

SEMINAL MODERNITY: MASTURBATION AND THE POLITICS OF ABSTINENCE IN
EARLY REPUBLICAN CHINA (1912-1937)

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the regulation of masturbation and, by implication, male sexuality during China's early republican years (1912-1937) through the lens of anti-masturbation literature as featured by urban print media in Tianjin and Shanghai. By comparing and contrasting the discursive roles played by three different civic actors in rationalizing sexual abstinence, notably the Nationalist state, May-Fourth educated elites, and religious as well as medical societies, I argue that the Republic's biopolitical climate and the spread of print had enabled a field of politics where enlightenment discourses were appropriated to the advantage of these various civic actors, thus turning the Republic's biogovernance into a dynamic unfolding process, rather than a unilateral top-down process of repression of the male body.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: Pathologizing Masturbation—By Way of an Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER 2: The Body that Thinks and Cries: The Pleasures and Sorrows of Masturbation.....	8
CHAPTER 3: Pacifying the Body: Religious Groups and Medical Societies in Anti-Masturbation Campaigns.....	13
CHAPTER 4: Policing the Body: The State and the New Life Movement.....	18
CHAPTER 5: Conclusion.....	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	30

CHAPTER 1: PATHOLOGIZING MASTURBATION—BY WAY OF AN INTRODUCTION

“Masturbation: the primary sexual activity of mankind. In the nineteenth century it was a disease; in the twentieth, it was a cure.”

—*From Thomas Szasz, The Second Sin*

In the first three decades of Republican China, China’s urban areas witnessed the spread of a burgeoning print culture. Newspapers and journals in Tianjin and Shanghai, alongside textbooks and self-help pamphlets on adolescent physiology, began to run articles on public health and sexual hygiene. Many of these urban publications addressed one recurrent theme: a collective anxiety over the loss of semen as well as abstinence from masturbation. This extensive body of anti-masturbation literature, the production of which involved various ends of the social spectrum—masturbating males, physicians, statesmen, and religious groups—all rationalizing that abstinence on competing terms and pushing their own agendas, tends to disclose a field of intense politics. An examination of this literature lends us an immediate vantage point from which a survey of the workings of the Republic’s disciplinary technologies, the individual’s moral agency in negotiating the terms of biogovernance, and the seminal nature of China’s modernity becomes not only possible, but also urgently relevant.

One example that captures this curious social climate comes from an epistolary exchange that appeared under the “Questions & Answers: On Excessive Masturbation” [*wen he da: shouyin guodu* 问和答：手淫过度] section of *Jiankang shenghuo* (Healthy Life), a Tianjin-based popular magazine. In 1935, one subscriber wrote to the magazine’s editor about his troubled history of masturbation with a request for health tips. In the letter, the writer, who wished to remain anonymous, complained about his chronic memory loss and poor health, which he believed were

the side effects of masturbation. He also to his chagrin observed that his moral and physical corruption constituted a betrayal of the love and care he received from the State, a failure he could never let go:

...I would have committed suicide long ago to end this shameful and miserable life, had it not been for the love and care I received from the State throughout my education and career, something I must repay. It afflicts me to think that my education from elementary school to college would have been impossible without the state's generous financial aid, and amid this crisis of mass layoffs, I was fortunate enough to hold a teaching position in college. Dear doctor, pray give your wretched man the right counsel!¹

The editor in response recommended a health-preservation [*yangsheng* 养生] regimen consisting mainly of proper meals throughout the day eaten with gusto, sexual abstinence, cold showers and loose-fitting garments, and in addition prescribed a particular brand of supplement called *qi lie ao bin* (“Gilynobin tonic hormones”, so translated on the cover page, see Figure. 1), the magazine's feature product claiming to boost virile energy.²

Questions arise from this unusual exchange: How did the state—a seemingly out-of-place subject and yet evoked multiple times in the young teacher's confessions—figure in this myth of modern manhood? And how did the leading medical thinking of the day conceptualize and prescribe cures to masturbation? What did the loss of semen signify to a man's health and selfhood in early twentieth-century China? Against what background—epistemological, social, political and otherwise—should we interpret the widely felt anxieties over masturbation-related semen loss? Above all, what did this heteroglossia of voices and discourses surrounding masturbation and sexual abstinence reveal about the workings of biopower in China's early republican period? These questions are hard to raise, let alone be answered, and constitute the major research problems that this thesis aims to address.

¹ *Jiankang shenghuo* (5th edition, vol. 5 1935): 314-315.

² *Ibid.*, 315.

凡男弱 生子者 宜服此 藥能機 障必約 礙有必 發意 不育 全不 腦到 神效 經力

奇 烈 奧 廣



內服劑 皮下注射劑
 每瓶六十片 每盒六管
 定價大洋七元二角 定價大洋七元二角
 近省函購郵費在內

中國總經理
 德國克林大藥廠製造
天津時代公司
 法租界三十三號路

適應症
 (等小短 萎陰 退減力制自) 礙障能機殖生
 (等漏液精 遺夢 精遺 洩早) 常異精射
 (等退減力憶記 眠失 重頭 痛頭) 弱衰經神腦
 (等退減力視 怠倦 勞疾 落脫髮頭 進丸壓血 退減總包) 老衰期早
 醇酸敗腐胃腸衰減劑代陳新

GILYNOBIN
 TONIC HORMONES



Figure 1. Cover page of Jiangkang Shenghuo (5th edition, vol. 5) featuring “Gilynobin Tonic Hormones,” a supplement for reproductive health.

Probing the seamy underbelly of masturbation in search of the strife, controversy, and intrigue in biogovernance can be more challenging than rewarding, especially for a “masturpiece” like this one that seeks to explore the fabrics of power in Republican China through the delicate lens of the regulation of masturbation at the levels of the state as well as individual bodily practices. A good point of departure for such an undertaking is to recover a basic picture of the phenomenological body and changing discourses of health as conceptualized by medical authorities and experienced by citizens in their everyday lives over time. In other words, it’s worthwhile to first investigate how the body had been felt and lived in historically, how health should be properly understood and preserved generally, and what it meant to the body to practice masturbation generally in the Chinese context.

These fundamental issues cannot be conveniently addressed in a fixed, homogenizing vocabulary, since the Chinese body is plural, not singular.³ It’s nonetheless worthwhile to draw on Bray and Furth’s research on the fundamental constitution of the human body as conceived by Chinese schools of medicine, and safely conclude that in late imperial China the body was conceived in cosmological terms, not in terms of anatomical entities.⁴ In other words, before the dawn of Western science, traditional Chinese medical authorities held a largely holistic view of the human body, with a particular focus on the dynamic processes of interaction and transformation that maintained health or caused disorders. On this holistic view, five interacting key organs—Heart, Liver, Lungs, Spleen and Kidney—governed different levels of one’s physiological activity in correspondence with heavenly laws of the Five Phases [*wuxing* 五行], and helped to maintain

³ Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (University of California Press, 1997), 297: “I should emphasize that we are dealing here not with a single ‘Chinese’ body, but with a heterogeneous package...and even within the same society it will be understood and experienced differently by different people.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, 302. See also Charlotte Furth, “Blood, body and gender: medical images of the female condition in China 1600-1850”. *Chinese Science* 7 (1986): 43-66.

the *yin-yang* [*yinyang* 阴阳] balance within one's body through proper circulations of the energy of the natural world [*qi* 气]. The Kidney was conceptualized by Chinese medical authorities as the reigning organ of water-related physical activities (condensing and liquefying, for instance) the producer of the vital essence or semen [*jing* 精]. This classic cosmological framework ordained that the real danger of masturbation lie as much in concrete, physical detriments—drowsiness, sterility and inflammation, among others—as in its potential of disrupting *yin-yang* balance, jeopardizing human vitality, and playing havoc with the heavenly order as a result of the loss of one's vital essence.⁵

The decline of the aura of Confucian knowledge and traditional Chinese medicine at a crucial time when the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) was brought to its knees and Western science and ethics of knowing became a cause for celebration among China's educated elites was not without real-world consequences. For one thing, the cosmological model of how the physical and physiological world worked gradually merged with a new ethics of seeing and experiencing the body, or as Dikötter and Bray have it, “the biologizing approach” or “the biological turn”.⁶ In the early republican years, gender differences started to be viewed in the light of biological determinism, rather than results of the relative dominance of *yin* or *yang*, and health the physical well-being of body parts, not their relations to the cosmological foundations of the universe; new discursive repertoires were employed to redefine, refashion and reevaluate the body, fabricating fresh desires and identities: “menstruating girls, the hysterical housewife, the menopausal harpy, the masturbating adolescent, and the syphilitic husband.”⁷ And this biological turn proved to have

⁵ Ibid., 303.

⁶ See Frank Dikötter, *Sex, Culture and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period* (Hong Kong University Press, 1995): 62-102. See also Francesca Bray, “Introduction,” in *Gender, Health, and History in Modern East Asia* ed. Liang, Qizi, and Izumi Nakayama (Hong Kong University Press, 2018): 13.

⁷ Dikötter, 62.

profoundly reshaped Chinese men's everyday experiences of masturbation in the early twentieth century, in that the modern notion of essence (*jing*)—its loss, circulation, and repletion—was inextricably bound up with and reducible to “protein” and “hormone” and, by implication, masturbation became no longer a cosmological issue, a transgression or violation of the cosmological order, but rather a purely pathological issue, a form of self-abuse jeopardizing the sheer physicality of the body.⁸

For another, in Republican China such new sexual discourses as informed by medico-scientific knowledge affirmed conceptual linkages between the individual, the conjugal couple, population, and the state, pioneering a new trail of cosmopolitan biogovernance.⁹ Through constituting the body as an official target of active intervention, this biological turn

marked a radical transformation in the scope and goals of governance in East Asia: hitherto disregarded as matters of public concern, the biological characteristics, gender identity, and reproductive behavior of individuals or families now became legitimate objects of official scrutiny, intervention, and management, essential components of broader programs to improve the “race,” raise modern citizens, and strengthen the nation.¹⁰

In the Chinese context, men's essence reemerged as a metaphor for the Chinese nation, and masturbation a potent signifier of the vulnerability of the Chinese nation. To prevent wanton abuse of *jing* through an active regulation of masturbation, and to ensure the survival of the Chinese race, thus became a most pressing task.

Dikötter's study of the construction of modern sexual identities and the regulation of masturbation in early Republican China offers valuable insights into the workings of state power: “The control of human production...was seen as a key to the achievement of wealth and power.”¹¹

⁸ Ibid., 165-179.

⁹ Bray, “Introduction,” 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹¹ Dikötter, 102.

But by drawing exclusively on medical texts, Dikötter's study falls short of providing a finer-grained approach to state-society relations, leaving the many nuances and contradictions in anti-masturbation campaigns unaddressed, and a number of pressing questions unasked: Did the state, individuals, and intermediaries between the state and the local society that actively participated in anti-masturbation campaigns all push the same agenda? Or, how were the anxieties over the loss of *jing* understood, experienced, and spelled out differently at the level of the state vis-à-vis individual bodily levels? Was the Chinese male body under the medical gaze a docile one under strict medical scrutiny, and Republican China reducible to another disciplinary society as analyzed in Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish*? Or as Francesca Bray puts it, should we be thinking in terms of "biopolitics in Asia" or "Asian biopolitics"?¹² And, perhaps most important of all, how are we to make sense of the workings of state power through the lens of this intense politics of anti-masturbation? How "seminal", after all, was China's modernity? The answers to these questions, I will argue, must begin with an examination of masturbation as well its regulation as a field of intense micropolitics, where the Chinese state, individuals, and various scientific and religious communities all formed the backbone of the Republic's anti-masturbation campaign. As we shall see, the divergences of and exchange between these groups of different levels had left a most indelible mark on urban print culture, and altogether helped define the basic fabrics of the Republic's biogovernance.

¹² Bray, 2-3.

CHAPTER 2: THE BODY THAT THINKS AND CRIES: THE PLEASURES AND SORROWS OF MASTURBATION

For studies of how in the contemporary world, masturbation and the anxieties over health and identity arising therefrom, are perceived and experienced in the male perspective, we are blessed with an abundance of sources and tools: paper-and-pencil questionnaires, autobiographical notes, statistics, and interviews, if not more. But cultural historians of sexuality in twentieth-century China are deprived of that advantage. Fortunately, one still finds *Sinking*—a key literary text registering the shared psychology of masturbating adolescents in the early Republican period—a serviceable source.

Sinking was authored by the pioneering May Fourth novelist Yu Dafu [郁达夫] (1896-1945) in 1921. Published by Taidong Publishing House, it provided a vivid autobiographical account of the anxieties felt among educated adolescents of the time. Dikötter analyses the story as the confession of a young hypochondriac who, frustrated by unfulfilled sexual desires, would have to seek refuge in masturbation, and sees the protagonist as a key embodiment of the collective anxiety about health and sex shared among educated youths. This collective anxiety, Dikötter's argument goes, has to be understood as a reflection of normative pressures and a byproduct of discursive formation in an era of sweeping changes:

...normative pressures would have been internalized by the generation of students who went through the new educational system set up after the fall of the empire....This novelette struck a sympathetic chord with many students, who represented Yu Dafu as the embodiment of a contemporary malaise (*shidaibing*)...this type of circumstantial evidence makes it impossible to draw any satisfactory conclusions about the transformation of sexual practices by discursive formations.¹³

¹³ Dikötter, 179.

Dikötter's observation is no doubt correct. But I will argue that it would be both misleading and less than productive to use *Sinking* as a type of "circumstantial" historical evidence in pursuit of an accurate idea of how prevalent masturbation had been among adolescents within a given period of time, and to what extent exactly discursive formations had transformed individual sexual practices in the early Republican era, although such a positivist undertaking certainly has its merit. If we approach the novelette not as a passive reflection of the social, discursive conditions of its production, but rather as a cultural artifact that involves the author's agency, responds to such conditions, and encodes within itself its own conditions of how, by whom and for whom it was produced, we'll find an Archimedean point from which a survey of a new continent of individual subjectivity becomes possible.

Sinking tells a heart-wrenching story of a young Chinese student studying in Japan, an alien country where he has to confront humiliation and hostility because of his nationality. Segregating himself from his Chinese classmates, he would often indulge in masturbation picturing the innkeeper's daughter, to whom he's emotionally attached, and sexual voyeurism. One day, while sauntering down a country path alone, he accidentally overhears a young Japanese couple making love behind the bushes. Exhilarated, he instantly puts himself in a ferry without knowing his destination, visits a brothel upon landing, and spends a night there. Later that night, haunted by a mixed feeling of shame, disgust and *ennui*, the lad runs ashore and drowns himself.

The story, bizarre, grotesque as it may appear, is not devoid of political implications. With a particular focus on the nationalist motif running throughout the story, K. A. Denton interprets *Sinking* as a modern tale of the crisis of Chinese nationalism. Denton argues that the dilemma of the protagonist and the two shores between which he stands captures the complex web of May Fourth paradoxes, one that is characterized by tensions between universalist cosmopolitanism and

parochial nationalism.¹⁴ For my purpose here, I'm not going to elaborate on Denton's argument and offer a detailed analysis of the plots, although the following arguments of my own are by no means tangential to Denton's big picture. Instead, I choose to focus exclusively on the narratives treating the pleasures and sorrows of masturbation.

In astounding details, the novelette provides a vignette of the protagonist's daily routines in his hours of leisure. During his stay in Japan, the young lad, an avid reader of Goethe, Byron and Shelley, among other Romantic poets, would often peek through the window and ogle the luscious body of the innkeeper's daughter, while busying his hands with pleasuring himself. He interprets such sexual impulses as answers to the call of nature and "divine instinct" and therefore to some extent excusable:

With all nature responding to the call of spring, he too felt more keenly the urge implanted in him by the progenitors of the human race. Unflaggingly, he would sin every morning underneath his quilt.

He was ordinarily a very self-respecting and cleaning person, but when evil thoughts seize hold of him, numbing his intellect and paralyzing his conscience, he was no longer able to observe the admonition that "one must not harm one's body under any circumstances, since it is inherited from one's parents." Every time he sinned he felt bitter remorse... Thus once, twice, and this practice became a habit... his fear increased.

One day he learned somewhere in a book that Gogol, the founder of modern Russian literature, had also suffered from this sickness and was not able to cure himself to the day of his death. This discovery comforted him somewhat...¹⁵

A devoted apostle of free love as he has always been, the protagonist of *Sinking* hails romantic feelings and chooses to chase "the sacred instinct" as soon as he realizes that he has a crush on the innkeeper's daughter, a blithesome Japanese maid. But because of his national background, he dares not confess his love to her and barely finds any chance of realizing a happy union of the body and the soul as prescribed by the gospel of romantic love. Facing no other choice but to

¹⁴ See Kirk A. Denton, "The Distant Shore: Nationalism in Yu Dafu's "Sinking"." *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 14 (1992): 123.

¹⁵ Yu Dafu, *Chenlun* [Sinking], translated by Joseph S. M. Lau and C. T. Hsia, in *Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas, 1919-1949*, ed. Joseph S. M. Lau, C. T. Hsia and Leo Ou-Fan (Columbia University Press, 1981): 39-43.

indulge himself in sexual fantasies, he practices masturbation daily. The free love he yearns for, a love that knows no boundaries, remains perpetually unfulfilled and hindered by established national, racial divides—Isn't there a dark irony here? Under this circumstance of despair, masturbation becomes a magic wand with which an instant alliance between fantasy and reality comes to be forged, an ersatz cure for his lovesickness, while prolonging the disease in the meantime and exacerbating his frustration.

The story ends with the young lad's suicide. What's particularly worth noting is that the minute he makes up his mind to drown himself and begins to walk into the sea, he heaves a long sigh and murmurs:

Oh China, my China, you are the cause of my death...I wish you could become rich and strong soon!...Many, many of your children are still suffering!¹⁶

For the protagonist, his hypochondria induced by masturbation is a mere trifle. It's the weakness of the Chinese state that is the real sting. In other words, had China been more prosperous, Chinese teens would not have to seek refuge in hedonistic pleasure, and the romantic ideal of free love and sexual desires could have been fulfilled sooner. The backward state, therefore, should be held accountable for the debility of Chinese youths. In this new context, the problem with masturbation is not as much the loss of a Chinese youth's *semen* as the loss of a *Chinese* youth's semen. It's the Chinese state, not its people, that would need to "man up".

This vehement criticism of the Chinese society and the state was spelled out even more explicitly by Cheng Fangwu [成仿吾], another prominent May-Fourth literary critic, who went to school in Japan with Yu Dafu in 1915 and would later invest the death of the protagonist of *Sinking* with an anti-feudalistic, progressive twist. In September 1922, fourteen months after the

¹⁶ Yu, 55.

publication of Yu Dafu's controversial story, Cheng openly praised Yu's work and contended in a review article titled "Criticisms of *Sinking*" [*Chenlun de pinglun* 沉沦的评论] that it would be preposterously shallow to interpret Yu's masterpiece as pornographic and contentless; far from being a ridiculous hypochondriac, a coward or a sex maniac, the protagonist most perfectly personifies the spiritual awakening of enlightened Chinese youths. For Cheng, in courageously saying yes to his sexual desire and longings for romantic love, the protagonist is in effect saying an emphatic *no* to the prudes at home and the backward Chinese state tragically ignorant of the beauty of romantic love and the value of sexual liberty.¹⁷

Cheng's commentary leads us back to the opening question: Was the body of masturbating adolescents a docile object under the medical gaze and manipulated like puppets in the face of sweeping social changes? Indeed, the biological approach to health and the body that gained purchase in the early 20th century made masturbation a pressing pathological concern, and invested *jing* with political significance, creating widespread anxieties over health and manhood. And the body against such a background became fragile and vulnerable to intervention. But social interpretations as to *who should assume the responsibility* for the loss of *jing* and, by implication, the degradation and degeneration of the Chinese nation as well as the Chinese race, varied from one social level to another. As Yu Dafu's semi-autobiographical account has powerfully shown, at the level of individual bodily practices, masturbating adolescents rationalized their sexual desires by appropriating enlightenment discourses of romantic love to their own advantage, and directed their frustration that followed from masturbation at the state.¹⁸

¹⁷ Xu Fengcai 许凤才, "Yu Dafu yu Cheng Fangwu" 郁达夫与成仿吾 [Yu Dafu and Cheng Fangwu], *Hunan shifan xueyuan xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 湖南师范学院学报 (哲学社会科学版) 5 (1984): 102-103.

¹⁸ For a detailed discussion of how May-Fourth narratives of progress exploited enlightenment discourses of free love, see Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love In China: 1900-1950* (Stanford University Press: 2007), 95-96.

CHAPTER 3: PACIFYING THE BODY—RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND MEDICAL SOCIETIES IN ANTI-MASTURBATION CAMPAIGNS

Like educated elites, religious groups and medical societies all strove to conceptualize masturbation and rationalize abstinence on competing vocabularies. Between 1918 and 1924, moral societies or “self-cultivation societies” [*jindehui* 进德会] began to mushroom in Shanghai’s foreign settlements. And newspapers and magazines funded by religious groups in the 1920s produced an astoundingly broad array of texts treating the subject of masturbation.¹⁹ In June 13, 1925, *The World’s Anglo-Chinese Weekly* [*Shijie yinghua zhoubao* 世界英华周报] published under its weekly “The Physical Culture” section one English text, “Stepping-stones to Vitality Supreme: Self-abuse, or Masturbation,” a short excerpt originally authored by J. H. Kellogg and edited by Francis Zia (1886-1935), offering a revealing account of religious perceptions of the subject that prevailed in China’s early Republican years.²⁰

In an obvious attempt to dissuade Chinese teens from the sinful habit of self-abuse, Zia’s editorial drew heavily on Biblical language and gave a detailed outline of the chief causes of masturbation: evil associations, poor diet, and a deteriorating urban environment. Particularly worth noting was this last point which somehow harkened back to an organic past: “The whole life of the average city boy, brought up in the unusual way, tends to develop abnormally the worst side of his nature.”²¹ Zia’s synopsis of the article ran as follows:

Sexual sins are sins so bodily injurious and morally degrading that a nation cannot possibly attain the goal of prosperity...We are indebted for this material to a weighty volume on ‘Man, the Masterpiece,’ being a labour of love undertaken by J. H. Kellogg, a missionary of rich medical experience who has devoted much time to the study of the

¹⁹ See Pi Kuoli 皮国立, *Xuruoshi: jindai huaren zhongxi yixue qingyu quanshi yu yaopin wenhua (1912-1949)* 虚弱史：近代华人中西医学情欲诠释与药品文化 [A history of *xuruo*: conceptualization of sexual desires and culture of medicine in early modern Chinese medical communities] (Taipei, The Commercial Press Taiwan: 2019): 62.

²⁰ Francis Zia, “Stepping-stones to Vitality Supreme: Self-abuse, or Masturbation,” *The World’s Anglo-Chinese Weekly* (June 13 1925): 6-8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

pitfalls from which a young man will seldom escape unless warned beforehand by a systematic course of reading on his life's problems. Such a course his book unflinching affords in order to help young people to make themselves masterpieces of creation because they are men, and therefore should be up to the high standard set for them by Providence physically, and morally.²²

Zia and his contemporaries shared common epistemological grounds in that they all identified a link between *jing*, virile strength and health of the nation, and saw masturbation in its politically subversive, physically enervating potential. However, Zia's account exhibited little interest in holding the state or masturbating adolescents accountable for the evil of self-abuse and the deplorable degradation of the Chinese race. Rather, in adopting an environmentalist approach, Zia and his fellow Bible-minded reformers called for the restoration of a proper urban climate—political, educational, economic, ecological and otherwise—that was presumably conducive to individual development and capable of serving providential ends. As if with a design to stress his environmentalist outlook, Zia employed a variety of rhetorical strategies, furnishing the corner of each page with thematic quotes and aphorisms:

The air we breathe, the house in which we dwell, the very way in which it fronts the sun, the degree of light and of shade that falls upon us with the flying hours, all have their delicate influences into the tissues of our being. — Chapin²³

Five years later, Zia's environmentalist approach was echoed by an epistolary exchange between the editor of the Shanghai-based health newspaper *Dachangshi* (Everyday common sense) [大常识] and a male reader named Huang Wenhan [黄文翰]. Huang identified himself as a Chinese student studying in Kobe, Japan. And his letter, with a detailed, graphic account of his personal history of practicing masturbation, appeared in the 141st issue of *Dachangshi*.²⁴ Huang began his inquiry with a lengthy note on Japan's social atmosphere and the playfulness and coquettish good

²² Ibid., 6.

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ Huang Wenhan, "Yi ze lai han: taolun," *Dachangshi* (141st Issue 1930): 2-3.

humour of Japanese women, which inspired his sexual phantasies as well as admiration, constituting a stark contrast with Chinese women:

Dear Mr. Editor,

I first came across *Dachangshi* at Ita Bookstore in Kobe and, upon reading it, found it a true gem...So here I am with this letter, with the modest wish to communicate to you one private issue. As I arrived in Kobe, the spectre of impulsive libido—probably brought about by exposure to unhealthful surroundings—has since been haunting me...The Japanese maids! What beautiful, blithesome and well-nurtured creatures they are! Prudishness before men is an art utterly alien to them...How am I, a hot-blooded youth studying overseas alone, to resist such foreign beauty? Think about it: every day as we walk past the gates of local girls' schools, we see a bevy of Japanese schoolgirls standing side by side. They are not like Chinese girls. Chinese girls are too timid to strike up conversations with men. Now look at Japanese girls! How very open-minded! They never refrain from talking to strangers, and would often take strolls in the park with their boyfriends—hand in hand, shoulder by shoulder. Yet to them, such lighthearted flirtations and intimacy should never translate into promiscuity and sexual transgressions—they know they are too sacred, too chaste to give in to inappropriate sexual contact...I dare say if Chinese girls were to be granted the same level of freedom and intimacy, they would instantly look for a hotel room (*kaifang*) and sleep with their boyfriends. Do not take me wrong: I do not intend to excuse myself for the sins I'm about to communicate to you. I call a spade a spade! (*weishi you zheme yihuishier ne!*)...²⁵

By depicting Japanese women as “the paradigm women”, as progressive values and Confucian ideals incarnate in one, Huang underscored the “inevitability” of falling under the spell of Japanese women and practicing masturbation, and thereby shielded Chinese students from blame: Japanese women are too “good” to be true, whereas Chinese girls at home are too unenlightened to speak with, too reserved to flirt with, and too remote, too dull to have sex with. (Isn't the tone here eerily reminiscent of Yu Dafu's novelette? One would even suspect that Yu Dafu himself authored this note under the pseudonym “Huang Wenhan”!) That introduced, Huang went on to report his declining health caused by daily self-abuse:

Plagued by that strong sexual impulse, I had even planned on visiting the brothel. But considering my financial situation, and for fear of contracting syphilis, I soon found that idea hard to entertain. At last I could only stay in bed, day in and day out, overwhelmed by sexual phantasies, and practice masturbation almost mechanically (*jixieshi de*)...As I sinned more often, my face turned yellowish. I pined a good deal. My muscles atrophied.

²⁵ Ibid., 2.

I experienced semen loss almost daily during sleep, regardless of having dreams or not, which became an almost vicious cycle: I would ejaculate at the sight of beautiful girls during the daytime, causing me to lose even more essence...²⁶

Oddly, considerations of morality went entirely unmentioned here as Huang explained why he found the idea of visiting brothels hard to swallow, and was outweighed by pathological and financial concerns. Odder still was the editor's reply, which read quite soothing:

I have to concede that it could be challenging and overly demanding for a bright young man like you who studies abroad and is constantly exposed to erotic associations to tame your sexual impulse...So here I'm not interested in blaming you by repeating truisms such as 'Your are on your honour to abstain from bad influences', 'Stay away from books that are shelved as pornographic', or 'Never listen to sensual music'...My advice is terse and straightforward: recall your betrothed wife in China...Please be advised that true happiness would not come to fruition until you return to China as an accomplished scholar and start a family with your significant other. There's no point for a good man like you with a promising future in wasting time and energy on illusions...Try my method. (Editor)²⁷

Like the protagonist of *Sinking*, Huang Wenhan leveraged enlightenment discourses of romantic love to his advantage, portraying the Chinese—Chinese women in particular—as a problematic people that ultimately created people with problems—in which case, masturbating teens who claimed that they had no other choices but to realize their progressive ideals and fulfill sexual longings through masturbation. The editor's advice, on the other hand, was largely a placebo of familial bliss. In a vein similar to that of Francis Zia, the editor of *Dachangshi* expressed a tacit acknowledgment of the formative role of the environment, and thereby freed Huang and masturbating adolescents from blame or guilt. Yet, in stressing the potential of Huang's "willpower" and his yet to be activated agency in combating the demon within, the editor was reluctant to hold the state or the larger society responsible for the spread of the evil of masturbation, leaving one clear message: the Chinese society and the conventional moral and political order, as symbolized by Huang's betrothed wife, were by no means that decadent, and should be always worth returning

²⁶ Ibid., 2.

²⁷ Ibid., 3.

to—but only through at least some degree of self-discipline or individual exertion could such a return translate into a tensionless state of Nirvana and a harmonious, fulfilled future life.

CHAPTER 4: POLICING THE BODY: THE STATE AND THE NEW LIFE MOVEMENT

Medical societies and religious communities were not the only parties with a stake in the politics of abstinence. As such politics intensified, the figure of the nationalist state began to loom so large as to change the game entirely.

In 1934, Chiang Kai-shek and the Guomindang government inaugurated a mass campaign in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, with an explicit aim to achieve the regeneration of the Chinese people through building their commitment to a synthesized code of behavior based on Confucian values, anti-communism, and public hygiene. Commonly known as the New Life Movement [*Xinshenghuo yundong* 新生活运动], this state-sponsored civil cultivation program soon went nationwide. By February 1935, fifteen provinces, three municipalities, and nine railway centers all established New Life promotional organizations.²⁸ Far from being a reaffirmation of Chinese “traditions” inherited from the past, the New Life Movement was later proved to be fashioned by and promoted as a response to the twentieth-century Chinese revolution.²⁹ The chief tenet of the movement, as vividly spelled out by Chiang Kai-shek in a 1934 speech and soon replicated in *Xinshenghuo Zhoukan* (The New Life Magazine), betrays a grave concern about the male *jing*:

Present-day Chinamen are inferior to Westerners in spirit and scope of knowledge. To make matters worse, the typical Chinaman is tragically debilitated and lacking in physical vitality. Hence he’s practically deprived of the chance of rivaling Westerners. I must admit that this is the most fundamental crisis besetting our nation and the Chinese race...To save the nation, we must put our best efforts into preserving our seed through relentless physical exercise. And in order to preserve our fertility, the wanton waste of seed inherited from our fathers and grandfathers on sensual pleasure ought to be prohibited.³⁰

²⁸ Arif Dirlik. "The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (1975): 949.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 945.

³⁰ Gao Sulan Ed., *Jiang Zhongzheng zongtong dangan: shigao lueben* (Biographical notes about the late president Chiang Kai-shek) (Taipei, Academia Historica: 2007): 15-16.

Chiang's motto highlights the utmost political importance of semen to national and racial continuity. For Chiang, that semen has much to bear on national strength is out of question. But unlike enlightened romantics, religious enthusiasts, and medical gurus, in dealing with the problem of masturbation, Chiang was uninterested in finding fault with the state or the larger society. Rather, Chiang dismissed the animus shared among educated elites toward the state as unfounded, and did not hesitate to hold China's youth who failed to practice sexual abstinence accountable for impeding the progress of China's nation-building project. Chiang declared that to strengthen the nation, Chinese youths must first learn to strengthen themselves by preserving their "seeds" [*zhong* 种]—seeds of hope, seeds of national prosperity, and seeds of racial integrity—through practicing abstinence under the supervision and guidance of the state.

This note of state paternalism found perfect reverberation in the anti-masturbation literature of the time. In a 1935 article titled "Shouyin: qingnian de choudi" (Masturbation: the arch-nemesis of youths) and published under the "Sexually Transmitted Diseases" section of *Changshou* (Shanghai 1932), one contributor under the pseudonym of "Lei" wrote:

Adolescents who committed this sin are often underachievers at school. In the old days, Chinese parents invariably made masturbation an embarrassing subject to talk openly in front of children...This is a gross error. Fortunately, these days we are witnessing more and more campaigners endeavoring to incorporate the facts about masturbation into conventional sex education at school, which shows a promising sign.³¹

Where this piece merits particular attention is its harsh, vitriolic tone: as if retorting to the Yu Dafus and the Huang Wenhans of the day, the author held masturbating teens as the chief target of ridicule and blame: only "bad" children lacking in self-restraint, family education, and perhaps even intelligence, would subject themselves to masturbation, and masturbation could in turn make them even "worse". Moreover, the author argued that "correct" education must be carried out under

³¹ Lei, "Shouyin: qingnian de choudi", *Changshou* (6th Edition Vol. 4 1935): 12-13.

the aegis of state reformers, not the traditional family. On that basis, the author further pronounced a politically charged diatribe against the demon of masturbation:

Masturbation ruins the future of our teens. It deprives teens of their god-given rights. It turns them into heirless invalids and skeletons...I hope teenagers will all keep my message in mind: if you have committed masturbation before, simply quite; if not, stay vigilant and guard against it (*you ze gai zhi, wu ze jia mian*).³²

As if this barrage of remonstrances were not sufficient to fully articulate his/her boisterous sentiments, near the end of the piece the author attached two rhymed poems, which ran (see Figure. 2):

I
Masturbation! Masturbation! She is the parasitic devil!
How many young talents have we seen she laid in peril?
She sucks your young blood, tears you apart,
Fiendishly pretty, she casts her spell and captures your heart.

II
Youths! Youths! You are the light of the universe!
Mankind will flourish for and take pride in you,
And it's the wish of us all that you become great men of the world.
But beware! Never lose yourself to the kiss of the Demon!³³

Curiously enough, this piece, exhibiting more political fervor than medical acumen about physical well-being and peppered with an armada of reformist slogans, should have appeared under the “Sexually Transmitted Diseases” section! Here one cannot help but ask: Does this piece really have much to bear on sexually transmitted diseases and male health? Is it a mere treatise on sexual hygiene? Who is the author? Whose *voice* are we to discern from this piece? Offhand, the pen name “Lei” (蕾, a feminine character literally meaning “aromatic flower bud”) naturally reminds one of a young female. And the section title “Sexually Transmitted Diseases” evokes the voice of a medical expert. But as one reads and reads through tropes of “god-given rights”, “great men of

³² Ibid., 13.

³³ Ibid., 15.

the world”, and “state-sponsored new education”, one hears the unmistakable bourdon tone of the Nationalist state amid this cacophony of voices. By exploiting and fusing together the female voice and the voice of medical as well as literary professionals, the Nationalist state in effect issued a clarion call to expel foreign devils, constituted the citizen as a site of self-discipline and bearer of social responsibility, and transformed this war against masturbation into a people’s war for building a stronger China. To phrase it in an Arendtian fashion, the subject of masturbation and the abstinence therefrom evolved from a form of *labour*, a means to cater to men’s biological needs in the early 1920s, into a type of *work* channeled toward maintaining an organic world fit for human use, before being ultimately galvanized during the mid-1930s in the New Life Movement into *action* and valued for its ability to affirm the reality of the world and actualize our revolutionary capacity (see Figure. 3).³⁴

³⁴ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press 1998).

之。臨睡前之五分鐘健身操亦甚有效。早晨一醒即起床。切勿戀被窩。因戀被窩是誘成手淫的種種不良環境之一。戒絕手淫癖的方法已如上述。現在以白話詩兩章作為全篇結論。

一

手淫。手淫。她真正是萬惡的妖精。

她斷送了無數的才子年紀青青。

她能活活地把你吞下不嫌血腥。

但她是非常美麗能教你一見傾心。

二

青年。青年。你們是世界的光明。

人類將因為你們而更幸福更光榮。

誰都盼望你將來成為世界上一個偉人。

但你必須當心不要自投那妖精的饒吻。

□ 手淫與意淫

性病須知

一三

從

Figure 2. Lei's cautionary poem in Changshou

國難!

國難臨頭，已居危在旦之秋。速宜使身體強健，方敵萬國效勞。孩學民族。

愛國之心，人人均具。此國身力薄，而英氣重。舉步乏力，增進衰弱。為國體弱，或因嗜好未除，或因不自由，雖具愛國之熱忱，無效而有餘力不足，前能常用新發明藥劑製之。

補使命 補針注射 補粉內服

定能使之精神強，強者為健，而弱者為病。此之故也。有過者速少之奇效，患有病者速用之，能使體質逐漸減少，或病後用之，得以此減少之病。現象之痛苦如基於此，或病後用之，尤能壯其內，增精神，恢復正氣之健康。

補使命 為近世最新之大補劑。最宜於個人之體格，持劑等皆速。口，本處成宜，合其功用，男女用此等，其明味，其時時服用。定能圓滿之家庭健康之國民。請速即向藥房採購中華民族。

補針 每盒一元五角
補粉 每盒一元五角
總發行所 上海新亞藥廠

上海新亞藥廠製造

Figure 3. A particular brand of sperm health supplements advertised in Shen Pao. The titles read: "NATIONAL CRISIS! To save the country, boost your virile energy!...Try this pill developed by Shanghai New Asia Pharmaceuticals!" Source: Commercial Section, Shen Pao (June 1936). See Pi Kuoli, Xuruoshi, 115.

One final caveat about this side of the picture we need to note is that while state regulations of reproductive sex were not a Chinese invention, the state's grip over male bodies as a particular source of eugenic anxiety in the case of Republican China was patently new and sets it apart from European eugenicist discourses. In Switzerland, for example, the state had likewise vigorously sponsored academic conferences, political reforms, and campaigns on key themes such as "hereditary responsibility" and "psychiatric-eugenic advice on marital candidates" in the 1930s. And other European countries, most notably Germany, soon followed suit. Information brochures, peppered with slogans strikingly similar to those popular in China, were produced and widely distributed in Swiss schools in 1939, encouraging Swiss youths to:

Choose your spouse from a physically and morally healthy, mentally superior family! You owe this to your offspring and to the Nation.³⁵

Such noticeable affinities to China's New Life Movement, however, tend to muddle a crucial difference that often escapes the eyes of most historians—perhaps with the exception of Yuval-Davis, who shrewdly points out that what characterizes the European experience is that ideas about the "purity of the race" tend to be intertwined with the regulation of female, rather than male, sexuality.³⁶ In other words, in the European context state regulation of reproductive sex was a heavily gendered practice targeting disproportionately women. Legal sterilizations and prohibitive marriage law were imposed on young, female deviants, that is, women who were deemed "maladapted" with "low intelligence." The notorious 1927 *Buck vs Bell* court rule in Virginia, for example, sanctioned the sterilization of a single mother who was considered too "feeble-minded", despite the fact that her pregnancy was mainly the result of incest against her will, on the

³⁵ Veronique Mottier, "Eugenics and the Swiss Gender Regime: Women's Bodies and the Struggle Against Difference," *Schweizerische Zeitschrift Fur Soziologie/Revue Suisse De sociologie/Swiss Journal of Sociology* 32, no. 2 (0, 2006): 253-267.

³⁶ See Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*, Politics and Culture (London ; Sage Publications, 1997).

questionable grounds that “society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind...three generations of imbeciles is enough.”³⁷ Likewise, data from Zurich show that between 1929 and 1931, eugenic sterilizations were directed at 480 women and—in staggering contrast—15 men.³⁸ As it were, European eugenicist discourses, while betraying a tinge of state paternalism not unlike that of Republican China, were slow to acknowledge the role played by as well as the political implications of men in reproduction, treating women’s sexuality as a site of intervention and a source of exploitation. In the case of China, however, it was precisely female sexuality in state regulations of reproductive sex that was usually taken as unproblematic and devoid of political implications. Urban newspapers rarely featured articles advising women how to abstain from masturbation and maintain reproductive health. And when they did, virtually no conceptual link was drawn between women’s reproductive health and the health of the national body politic.³⁹

³⁷ See Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³⁸ Véronique Mottier, *Sexuality: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2008): 91.

³⁹ For examples, see Xiong Zhaohui, “Shouyin: tan nüzi shouyin,” *Changshou (Shanghai 1932)* (vol.4 1935): 16-21; see also Bao Tianbai, “Nüzi shouyin zhi zhenduanfa,” *Jiating Yiyao* (vol.1 1933): 19-21.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Our calendar now turns to 1935, a time when the New Life Movement had just reached its commanding height, returning us to the curious exchange between the young teacher and the editor of *Jiankang shenghuo* introduced at the beginning.

Jiankang shenghuo, a Tianjin-based publication helmed by recognized medical professionals of the day, was no health magazine in the ordinary sense. Its very cover, heavily embellished with signatures and epigraphs of prominent Nationalist politicians and patrician office-holders—Yu Youren (1879-1964), Qian Zongze (1891-1940), and Zeng Zhongming (1896-1939), to name just a few—speaks volumes for its political persuasions and commitments.⁴⁰ And Chiang Kai-shek's forceful pronouncement—"Physical exercise...offers a timely antidote to the social ills that have been haunting our ailing race"—that graced the magazine's front page gives powerful testimony to the official ideology it registered (see Figure. 4).⁴¹ Read against this backdrop, the anonymous teacher's expressions of contrition—"I would have committed suicide long ago to end this shameful and miserable life, had it not been for the love and care I received from the State throughout my education and career"—should not come as that much of a surprise: quitting masturbation was refashioned into a holy act of requiting the love of the state in the mid-1930s; to achieve that, one must hold oneself accountable and bring forth one's best efforts.⁴² Here the veracity of this statement should not concern us. So far as questions of authorship and word choices are concerned, chances are that this statement reflects more an editorial choice, epistolary acumen or quirky mannerism than a heartfelt confession. But this language of contrition does have the merit of teaching us a new episteme, a new social ethos: a conceptual link between anti-

⁴⁰ Note: Yu Youren had long served as the Deputy Minister of Transportation and Communication and President of Control Yuan. Qian Zongze and Zeng Zhongming headed the Ministry of Railways in the 1930s.

⁴¹ See *Jiankang shenghuo* (5th Edition Vol. 5 1935), iii-iv. See also Fig. 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 314-315.

masturbation and nation-building, between individual exertion and state paternalism is clearly discernible in it. To put it in a jargon-free way, the anonymous subscriber might well have made that remark out of politeness, a routine way of writing letters or social propriety. Whatever the case, it does tell us that in the mid-thirties, it made sense to say that individual sexual abstinence is and should be practiced in the honor of the state.



Figure 4. Generalissimo Chiang’s pronouncements on preserving “seed” and maintaining physical health that embellished the bottom of the cover page of *Jiankang shenghuo* (5th edition, vol.5, 1935)

Equally worth noting is the editor’s reply. The editor toed the party line and routinely lamented the man’s physical and mental impotence as well as lack of self-restraint. However, in prescribing

a cure, he gradually and self-consciously drew on medical language and called for an environmentalist approach: proper meals, cold showers, loose-fitting garments, and tonic hormones (a highly *lucrative* offering) were all designed to change one's bodily economy and living environment for the better.⁴³ In this sense, medical journals (and newspapers with religious backgrounds as analyzed earlier of course) of the day were by no means reducible to the mouthpiece of the state. Rather, medical societies conceptualized masturbation, rationalized sexual abstinence, and navigated the tension between the state and the individual on its own vocabulary in pursuit of distinctive political, commercial interests.

The regulation of masturbation, as clearly demonstrated by this “masturpiece”, has never been a story of coercion or repression, something unilaterally imposed on the male body by the state, medical authorities or moralists. I encourage readers to revisit Arif Dirlik's wisdom, and study the Republic's biogovernance as an *unfolding process*, focusing on the tensions, dynamics, and contingencies therein.⁴⁴

Building on Frank Dikötter's 1995 study of the construction of sexual identities in early Republican China and Francesca Bray's big picture of biopolitics in early twentieth-century East Asia, my study explores anti-masturbation literature in urban print as a field of politics encompassing a colorful menagerie of civic actors, and adopts a tripartite model following a clear chronological sequence to analyze how the state, the individual and intermediary social groups, in rationalizing abstinence from “self-abuse” and advocating for the preservation of one's “seed”, exploited enlightenment discourses differently to advance competing agendas. And my approach stresses that state power “can only achieve an effective command over the entire life of a population when it becomes an integral, vital function that every individual embraces and

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Arif Dirlik, “Chinese History,” 99-101, 112-17; Dirlik, *Culture and History*, 153-55.

reactivates on his or her own accord.”⁴⁵ At the level of individual bodily practices, masturbating adolescents, as exemplified by the May-Fourth educated elites, exerted their own moral agency and processed the anxiety over semen loss through appropriating enlightenment discourses of free love to their own advantage, and directed their frustration that followed from masturbation—their hedonistic refuge—at the state. The state, however, by holding masturbating males absolutely responsible for the degradation of the Chinese race and constructing their semen as the symbol of national strength or sites of discipline, turned the May-Fourth narrative upside down and effectively transformed anti-masturbation into a revolutionary cause. Between this twosome sat religious groups and medical societies who, while promoting abstinence, strove to seek middle ground and reconciliation; by drawing on either Biblical language or language of medicine, they argued for a holistic environmentalist approach, aiming at building a more organic urban environment conducive to male health and human flourishing, and prescribed their own cures to the *maladie d'époque*. These three strands of bodily regime interwove like threads of a cloth around the central linchpin of sexual abstinence, leaving their indelible marks on urban print culture and defining the fabrics of the Republic's biopolitical climate.

⁴⁵ See P. Sean Brotherton, *Revolutionary Medicine: Health and the Body in Post-Soviet Cuba* (Duke University Press: 2012), 5.

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