A: I did not mean that there are no lively stories in history but that history records distant past events and accounts of people long departed. As a result, I am not much

⁹See Yang Guobin 2016 for a fascinating study of how “subversive” literature survived in China during the Cultural Revolution.

¹⁰See Li Yinhe 2014b.

interested in history. I feel totally different about sociology where I find live, active people with their vital life stories. As a result, my sociological research has always relied heavily on oral narrative methods.

Q: After your graduation, you worked as an editor at the *Guangming Daily*.¹¹ Were you helped to land this job because your parents had been journalists?

A: One of my father's old colleagues was in charge of this newspaper. In 1977, there were not many university graduates and, because of my undergraduate major, I went to work at the paper and was assigned to the "history group."

Q: You have described yourself as a "lowly editor."¹² What were your responsibilities at that time?

A: For the most part, I edited other people's work, but later I was promoted and was able to write a few articles of my own. It was during this time that I first met Wang Xiaobo, my future husband. It was one of the most significant moments in my life.

Q: Within a year, you were appointed to a position as a researcher at the State Council in Beijing. How were you able to make this transition?

A: The father of my friend, Lin Chun, worked in the Research Office of the State Council. That office needed more researchers. Lin went there first and then recommended that I, too, be hired. In May, 1978, I became a research fellow in that office. From 1979 to 1982, I was employed as an assistant professor and associate researcher in the Marxist Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).

Reestablishing sociology in the PRC

Q: Why was it necessary to establish "boot camps" in sociology?

A: From 1952 to 1979, sociology was banned from universities in China because authorities thought that it was a bourgeois pseudo-science that examined society from a capitalist point of view.¹³ It had been replaced by a Marxist-Leninist socialist version of social science. The eminent scholar Fei Xiaotong wanted to revive sociology as he had known it before 1952.

Q: What steps did Dr. Fei take to revive sociology?

A: On the ground, he scoured several universities to see if he could find talented young people who were interested in studying sociology. At an organizational level, he approached C.K. Yang, head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. They were life-long friends going back to their student days at Yanjing University. Dr. Yang assembled a small group of scholars from his university and from the Chinese University of Hong Kong to come to Beijing in the summers of 1980 and 1981 to run short-term training (or retraining) courses of six to eight weeks.¹⁴

Q: How did you learn about this opportunity? Why were you interested in learning this new discipline, and how were you selected?

¹¹The *Guangming Daily* is a national newspaper based in Beijing that targets government officials and intellectuals. Its sponsorship shifted from various democratic parties to the China Federation of Industry and Commerce in 1953. Four years later, the newspaper was brought under the direct leadership of the Propaganda Department and the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee.

¹²Li Yinhe 1999a, 97.

¹³See Hang-sheng Zheng and Li Ying-sheng 2003, 276–278.

¹⁴For an account of the revival of sociology and anthropology in China, see Pasternak 1983, 37–62.

A: Because I was an associate researcher at the Marxism Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, I was sent to this workshop. I was interested in sociology because of my experiences in the Cultural Revolution when I had seen all sorts of social problems. I shared the concern and anxiety that people felt about the direction of Chinese society as a result of the events that had taken place between 1966 and 1976. It is a tradition among Chinese intellectuals to become involved when they are concerned about the state of their country and its people. I thought that sociology would afford me the opportunity to study and understand my society.

Q: What did the courses cover?

A: Basic concepts, statistics, and research methods appropriate for studying the social impact of modernization.

Q: Did this first contact with the concept of modernization lead to its role in your doctorate?

A: I first encountered the term “modernization” as a government policy initiative advanced by the Chinese government as part of its Open Door Policy. The summer camps introduced me to sociology and the effects of modernization on structures and relations in society.

Q: What was the biggest challenge you faced when embarking on this program?

A: Language! I had learned a little English in school, but for the most part after that I had to learn English by myself. When applying for admission to Shanxi University, I had claimed that foreign languages were just tools, but I learned through this experience that they could be very valuable tools for opening many doors of opportunity.

University of Pittsburgh years

Q: What role did Dr. Burkart Holzner¹⁵ play in your growth as a sociologist from the boot camp in Beijing to your admission into the University of Pittsburgh and your doctoral work?

A: I met Holzner in 1979 when he came to China to give lectures at the Chinese Academy of Social Science. After the summer camps in 1980 and 1981, I realized that I wanted to go to the United States to pursue a graduate degree. In my application, I stated that my purpose in studying abroad was to understand how the public perceives the world. After the recent social upheavals in China, I wanted to know how people performed in a normal society. At that time, Holzner was in charge of international students in sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. He helped me gain admission and a scholarship. Later, he became the chairperson of my doctoral committee.

Q: How did you finance your graduate studies?

A: I did not receive any funding from the Chinese government and managed to survive on a scholarship of several hundred dollars per month from the University of Pittsburgh. After two years, Xiaobo joined me in America, at which time I needed a little more income, and so I started working one day a week in a restaurant called the “Beijing Restaurant.”

Q: How did you settle on your dissertation topic?

¹⁵Burkart Holzner (1931–2014) served as director of the University Center for International Studies (UCIS) at the University of Pittsburgh from 1980 until 2000, where he also was a professor of sociology and international affairs.

A: My dissertation, “Urban family and marriage in contemporary China” (1988), examined the proposition that among urban, non-agricultural Chinese, the patterns of family and marriage were converging in patterns common to most industrial societies and argued that this trend was caused by the modernization of Chinese society. More specifically, I looked at factors such as decreased family sizes, postponed marriage, and a decline in traditional wedding rites, along with an increase in post-marital residence, equality between the sexes, self-initiated marriages, and contraception use – in substance, a shift from family relationships which stress filial bonds to relationships which primarily stress conjugal bonds. I concluded that the former is traditional, agricultural, and Chinese, while the latter is modern, industrial, and universal.

The empirical basis for my research was survey data collected by a group of Chinese sociologists from nine research and educational units in five large cities under the direction of the Sociology Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.¹⁶

Q: Your dissertation was entirely quantitative. Apart from two references to the work of Julia Kristeva, you did not draw on the work of any other structuralists, post-structuralists, philosophical feminists, or psychoanalysts. At the University of Pittsburgh in the 1980s, were quantitative methods the prevailing – and perhaps the only – methodology employed in sociology?

A: At that time, Pittsburgh had two types of sociology professors – one preferred quantitative methods and the other qualitative approaches. The two “camps” criticized each other fiercely and contended that the other party was not capable of producing any sound research! I used both methods after I returned to China but came to rely more on qualitative explorations. This is certainly true of my studies on homosexuality and female sexuality.

Q: At the end of your doctoral program, why did you decide to return to China?

A: First, I was doing research in sociology, and I really wanted to explore Chinese society. Second, I knew that I could live on very modest material means. In the United States, I would have had to worry about money. And third, I thought that I would have a higher social status in China and so could do more of what I wanted to do.

China years

Q: When did you resume contact with Fei Xiaotong?

A: In 1988 when he became the director of the Institute of Sociology at Beijing University. At just about that time, the Chinese government introduced the idea of the “post-doc” in the humanities. Dr. Fei offered me a post-doctorate position and, as I was impressed with his work, I accepted. After two years (1990–1992) as an associate professor in this institute, I was appointed to the Institute of Sociology in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1992, and I remained there for the rest of my career.

Q: What the most valuable thing you learned from Fei Xiaotong?

A: Qualitative methods. Fei believed that sociology and anthropology were tightly connected and should not be separated. That is why sociology and anthropology at Peking University are still not separated. I came to understand that sociology is not only about numbers but also about the results of qualitative studies. While I continued to make

¹⁶Pasternak 1986.

use of large-scale questionnaires, I spent most of my time learning qualitative research methods. I was taught that sociology could include story telling. I recall Fei saying one time that, “Life is about acting on a stage: everyone has his or her own role to play, so listen to each individual’s story, their narrative history, and their life history.” That was his approach to sociology.

Q: As a young woman, you had been interested in sexuality in Chinese culture. What provoked your curiosity?

A: In China, sex was a much suppressed concept. Whenever people talked about sex, they would feel very embarrassed and would blush. In 1984, there was even an organization called “Youth against Sex Association” that was opposed to promoting positive attitudes on sex-related issues. In ancient China, there was abundant literature exploring sex culture. Sex was not a taboo back then. I could never understand why in modern China people were not even willing to talk about it. Such reticence is not normal. This odd situation sparked my interest in doing research in the area.

Q: How did your academic research career develop?

A: Between 1988 and 1992, I researched ten topics, including adolescent love, premarital sex, standards for choosing a spouse, extramarital love, divorce, remaining a single woman, voluntary sterility, and gay experience. Several of these topics became the themes for my most important publications.

Q: What was Fei’s reaction to your ideas?

A: In 1989, I proposed to work on my “gay book.” As Fei did not object to this topic, I received funding and started to conduct research. I am grateful for Fei’s approval. I suspect that, if I were to seek funding for the same kind of research today, I might not be so fortunate. In the 1990s, every research area in sociology had gaps that authorities recognized needed to be filled. Before *Their World*,¹⁷ Pan Guangdan’s 1946 translation of Havelock Ellis’s *Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students* (1933) – in particular, Chapter Five entitled “Homosexuality” – was the only book available in Chinese that mentioned gays and lesbians.¹⁸

Q: What reaction did you receive from publishers when you sought to have *Their World* published?

A: This process was very trying. The Beijing press that first requested the opportunity to publish the book later refused after I had completed the manuscript. They thought the material was too sensitive. I decided to seek a publisher in Hong Kong because the censorship standards there were not so restrictive. In the early 1990s in China, any material containing descriptions of sexual scenes was deemed obscene, and so pornographic. However, the book became an immediate best-seller [in Hong Kong], and so, in 1993, Shanxi Press was bold enough to release the book. Shanxi is quite a long distance from Beijing and a place where censorship was not as severe.

¹⁷Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo’s *Their World* (1992/93) was widely praised upon its release. Xiaopei He and Susie Jolly (2002) noted that homosexuality even in the 1990s was classified in Chinese medical books as a mental illness or type of sexual perversion.

¹⁸Li’s experience while studying at the University of Pittsburgh was eye-opening: “I found that there were many people researching homosexuality, and even sometimes finding half of the books on a library shelf to be all about homosexuality. But in China, there wasn’t a single research report about it. So I started doing research because I wanted to fill in the blanks in this academic world. In China in the 1980s, married couples who swapped their spouses for sexual purposes were even sentenced to death along with the madams of brothels. Even some book sellers who sold pornographic books were shot dead. This was very shocking to the rest of the world. I clearly felt the sexual repression and distortion of our society.” Li Yinhe n.d.a.

Q: What was the response to *Their World* by colleagues, the press, the public, and government officials?

A: There were different layers of reaction. My colleagues who were knowledgeable and understood sociology were very tolerant. They didn't believe that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) matters should be a political or a moral issue. The general public had different views that were supported by the *Chinese Diagnostic Manual*. It claimed that LGBT persons deserved psychiatric treatment and that to "cure" them they could be subjected to electric shock treatment. On a third level, the reaction in newspapers was quite intense. In 2007 – that is, fifteen years after its publication – an online investigation tried to understand the public's views of LGBT people. It turned out that many people had no clue what it meant for someone to be LGBT, indicating that the experience and activities of LGBT persons had remained underground and in the closet. The reactions of politicians and higher-level officials constituted the fourth layer of reaction. They were quite ignorant. For example, one of our officials told a visiting foreign political figure that the LGBT phenomenon was a cultural matter, that his country had LGBT people, but that China did not have any. Given that level of ignorance, the place of LGBT people in society and their experiences would never enter into discussion and social understanding.

Q: From 1989 until 1991, you focused your research on gay issues. What role did Wang Xiaobo play in this work?

A: About the same time as I was beginning this work, Zhang Yuan, a second-generation film director, asked me if I thought a film could be developed about LGBT people. He also wondered whether Wang Xiaobo would be interested in writing the script. While Xiaobo was investigating the different experiences of LGBT people and working on the script, he discovered that few gay men would ever talk to a woman about their experiences. ... I needed Xiaobo to conduct many of the interviews and later he also wrote up of some of the cases. His contribution to *Their World* was indispensable.

Q: Is it from some of these experiences that Xiaobo gained the confidence to write *East Palace, West Palace*?¹⁹

A: To write his novella and an authoritative film script, Xiaobo needed to interview gay and lesbian people to learn more about their lives. He also explored "bathroom literature" and took "field trips"²⁰ to come to understand this social phenomenon ... very real details were placed into the script of the movie. They were not just the products of his imagination but arose out of his research.

Q: In *The Subculture of Homosexuality* (1998),²¹ you increased the number of people you interviewed. Apart from that and a hefty section on Michel Foucault, did the book advance the understanding of homosexuality in China beyond what you had published in 1992?

A: An appendix at the back of *Their World* contained the questionnaire I had used. Many readers answered these questions and returned a completed version to me, so I acquired lots of additional data. In phone calls, some readers told me that they wanted

¹⁹*East Palace, West Palace* is a 1996 Chinese film directed by Zhang Yuan. The film is based on a short story by Wang Xiaobo published in *Love and Bondage* 2007, 119–155.

²⁰By "bathroom literature," Li is referring to writing about activities among gays in public washrooms, and by "field trips," she is referring to trips that Xiaobo took to such places for the field work he needed for his short story.

²¹Li Yinhe 1998a.

to meet me in person and assured me that they had wonderful stories to add. They asked me to help them write about themselves! I was able to collect about forty new stories and added these to *The Subculture of Homosexuality*. I also added a new chapter on the legal status of LGBT people in China in which I included historical and cross-cultural sections that discussed legal issues at other times and in other places.

The gay community in China had welcomed and applauded *Their World* when it was published and quite quickly 400,000 copies were sold. When I revised and expanded this as *The Subculture of Homosexuality* (1998), it, too, became a bestseller. However, both books touched off a backlash and I was publicly criticized for my work.

Q: What resources did you have that helped you withstand these assaults?

A: Many people were very ignorant about these matters and said many hurtful things to me, but I felt that doing research is just an attempt to understand reality. It didn't matter to me how people criticized or judged me, even when they called me a "pervert." I had had the opportunity to pursue historical and cross-cultural studies and explore a wide range of theoretical perspectives. I regarded myself as an authority and so had an absolute right to share my understandings. That is what gave me confidence.

Still, so many people wrote such negative comments about me and my work on my blog that I closed it for a while, then opened it, and then closed it again! I remember one particular comment from a reader: "If killing a person were not illegal, I would like to use a knife to kill you." When I read that, I just laughed. If that was the worst that could happen to me, I could take the rest of it!

Q: Despite the backlash, were there rewards?

A: Sometimes when I attended meetings, people asked to have their picture taken with me. Some said that they had managed to survive after reading my book. Many gay Chinese men had tried to kill themselves. Many adolescents who identified as homosexuals had felt very lonely and terrified. When they found this book which told them that there were actually many others like them, they were apparently greatly helped. I knew that I was correct both methodologically and theoretically, but also that I had done something that was socially worthwhile. That has been very reassuring.

Q: What was the attitude of the Communist Party on these issues throughout this period?

A: During the first thirty years of its rule, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was anti-sex, so that made studying sex controversial. Even today, the reaction to my work is huge and harsh. Publishers also feel the need to be very cautious. For example, in one of my recent books, a section on laws about sex was removed. You just can't publish that kind of material! As another example, *Introduction to Sexology* did not appear without excisions until 2014. It was delayed for more than a decade because of what was regarded as the sensitive nature of its content.

Q: Why does the Party care about sex? Sex doesn't challenge its power.

A: Party officials still have very traditional ideas about sex. There have always been two main categories of censored or banned books. One covers philosophical and political issues that might be seen as opposing the CCP. The other is literature and, in particular, materials that discuss sex. That hasn't changed.

Q: Of the books you have published since 2000, which do you regard as the most important or the most satisfying and why?

A: *A Study of Sex-related Discourse in New China* (2014a) stands out for me. For this book, I looked at all of the articles related to sexuality published in the *People's Daily* from 1949 to 2010. I did a content analysis to see how the discussion had changed over the preceding sixty years. This showed how the rhetoric on some issues, such as prostitution or AIDS, had changed. Or love – during the early years after Liberation, we couldn't discuss love – how could one talk about such a *petit bourgeois* issue?²²

Sadomasochism (S&M)

Q: Why and how did you become interested in S&M?

A: I had been interested in sadomasochism from a very early age. In Chinese, the meaning of the term is different from the common understanding of it in English. In Chinese, this is called *nue lian* (虐恋). We encounter it frequently in soap operas, novels, and movies. In these situations, you fall in love with someone who does not love you and “dumps” you. These stories are harsh emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. So in Chinese, S&M isn't even predominantly physical.

Q: What influence did Michel Foucault have on your thinking?

A: I had not even heard about Foucault before my return to China in 1988. Quite by chance while at a party, I met a gay person who knew about Foucault. I was quite astonished by what I heard, and so I started to read Foucault's work. It was quite different from anything I had ever encountered ... especially his theories about power. At first, I didn't really understand much from reading his three-volume study on sexuality in the Western world. At the time, it was too philosophical for me, but he still provided me with a different perspective about sex.

Around 2000, a publisher requested that I introduce Foucault's work to Chinese readers. I learned from Foucault that not all acts are pre-determined but can be socially constructed. I concluded that to be gay is “not to be, but to do.” That is what people did in Ancient Greece and Rome, but they were not necessarily gay. As a result, I wrote *Foucault and Sexuality* (2001) in which I tried to explain his theory of sexuality, social constructivism, and his life.

Q: In China, you provoked outrage when you broke the silence on sadomasochism. How did this come about?

A: While I was a visiting scholar at Cambridge University between October, 1996 and March, 1997, I devoted much of my research time searching for books and articles on this phenomenon. In particular, I was interested in Foucault's thoughts. He had written that he didn't believe this type of activity exposes or reveals a sadomasochistic tendency hidden deep in our unconscious or anything like that. He claimed that sadomasochism surpasses this for it creates entirely new possibilities for pleasure, possibilities that people had never before experienced. Foucault considered S&M to be a pleasant sensation instead of a matter of desire. As a result of my research and the influence of Foucault, I wrote *The Subculture of Sadomasochism* (1998b).²³

When this book was published in 1998, I happened to be abroad. The official response was even more extreme than that to *The Subculture of Homosexuality*, which had been released around the same time. The publisher's boss said that they had received

²²See Ian Johnson 2014.

²³In 2008, Li Yinhe returned to this subject in “Lesson 16” in *20 Lessons on Sexual Love*.

instructions from the review department to destroy the book. But by the time the publisher received that notice, 60,000 copies had already been sold, and so the burning edict was left unsettled! China's book censorship system was not so strict in the 1990s. Often a book would be published first and then an order would be issued to have it banned. Now all books must be reviewed before they are released.

Q: You have written that you had a passion to demystify sadomasochism. What needed to be demystified?

A: If most people knew little about homosexuality when I began my research in the early 1990s, they knew even less about sadomasochism. Most people lack basic factual information about the different practices and roles of participants. There are also ethical and legal questions about the limits and specificity of consent. For example, can I consent to behavior that might result in my being injured? Can I willfully cause someone pain without the intent to injure? Every time boxers enter the ring, they consent to the possibility of being injured. They try to inflict pain on their opponents without necessarily attempting to injure. Why should sadomasochists be treated any differently? We should ask psychological questions about whether it is a natural desire to be dominated, to be acted upon while rendered helpless, or to inflict pain on another person – even someone you love. There is the difference between inflicting pain out of love and inflicting pain out of a desire to be cruel. How are the differences between these two kinds of motives to be discerned? Are they relevant in legal cases? Would a chargeable offence (say, of bodily assault) turn on a question of motive? So there is much to be demystified!

Q: Throughout your career, did you receive support from your colleagues at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and from other sociologists – for example, from Fei Xiaotong, Pan Suiming,²⁴ Liu Dalin,²⁵ and Zhang Beichuan²⁶ or – were you for the most part reading, writing, thinking, and advocating alone?

A: Fei Xiaotong approved my homosexuality research and did not object or seek to ban my research on grounds that it was too sensitive. The same is true of the others, but from them, I received only moral support.

Q: You have done a lot of work with media, even TV.

A: Yes, even TV! But my first effort was short lived. I participated in a TV program in 2001 called “Getting Closer to Homosexuality” with two gay people. One was the first man to announce his homosexuality in such a public manner and the other was the first woman. The program only got a premiere after which it was terminated! The program was criticized because of its positive approach to homosexuality.

Q: Several times since 2001, you have forwarded an amendment to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference to legalize same-sex marriage.²⁷ All of these proposals have failed because you have been unable to find enough co-sponsors to place them on the agenda.²⁸ However, you have pledged to continue promoting the

²⁴Pan Suiming's first book was entitled *Mysterious Fire: A Sociological History of Sex* 1988. In 1991, he founded the Institute for Research on Sexuality and Gender at Renmin University in Beijing.

²⁵Liu Dalin is the senior author of *Sexual Behavior in Modern China* 1997 and *History of Erotica in China* 2004.

²⁶Zhang Beichuan is the author of *Same-sex Love* 1994 and director of the China Sexology Association.

²⁷Article 2 of the Chinese Marriage Law declares “one husband and one wife” as one of the principles guiding marriages. In 1999, Li published *Debate on the Amendment of the Marriage Law* in which she recorded various points of view on the marriage law.

²⁸Members can offer “suggested proposals” to the conference, but for these to become a “legislative proposal,” a minimum of thirty signatories is needed from the over 2,000 delegates.

bill until it passes.²⁹ **Can you describe for us the efforts you have made and the strategies you have pursued to place your amendment before the Consultative Conference?**

A: On my first attempt, I approached a friend who worked in higher-level committees and asked her if she would promote it for me. We needed to find thirty people to sign it before it could be put on the agenda, but we could not find that number. I have faced the same challenge on every occasion I have sought to put forward my amendment.

Q: At times, you have been optimistic about the prospects for amendments to the Chinese marriage law and at other times quite pessimistic. For example, in a 2006 blog, you wrote that progress on “an issue like same-sex marriage is not possible in a developing country like China. When the time is ripe, social reform will happen naturally. Perhaps I will only be a bystander instead of a participant.” What is your current assessment?

A: Taiwan’s constitutional court has legalized same-sex marriage, and I think China will do the same, but I just don’t know when.

Q: Are you freer to pursue your research into sexuality and LGBT issues today than you were when you were starting out in the early 1990s?

A: Curiously, things were looser in the 1980s and 1990s. But nowadays, it is getting a little more difficult, especially recently. In China, public events supporting LGBT people – like a pride parade – have often been banned or canceled. For example, in 2011, the *China Daily* reported on a gay pride parade in Shanghai.³⁰ I regarded this as a sign of a loosening up, but seven years later, the issue had become more controversial and things were more restricted.

In 1998, I published *The Subculture of Sodomasochism*. Now twenty years later, I am prevented from republishing it. Still, I remain positive even though some new restrictions have been introduced. I don’t believe we will return to the worst times. Why? Because the Internet is so popular and is unstoppable. Censorship cannot be everywhere and at every moment in the era of the Internet.

Q: At different times, you have either withdrawn on your own from the public sphere or been blocked from participating in a discussion of social and political issues. For example, in 2007, you wrote on your blog that people were putting pressure on officials in CASS, hoping that you would simply “shut up.” You then decided to withdraw from public life. What prompted you to break your silence in 2010?

A: Ma Yaohai, formerly an assistant professor at the Nanjing Institute of Technology, stood trial on charges of having engaged in “group licentiousness” by hosting an online swingers group. He was sentenced to three-and-a-half years of imprisonment. I could not stand by and watch this happen, so I publicized his plight and argued in his defense.

Similarly, in 2011, when Cheng Jianjun, a government official in Kunming, was sentenced to three-and-a-half years for the same offense, I was once again a vocal critic of the verdict, arguing in several online commentaries that the law against “group licentiousness” was obsolete, unconstitutional, and should be abolished. I compared it to the law against “hooliganism,”³¹ which encompassed offences from disruption of public order

²⁹Chris Luo 2013.

³⁰Sarah Buckley 2016.

³¹The law against hooliganism was amended in 1997.

to showing disrespect for women, thus making the definition of a criminal act highly vulnerable to interpretation.³²

Q: More recently in 2017, you were silenced in a different manner for protesting publically. Do you feel that your communications (blogs, emails, presentations, interviews, books, articles, and so on) are carefully watched?

A: I had written an article on my blog arguing against censorship, and I received a notice from Weibo saying that I was banned for three months. No explanation was given. When the ban was lifted, I could once again send messages on Weibo. I suspect that I must not publish any views containing “sensitive words.” The monitoring is probably computer-driven. Whenever sensitive words appear, the machine issues a notice in which the author is told to rewrite the message or it will not be sent out. You then rewrite the piece in a way that retains the original meaning but does not include the sensitive words.

Q: In 1999, Wang Xiaobo published a very short article about the place of values in scientific work. He wrote that “one should take a neutral stance toward values when doing scientific research but, as an ordinary person, one cannot avoid making value judgments.”³³ Presumably making moral judgments cannot be avoided in the social sciences as well. Fei Xiaotong was very clear about this: “Knowledge is valuable, but its value must be actualized through practice ... in my view, the ultimate goal of sociology and anthropology is precisely that – to improve the lives of people.”³⁴ So what ethical principles do you apply in your work to cases of group sex, prostitution, women who have been trafficked, sex with minors, consuming or producing pornography, rape, or sexual relations based on deception or promises which one has no intention of keeping?

A: I insist that in sexual matters three basic principles are at play: free will, privacy, and legal adulthood. I have always been opposed to extramarital affairs and keeping mistresses, which I feel are immoral practices. They should not be classified as crimes even if they do violate the three principles. Moral intolerance and legal intolerance are two different things. I’m not encouraging these things but I just don’t think they all should be punished as crimes. Some cases may not raise legal issues but simply ethical ones. If gay and lesbian relationships are voluntary and occur in their own private time and space, then that is the business of the individuals. No crime has been committed.

The cases of women (and men) who have been raped or trafficked is simple: the principle of voluntariness has been violated, and they become both legal and ethical issues. The case of prostitution arising out of economic desperation is more complicated. The birth of a child as the result of sexual relations would quite naturally raise some legal and ethical issues.

If you are married and are having an extra-marital affair, it is an ethical though not necessarily a legal issue. You have broken a promise. It doesn’t matter whether or not you are gay, you should simply be loyal to your husband or wife. If you and your spouse agree to have an open marriage, then an additional relationship is not promise-breaking. Everyone should be on the same page and agree with the arrangement. In

³²Li Yinhe n.d.b.

³³Wang Xiaobo 1999.

³⁴Reported in Pasternak 1988, 660.

such a case, there is no ethical issue. Incest would still remain a legal and possibly an ethical issue even though the partners in the relationship openly wanted it.

Q: Can your ethical or legal principles be applied to cases of sadomasochism? You have said you agree with Foucault that pleasurable sensations are neither good nor bad in themselves and, provided that your three principles apply, you argue that there should be no objection to pursuing them. But what if some S&M practices were likely to result in psychological or physical injury or even death? Would the state ever be justified in intervening?

A: I think that my three principles also apply to S&M situations. Voluntariness is a watershed. Physical and mental harm caused by the situation in which both parties enter voluntarily should not be illegal. If one party is not involved voluntarily, it is a violent violation and should be punished and legally sanctioned.

Q: In 2018, you published *We Are Dust in the Universe*. It is very different from anything else you have ever written. You strip away all of the sorts of categories with which sociologists typically work – rural/urban, male/female, gay/straight, poor/affluent, and so on – you ask your readers to confront their human existence in universal terms. What provoked this change in perspective?

A: This book is the new direction my writing took after I retired in 2012. I turned to writing essays, novels, and poetry. So far, I have published three collections of short and medium-length stories and several essays. This book is my latest. My idea is to record my daily thinking, practice, and inner struggles faithfully because these are problems of life. Thinking and exploring these issues started when I first entered adolescence. I hope readers will feel some resonance from my thinking and truly face their own existence.

Q: Looking back on your life as a researcher and activist, do you have any regrets? In hindsight, would you have done anything differently?

A: I regret that I was unable to enter my academic career earlier. Because of the Cultural Revolution, I was thirty years old before I was able to travel to the United States and become fully involved in my field of research. If I could do it over again, I would want to start ten years earlier. At a young age, I had dreamt of being a writer, but I knew that my literary talent was not particularly great. Forty years later, I still think I was right to choose sociology.

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