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**A Small Business of Sexual Enlightenment:
Zhang Jingsheng's "Beauty Bookshop", Shanghai 1927-1929**

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Abstract

*This paper addresses the history and historiography of sexual knowledge during the May Fourth New Culture Movement (ca. 1910s-1930s) in China. Chinese intellectuals engaged in an ambitious project to build a "New Culture", translating and appropriating a wide range of foreign ideas including European and American works on sexology, reproduction, and eugenics. I focus on "Dr Sex", Zhang Jingsheng (1888-1970), well-known for his 1926 publication *Sex Histories*. Zhang wanted to introduce the scientific study of sex to China and to overthrow what he regarded as repressive Chinese traditions. Between 1927 and 1929, Zhang operated the "Beauty Bookshop" in Fuzhou Road, Shanghai's "cultural street", to disseminate his writings and translations. He also published a short-lived journal called *New Culture*, which carried articles on politics, aesthetics, and most interestingly, readers' inquiries on sexual and reproductive practices. The case study on Zhang Jingsheng's "small business of sexual enlightenment"—to adapt a term from Leo Ou-fan Lee (in turn borrowed from Robert Darnton)—sheds light on local entrepreneurial and commercial dynamics in the publishing field of 1920s Shanghai that were crucial to the distribution of knowledge. It also offers an opportunity to see how China's urban, bourgeois, educated readers engaged with modern medico-scientific knowledge.*

Keywords: *Zhang Jingsheng (1888-1970), sexology, entrepreneurship, bookshops, readers' letters, Shanghai.*

Introduction: The Dissemination and Consumption of Sexual Knowledge

[W]hen [the Beauty Bookshop] first opened, business was booming. All our publications were sold out right away. Now you're going to ask what was so valuable about these books

and why they seemed utterly irresistible. Were they similar to *Sex Histories*? Were they new-style pornographic texts? No, they weren't. What we published were [...] books by [Havelock] Ellis on all kinds of sex difficulties [...] Our little bookshop was located at what was called "Fourth Avenue"; this was the bookshop district (Zhang Jingsheng, 2008: 161-162).

In the late 1920s, Chinese intellectual Zhang Jingsheng 張競生 (1888-1970) established the Beauty Bookshop (*Mei de shudian* 美的書店) in Fuzhou Road, Shanghai's "cultural street" (Wang Yaohua, 2006; Reed, 2004: 203-256). Zhang was Professor of Philosophy at Peking University from 1921 until he relocated to Shanghai in 1926 (Rocha, 2015; Rocha, 2010; Zhang Peizhong, 2008; Jiang Xiaoyuan, 2006; Peng, 1999; Leary, 1994). He set up the Beauty Bookshop with his associates; his mission was to disseminate Zhang's own writings on sex education as well as translations of foreign sexological texts, in order to bring about a "sexual revolution" (*xing geming* 性革命). Zhang Jingsheng also published a monthly in-house journal entitled *New Culture* (*Xin Wenhua* 新文化); it carried articles on politics, art, philosophy, and notably, readers' inquiries on sexual morality and practices—a significant selling point at the time. The Beauty Bookshop and *New Culture* both proved to be small-scale and short-lived: the former survived for around two years (1927-1929) and the latter ran for only six issues.

From the perspective of intellectual history, Zhang's bookshop and journal could be situated in the context of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, generally said to begin in the mid-1910s and to have ended around the 1930s (Mitter, 2005; Chen Pingyuan, 2001; Doleželová-Velingerová and Král, 2001; Chow et. al., 2008). To save the Chinese nation from the forces of imperialism and colonialism, many Chinese thinkers embarked on an audacious attempt to build a "New Culture" to replace Confucianism, "feudal morality", and old values which they believed had impeded China's modernisation. To that end these intellectuals, positioning themselves as agents of enlightenment, translated, borrowed, and distributed a tremendous range of new knowledge from Europe, America, and Japan (Liu 1995). Typical of this "May Fourth" generation, Zhang believed that, to increase China's national strength, the

quality of its population had to be improved. To accomplish that, Chinese women had to be emancipated from traditional family structures, sexual relations had to be fundamentally reconfigured, and reproduction had to be regulated through the implementation of birth control, eugenics and racial science (Sakamoto, 2004; Chung, 2010; Chung, 2002). Zhang's Beauty Bookshop and *New Culture* belonged to the countless number of projects at that moment when intellectuals thought the circulation of new ideas would bring about permanent social transformation. Political changes in the 1930s—the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and then the full-scale Second Sino-Japanese War—pulled intellectuals away from utopian thinking into militant politicisation and violent revolution.

I argue that the Beauty Bookshop and *New Culture* offer an invaluable opportunity to rethink frequently neglected issues concerning the dissemination and consumption of medico-scientific knowledge on sex and reproduction. Thanks to Anglophone scholarship on Chinese sexuality from the last twenty years or so, we have a thorough understanding of how Chinese intellectuals refashioned Western ideas to serve political ends, and how Chinese conceptualisations of sex accommodated or clashed with sexological knowledge arriving from afar (e.g. Dikötter, 1995; Chung, 2002; Sang, 2003; Barlow, 2004; Kang, 2009). This body of scholarship globalises the histories of sexuality and medicine—scrutinising networks of communication between adjacent as well as distant locations; the migration of people and expertise; the translation of texts and the movement of technologies.

Some scholars, such as Howard Chiang, have argued that the heated and often interminable debates on sexuality among groups of elite Chinese men (and some Chinese women) signalled a discursive shift in China—towards what Michel Foucault called *scientia sexualis*—that was radically discontinuous with the Chinese past (Chiang, 2010a; Chiang, 2010b). The prioritisation of the discursive and the global dimensions can, however, elide important questions concerning local conditions, as if ideas sublimated into a stratosphere of modernity or became implanted into a deep cultural unconscious. Instead of operating at that level, I am interested in asking the following questions: How was sex knowledge disseminated and promoted in China? What commercial dynamics and market forces drove the distribution of

publications about reproduction and sexuality? Why did some theories become fashionable for a brief period of time, and then disappear? What did the readership of these publications actually make of these modern ideas?

I use the case of Zhang Jingsheng's business venture to explore the publishing field and intellectual habitus in republican Shanghai, and to answer the questions above. The bookshop and journal also enable historians to peer into the mentalities of urban, educated, "self-aware youths" (*zhishi qingnian* 知識青年) in China—Zhang's primary audience—and how they interacted and interfaced with talk on free love, contraception, "perversions", and sex difficulties. They were trying to fathom what it meant to be modern, enlightened, and emancipated individuals. In what follows, I first introduce Zhang's life and work, concentrating on his metamorphosis from university academic to cultural entrepreneur in the late 1920s. The story is tied to the exodus of intellectuals from war and terror in Northern China, and the ascendance of Shanghai as China's cultural capital. In Part II, I turn to the Beauty Bookshop's operation, and argue that the demise of Zhang's business was related to commercial factors—a failure to build a competitive business. Part III pays closer attention the "Questions and Answers" section in *New Culture*; we can see how readers responded to Zhang's writings and to the Beauty Bookshop's products, and I argue that the "small business of sexual enlightenment" was just as responsible for generating the anxieties keenly felt by the emergent middle-class readership.

The paper's title, "A Small Business of Sexual Enlightenment", is an invocation of Leo Lee's *Shanghai Modern*. Lee argues that Shanghai's commercial ventures in publishing were "comparable to the eighteenth-century French 'Business of Enlightenment' [described] by Robert Darnton, in which the ideas of the *philosophes* were popularised and vigorously disseminated by a network of printers and booksellers" (Lee, 1999: 47; Darnton, 1968). In examining Shanghai's "Business of Enlightenment", previous scholarship focused on big players such as the Commercial Press (*Shangwu yinshuguan* 商務印書館), China Books (*Zhonghua shuju* 中華書局) and World Books (*Shijie shuju* 世界書局)—collectively known as the "Three Legs of the Tripod" (*sanzu dingli* 三足鼎立) (Lee, 1999: 43-81; Reed, 2004: 203-256). The "Three Legs of the Tripod" dominated the Fuzhou Road cultural

scene, and indeed China's publishing industry. Together they had by far the largest capital and turnover compared to any other bookshop or publisher in the 1920s and 1930s. Their publications had the highest circulation numbers and reached an extremely wide readership, including the Chinese diaspora (Reed, 2004: 210-211).

However, the "Three Legs of the Tripod" were ultimately exceptional in the Chinese publishing field in terms of their business structure and their ability to maintain (sometimes cosy) relationships with politicians and state institutions—and exceptional too in the very existence of archival materials for them. In the Republican era, Fuzhou Road was littered with hundreds of smaller bookshops, many of which failed within years or even months. Unlike the "Three Legs of the Tripod", most small businesses, like Zhang Jingsheng's Beauty Bookshop, left behind no traces in the Shanghai Municipal Archives. In this regard, the Beauty Bookshop was a very *typical* bookshop and, through Zhang's memoirs, *New Culture* and other materials—problematic these sources may be—there was a sufficient trail of historical sources.

For most other smaller bookshops, historians could generally say very little about them; it would be extremely challenging to ascertain even basic information, for instance their years of operation or what they sold. Many Chinese intellectuals at first worked for one of the major publishers, became frustrated with the big companies' business acumen and political conservatism, and subsequently set up their own bookshops that afforded them greater creative control, at the expense of financial stability (Hockx, 1999b: 74). Therefore, it is crucial to study those smaller businesses of enlightenment for a more rounded understanding of Shanghai's marketplace of ideas.

In this regard, the paper is animated by Michel Hockx's work, which grounds the traffic of ideas in republican China on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theorisation of social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Hockx, 2003a; Hockx, 1999b; Denton and Hockx, 2008); the paper also speaks to investigations of cultural entrepreneurship in China (Rea & Volland, 2015). Whereas previous scholarship has tended to explain Zhang Jingsheng's failure and subsequent marginalisation on the basis of the absurdity of his theories about sex and

reproduction, I argue that it is better to contextualise and nuance Zhang's case as a failure to safeguard the viability of his "small business of enlightenment", and to sustain a vital outlet for his views.

I. From the Ivory Towers to the Cultural Street

Zhang Jingsheng was born in 1888 in Raoping, Guangdong. He attended the Whampoa Military Primary School where he received a Western-style technical education and acquired proficiency in French, and later studied at the Imperial Capital University in Beijing. Like many of his contemporaries, Zhang developed a keen interest in sexology, eugenics, Social Darwinism, and racial science. In 1912, Zhang travelled to France through a Kuomintang scholarship, and enrolled at the University of Paris and then the University of Lyon (Lai, 2009). At Lyon, Zhang completed a doctoral dissertation on Rousseau's pedagogical philosophy; he would later produce Chinese translations of Rousseau's *Confessions* and *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. In 1920, he returned to China and was then appointed professor at Peking University. In 1924 and 1925, he published two texts, entitled *An Aesthetic Outlook of Life* (*Mei de renshengguan* 美的人生觀) and *The Method of Organisation of an Aesthetic Society* (*Mei de shehui zuzhifa* 美的社會組織法). These two texts established his reputation as a radical and somewhat eccentric thinker, who wanted to build a Chinese utopia based on aesthetic education, free love, and sexual liberation (Zhang, 2009; Lee, 2006; Lee, 2007: 140-185; Rocha, 2017).

In 1926, Zhang embarked on the project that would bring him overnight notoriety—*Sex Histories* (*Xingshi* 性史) (Leary, 1993; Peng, 1999; Lee, 2007: 186-219; Larson, 2009: 54-59). *Sex Histories* contained seven sexually explicit autobiographical confessions that Zhang solicited through an advertisement in a newspaper supplement. At the end of each confession, Zhang appended his sexological commentaries and claimed he was emulating British sexologist Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1928). Zhang presented *Sex Histories* as a matter-of-fact, self-help manual that would instruct Chinese individuals about sexual hygiene and modern science. He prescribed his "correct path of sex" that would "heighten the intimacy between men and

women, achieve a fulfilling marriage” and produce “physically strong and vivacious children” (Zhang, 2009: 155).

His theorisation of this “correct path of sex”, which only permitted heterosexual penile-vaginal penetration, revolved around the concept of the “Third Kind of Water” (*disanzhong shui* 第三種水) (Zhang, 2006: 80-84; Zhang, 1927b). He suggested that a woman’s genitals could secrete three kinds of fluids: from the labia (“First Kind”), the clitoris (“Second Kind”), and the Bartholin’s glands (“Third Kind”). He believed that, in an ideal intercourse with lengthy foreplay and penetration, a woman could release all three kinds of fluids. All sexual secretions had to be absorbed for their health benefits: a woman had to absorb a man’s semen and a man had to absorb all three kinds of fluids from a woman. Moreover, Zhang suggested that it was a man’s duty to train his stamina so that he could penetrate a woman for a lengthy period of time; he had to delay ejaculation so that it could coincide exactly with a woman’s orgasm. A child conceived at the moment when a couple reached simultaneous orgasm, with the ovum and sperm “enlivened” by the “Third Kind of Water”, would be physically stronger and more intelligent. Therefore, Zhang claimed that his “correct path of sex” also fulfilled a eugenic objective, inspired by Marie Stopes’s *Married Love* (1918). As I have argued elsewhere, as “bizarre and ‘pseudoscientific’” as Zhang’s theory might sound, it could nevertheless be situated “in the context of [the] global genealogy and traffic of ideas” as a number of European and American sex manuals carried similar ideas on the eugenic function of simultaneous orgasms and vaginal fluids (Rocha, 2015: 163-164).

Zhang’s contemporaries were broadly hostile to *Sex Histories*, arguing that it was at best nonsensical and at worst “smut-peddling” (*huiyin* 誨淫) (Leary, 1993; Larson, 2009: 54-59). Pirated copies, fake sequels, and parodies of *Sex Histories* rapidly appeared. Bans were put in place by some regional authorities, and schools allegedly searched their dormitories and confiscated *Sex Histories* from students (Zhang, 1927; Zhang, 2008: 157-158). Zhang abandoned plans to publish further volumes of *Sex Histories*, and in December 1926, left Beijing for Shanghai. It is unclear whether Peking University sacked him. In his memoirs, Zhang explained that Peking University’s faculty could apply for sabbatical after four to five years of service, and his original plan was

to travel for one year (Zhang, 2008: 161). However, the political turmoil that unfolded in 1926 and 1927—the March 18 Massacre and Zhang Zuolin’s occupation of Beijing—meant that Beijing was no longer safe for intellectuals (Zhang, 2008: 103-104; Schwarcz, 1986: 156-158; Strand, 1998: 193-194; Lin, 2005: 59).

Chinese academics were also not receiving regular pay. Funding for the universities came from the Boxer Indemnity Fund, but the fund’s distribution was “conducted by a committee that suffered from serious administrative problems and possible embezzlement” (Lin, 2005: 45). In 1926, Peking University faculty probably received thirty to forty percent of their monthly salary. Zhang and his colleagues faced two options. They could seek employment at other institutions in Southern China, or they could try to build alternative careers as freelance writers, publishers, journalists, editors, or translators. Like many of his friends and adversaries, Zhang stepped out of the proverbial ivory tower into a marketplace of competing bookshops, magazines, and journals.

By the late 1920s, Shanghai had become home to most well-known Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries. Its well-developed cultural industry provided intellectuals with a regular income, and the “legislative blankness” and the multiple occupation zones meant that censorship was disorganised and ineffectual (Kohama, 2000: 55; Hockx, 1998). Migrants were greeted with a city in which Western technology was ubiquitous, and where material comforts and spaces of interaction were abundant, from coffee-houses to foreign-language bookstores, from dancehalls to newspaper offices. The critical mass of thinkers in Shanghai, embracing divergent politics and possessing different expertise, led to an upsurge of intellectual production and a concomitant battle for positions in which Zhang vigorously participated (Xu, 2007).

II. The Beauty Bookshop and a Small Business of Sexual Enlightenment

Arriving in Shanghai in December 1926, Zhang flirted with the idea of working for the Commercial Press. However, like many Chinese intellectuals, he was

dismayed with the big businesses' restraints on scholarly freedom and editorial autonomy (Zhang, 2008: 166; Hockx, 1999b: 70-74). The Commercial Press adopted a conservative approach, not just to content but also genre; it was most famous for its reference works, general guidebooks, and abridged translations. Zhang thought the Commercial Press's products were often stitched together with little regard for the unity of the work or the quality of individual contributions (Zhang, 2008: 166). Moreover, he was displeased with the organisation of labour at the Commercial Press, where editors and translators were paid a fixed fee per Chinese character, and often received neither royalties nor attribution (Zhang, 2008: 180).

Zhang therefore decided to set up his own bookshop on Fuzhou Road in the International Settlement. He took advantage of this arrangement knowing that, if he landed in trouble, the International Settlement Police had no jurisdiction in the French Concession and therefore could not arrest him at his residence there (Zhang, 2008: 24-28; Martin, 1996: 31-32; Wakeman, 1995: 60-77). Fuzhou Road was located behind the international banks and the government institutions at the Bund, and several blocks away from Nanjing Road, the commercial hub and shopping centre of Shanghai (Cochran, 1999). Fuzhou Road took shape in the 1880s as a collection of offices for China's major publishers and newspapers. By the early twentieth century, these were joined by retail outlets, antique bookshops, trade associations, stationers and art suppliers, printers and instrument makers, translators' bureaus, and calligraphers' studios. By the 1920s, there were hundreds of large and small businesses crammed within the road's mile-long stretch and its side-streets. It became home to the headquarters and flagship stores of most "cultural brands" in China. There was also a clear east-west divide on Fuzhou Road—a gradient of respectability. On the east and towards the Bund, there were financial firms and elite institutions, and as one moved further west and away from the river, the density of entertainment establishments dramatically increased (Hu, 2001: 3-7).

Zhang's Beauty Bookshop was located at 510 Fuzhou Road, towards the seedier end of the "cultural street" and away from reputable bookshops like the "Three Legs of the Tripod". It opened in May 1927 with a capitalisation of about 2,000 dollars, which was typical for establishing a small bookstore in

Shanghai at that time (Zhang, 2008: 24-25, 161; cf. Liang, 2002: 338 on New Crescent Bookstore). This covered the printing and distribution of publications, as well as rent, fees for contributors and translators, and salaries for shop-front employees. Even though Zhang's name appeared prominently in Beauty Bookshop's products, a certain Xie Yunru 謝蘊如 was in fact listed as the major shareholder and general manager. Zhang himself was nominally the chief editor, deputised by the photographer and translator Peng Zhaoliang 彭兆良 (1901-1967), who would go on to edit *Ling Long* 玲瓏 magazine from 1935 to 1937 (Zhang, 2008: 27; Cheung, 2015). This arrangement provided Zhang with a degree of protection: when the Beauty Bookshop was in trouble with the International Settlement Police on obscenity charges, Zhang could not be held accountable as he was nominally not in charge of its operations.

The Beauty Bookshop was closely associated with a "New Culture Society" (*Xin wenhua she* 新文化社), consisting of around five or six disciples of Zhang Jingsheng. This "New Culture Society" was what Michel Hockx would call a "habitual society" (Hockx 2003a: 90)—a collective behind the release of a publication, in this case *New Culture*, the in-house journal of the Beauty Bookshop. A number of pieces in *New Culture* were signed by the New Culture Society, including a call for new members of the society (*Xin wenhua she*, 1927b: first page). This announcement began with a reiteration of Zhang's basic aims: promoting sex education and aesthetic philosophy. The New Culture Society was to provide a forum for like-minded individuals to improve themselves; Zhang wished to import the French salon culture into China. Future plans included setting up New Culture Society branches in major cities. In Hockx's terminology, Zhang was aiming to transform what began as a "habitual society" into an organisation with greater public visibility. It was also a marketing strategy—an attempt to expand the Beauty Bookshop's readership beyond Shanghai—but there was no evidence that the plan had much traction.

Zhang operated within a wider network of allies, as illustrated in *New Culture's* inaugural issue (December 1926). The lead article, on women's inheritance rights, was followed by endorsements from well-known intellectuals and politicians such as Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940), Wu Zhihui 吳稚暉 (1865-1953), and Zhang Ji 張繼 (1882-1945) (*Xin wenhua she*,

1927a: 1-21). The section concluded with a collection of signatures which exhibited *New Culture's* credentials and allegiances; they functioned similarly to the “inscriptions” (*tizi* 題字) commonly found in Chinese books (Yen, 2005: 17-25; Rocha, 2010: 243-245). Wu Zihui, Cai Yuanpei and Zhang Ji had all been involved in the organisation of the work-study programs for Chinese students in France. Wu and Zhang Ji both belonged to the Kuomintang's left-anarchist faction (Dirlik, 1991: 260).

From the list of signatories, a politically aware reader would surmise that *New Culture* and the Beauty Bookshop were situated in the left-anarchist, utopian socialist portion of China's political spectrum. *New Culture* positioned itself against the warlords in Northern China and the foreign powers, against Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang Right or intellectuals inspired by Anglo-American liberalism, and against Marxist-Leninism and the Chinese Communist Party. Zhang's venture, then, was not associated with the powerful political forces in 1920s China. *New Culture* did not adopt an irreverent, apolitical, or commercial approach to stay out of trouble either. In other words, Zhang lacked the kind of political support that might allow *New Culture* and the Beauty Bookshop to flourish.

The Beauty Bookshop produced three kinds of books: (i) the “Little Series on Sex Education” (*xingyu xiao congshu* 性慾小叢書); (ii) “General Literature” (*putong wenxue* 普通文學); and (iii) the “Romantic Literature Series” (*langmanpai wenxue congshu* 浪漫派文學叢書) (Zhang, 2008: 162). The “Little Series on Sex Education” consisted of abridged translations of Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*—between 10,000 and 20,000 Chinese characters—and cost 20 cents. The front covers of the “Little Series on Sex Education” were nude paintings, designed to pique a customer's curiosity (*Mei de shudian*, 1927). The books listed under “General Literature” included Zhang's *An Aesthetic Outlook of Life* and *The Method of Organisation of an Aesthetic Society*, alongside other translated texts (*Mei de shudian*, 1927). Zhang's intention was to expand this series by adding another 200 works of radical politics and philosophy, science and technology guidebooks to rival collections sold by the Commercial Press and China Books (Zhang, 2008: 166). The third set of Beauty Bookshop's publications, the “Romantic Literature

series”, were translations of Rousseau, Dumas, Hugo and other foreign authors.

The Beauty Bookshop closed in 1929. In his memoirs, Zhang cited two factors for the bookshop’s demise: troubles with the police, and with gangsters. The Beauty Bookshop was prosecuted “seven or eight times” for its “obscene publications” (*yinshu* 淫書) by the Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP) in the International Settlement (Zhang, 2008: 24). The general manager, Xie Yunru, and the deputy editor, Peng Zhaoliang, took turns representing the bookshop in the Shanghai Provisional Court.

In one scenario, the SMP claimed that one of Zhang’s articles in *New Culture* was pornographic. The article attacked the Chinese custom of proving a bride’s virginity by displaying the bride and groom’s blood-stained bedsheets in the family’s courtyard on the morning after the wedding (Zhang, 1927a; Zhang, 2008: 163-164). In another case, the abridged translations of sexological texts sold by the Beauty Bookshop were deemed to be obscene (Zhang, 2008: 25). Zhang recalled that the Chinese judge often ruled against the bookshop, ordered fines between 100 and 400 dollars, and confiscated the offending publications. Zhang claimed he was frequently summoned by the SMP for “informal negotiations” (Zhang, 2008: 163). The SMP said they would allow the Beauty Bookshop to continue to operate if it removed the word “sex” (*xing* 性) from its “Little Series on Sex Education”, if the nude paintings on the books’ front covers were replaced with something plainer, and if Zhang delivered a monthly 1,000-dollar “handling fee” (*shouxu fei* 手續費)—euphemism for a bribe—to the SMP. When Zhang refused to comply, the Shanghai Post Office stopped mailing items for the Beauty Bookshop—a setback for Zhang’s business as he could not process mail orders and subscriptions (Zhang, 2008: 164).

He also blamed the harassment of the Beauty Bookshop’s employees by “Jiangsu gangsters” from Shanghai’s “publishing industry union” (Zhang, 2008: 162). Since Zhang and his associates were mostly from Guangdong, and refused to pay “protection fees”, Zhang claimed he received numerous threats of vandalism and violence. He also believed the SMP repeatedly raided his

bookshop because the SMP colluded with the “Jiangsu gangsters” (Zhang, 2008: 163).

Here, we need to exercise scepticism regarding Zhang’s one-sided explanation of the Beauty Bookshop’s failure. I would argue there was a more fundamental reason—Zhang’s business practices. Looking at the Beauty Bookshop’s offerings, textbooks were conspicuously absent. I argue this absence meant that Zhang’s enterprise was ultimately unsustainable. Simply put: textbooks underwrote Shanghai’s publishing market; all presses and bookshops were absolutely dependent on the educational trade. The Commercial Press’s “unquestioned commercial dominance” was predicated on “its monopoly of its textbook market, a monopoly established in 1904 with the publication of a ten-volume curriculum stipulated for use in new-style public schools” (Jones, 2011: 119). Between 1921 and 1937, the “spectacular growth of [the Commercial Press] was a direct result of steadily increasing primary school enrolments, for only textbooks could consistently reach such a large, regulated readership” (Jones, 2011: 119). In a similar vein, Christopher Reed points out that the “staple commodity” in Shanghai’s Business of Enlightenment was the textbook, the foundation upon which the “Three Legs of the Tripod” rested (Reed, 2004: 211-212).

The Enlightenment Bookshop (*Kaiming shudian* 開明書店) on 268 Fuzhou Road is a very useful contrast to the Beauty Bookshop (Wang, 1999: 84-115; Chow, 2009). Managed by Zhang Xichen 章錫琛 (1889-1969), the Enlightenment Bookshop opened in August of 1926 as a small outlet for intellectuals frustrated by the big presses’ attitude towards revolutionary writings. Zhang Xichen was formerly employed by the Commercial Press as the editor-in-chief of *Ladies’ Journal* (*Fünu zazhi* 婦女雜誌). Under his stewardship, *Ladies’ Journal* focused on feminism and women’s movements. Deemed too radical by his employers, Zhang Xichen was removed as editor. Disgruntled with the treatment, he opened the Enlightenment Bookshop just a short distance from the Commercial Press. One of the Enlightenment Bookshop’s flagship journals was *New Woman* (*Xin nüxing* 新女性), which became a rival to *Ladies’ Journal*, the content of which had become more conservative—housekeeping tips and recipes—after Zhang Xichen’s departure. In May of 1927, Zhang Jingsheng opened the Beauty Bookshop on 510 Fuzhou

Road, and directly competed against Zhang Xichen. Zhang Xichen was incensed by readers who complained that *New Woman* was dull compared to Zhang Jingsheng's publications, and was unsettled by the constant stream of people who turned up at the Enlightenment Bookshop and asked him if he had Zhang Jingsheng's *Sex Histories* in stock (Rocha, 2010: 140-141).

In the long term, Enlightenment won this commercial battle—while Beauty closed in 1929, Zhang Xichen built a viable business that survived well into the 1950s. The foundation of the Enlightenment Bookshop's enduring success was laid in the late 1920s, when it maintained an extensive list of educational publications. The circulation and profitability of textbooks vastly outstripped literary and revolutionary writings—several hundred thousand copies versus a thousand copies. Zhang Xichen ventured into the textbook market to ensure Enlightenment's survival (Jones, 2011: 120). Effectively, textbook sales subsidised Enlightenment's production of radical philosophy and experimental literature. This was an instance whereby an “avant-garde” intellectual bookshop became commercially institutionalised; it played by the rules of the Shanghai publishing market to safeguard its buoyancy and growth.

In Hockx's (1999a: 4-9) theorisation, success in the literary field involved the balance between the “principle of autonomy” (elitist values, ideological purity, “high” culture for a small audience) and the “principle of heteronomy” (financial profit, sensitivity towards market trends, “popular” culture for a wider readership). The principle of autonomy was not necessarily at odds with the principle of heteronomy; in fact the principle of heteronomy *enabled* the intellectuals' continual dissemination of ideas by supplying economic capital (i.e. money!) (Hockx, 2003b: 220-239; Bourdieu, 1992: 214-280). Yet the principle of autonomy was crucial to the intellectuals' self-fashioning as disinterested truth-seekers with a social mission. The principle of autonomy thus conferred legitimacy and distinguished intellectuals' literary output from “entertaining”, cultural products. For the Fuzhou Road intellectuals, a delicate balance had to be attained between the two principles. Unlike the Enlightenment Bookshop, the Beauty Bookshop did not appear to have any clear plans to diversify its catalogue, so Zhang Jingsheng's small business missed out on a vital demographic of customers—schoolchildren, parents, teachers—that might have made it profitable in the long term. The Beauty

Bookshop struggled until early 1929, and became another casualty on Shanghai's "cultural street". Zhang's influence on the intellectual scene was on the wane, and by the late-1930s he was largely forgotten.

How does the fate of Beauty Bookshop illuminate wider issues surrounding the historiography of sexual knowledge in China? Many historical studies have been concerned with the question of reception—namely, how medico-scientific knowledge from Europe and America travelled to faraway places like China and Japan, and how theories and ideas were translated, repackaged, and deployed by non-Western intellectuals. In *Obsession*, Wenqing Kang demonstrates that Western sexological understandings of male same-sex relations gained a foothold in China in the first half of the twentieth century. He analyses debates among Chinese intellectuals in journals and newspapers, showing that the motivations of those who introduced and appropriated "homosexuality" were tied to the issue of colonial modernity (Kang, 2009: 41-60). Similarly, Tze-lan Deborah Sang's *The Emerging Lesbian* investigates republican Chinese translations of Western sexological texts (by Magnus Hirschfield, Havelock Ellis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and others), and examines the "diverse significations of the new taxonomy *same-sex love* in the popular discourse represented by the urban print media" (Sang, 2003: 126; emphasis in original). Sang argues that it was "above all the incorporation of female same-sex relations that distinguished the new discursive domain from the late-imperial discursive domain, marking it as modern" (Sang, 2003: 126). Kang and Sang give us deep histories of the formation of sexual identities in China, and how they overlapped and diverged from Western modes of being.

However, these accounts do not tell us about the issues of dissemination and consumption of knowledge—the Chinese intellectuals who wrote the books and sold them in their bookshops. I argue that these commercial dynamics—the survival or collapse of these "businesses of enlightenment"—are crucial if we want to understand why some theories persisted in the public sphere, while some intellectuals like Zhang Jingsheng could vanish after a brief period of popularity. In *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*, Lee brands Zhang an "extremist" with a "vitalistic exaltation of sex" and an "unprecedented radicalism" (Lee, 1973: 270). According to Lee, Zhang carried some of the "seminal ideas" of celebrated Chinese intellectuals—Liang

Qichao's 梁啟超 (1873-1929) concept of "New Citizens", Lin Shu's 林紓 (1852-1924) translations of Social Darwinism and racial science, Xu Zhimo's 徐志摩 (1897-1931) dream of "Dionysian madness"—to an "extreme frontier that borders on the absurd" (Lee, 1973: 271-272). Lee argues that other intellectuals were more successful because their ideas were less "extremist" and less "heretical" than Zhang's (Lee, 1973: 272). Here, Lee follows a surprisingly simplistic line of argumentation: that historians can simply appeal to the merit of an intellectual's ideas to explain their staying power, and an intellectual's staying power in turn shows the merit of their ideas. This section, however, has shown that Zhang's failure was one of entrepreneurship as much as anything else. By failing to make the Beauty Bookshop a sustainable business, Zhang did not secure a platform to broadcast his views. This is an aspect of intellectual life that histories of knowledge would do well to account for.

III. *New Culture* and Consumers' Sexual Anxieties

How did Zhang Jingsheng's readers respond to the Beauty Bookshop's products? It is difficult to offer concrete answers to this question, because the customers who set foot in the Beauty Bookshop tended not to write very much of it, thus leaving behind no archival documents that we could consult. Nonetheless, we could catch an indirect glimpse of the lived experiences of some of China's educated urbanites, specifically their confrontations with modern sexuality, by revisiting Zhang's journal *New Culture*. *New Culture* was another project that ended abruptly; only six issues were released between December 1926 and October 1927. Anecdotally, *New Culture's* monthly print run was over 20,000 copies, without taking into account pirated and unauthorised editions (Chen, 1991: 73). While *New Culture* did not seem wildly popular, it did appear to have a solid following.

Of particular interest is the section entitled "Sex Education Communications" (*xingyu tongxun* 性慾通訊). Here, Zhang presents himself as a sexological expert responding to readers' inquiries on their intimate lives. "Sex Education Communications" appeared in all issues of *New Culture*—a total of 35 letters—with the exception of the fifth issue (July 1927) in which it was announced that

the section had been deleted because of “censorship from the authorities” (Zhang et. al., 1927e: no pagination). In the sixth and final issue, Zhang mentioned that he received so many letters of encouragement that he ultimately decided to defy the Shanghai Municipal Police and restore “Sex Education Communications” (Zhang et. al., 1927f: 1). If we take Zhang’s word for it, then, the correspondence section was well-received by his audience. Such sexually explicit advice columns were rare in the late 1920s when *New Culture* was in publication, though by the 1930s there were other journals that published such columns (Cheung, 2015).

The general tone of the letters was panicky. These were young people who were overwhelmed with the conflicting advice in numerous sex manuals, and became deeply preoccupied with issues such as: the shape and dimensions of their genitals; sexual attraction towards strangers or their classmates (of the opposite sex as well as the same sex); their virginity or painful intercourse; the safety of birth-control products sold in Shanghai’s pharmacies; vaginal discharge or leucorrhoea; masturbation and pornography. For example, in the second issue, “Youquan”, a student attending Xiamen University, wondered if the continual use of condoms was harmful to the body. Youquan had been married to a fellow student for a year, and they had never had intercourse without condoms. If Youquan’s wife became pregnant, then they would both have to abandon their studies. Youquan also wanted to know if using condoms had been diminishing sexual pleasure. Finally, he said that he could not help but ejaculate after five minutes of penetration if he and his wife had sex in the missionary position, but they experimented with the “lotus position” and he could last for twenty minutes before climaxing (Zhang et. al., 1927b: 104-106). Another reader, “Lin Dong”, explained that he had a long foreskin, and intercourse was sometimes extremely painful because it could not retract past the glans. He wanted to have a circumcision to correct the problem, but worried that the procedure might lead to heightened sensitivity and premature ejaculation. Zhang promised Youquan that the prolonged use of condoms would not have any adverse effects, and strongly supported Lin Dong’s course of action (Zhang et. al., 1927b: 106-107).

Yet another concerned reader, “CC”, had a whole list of questions concerning the signs of a woman’s sexual arousal. Zhang replied that, when a

woman was aroused and ready for penetrative sex, her clitoris would become firm and enlarged while her labia would become redder from the increased blood flow. Zhang also suggested that having sex during pregnancy would be unproblematic provided that one proceeded gently, but a woman who was a month or two away from giving birth ought to abstain from sex (Zhang et. al., 1927b: 110-112). “Mingming” wanted to know if kissing was hygienic when a woman was having her period; Zhang pithily wrote that menstrual fluids were not unhygienic, and were entirely unrelated to the oral cavity anyway (Zhang et. al., 1927b: 112) In the final issue of *New Culture*, Zhang recommended that reader “HOC” place a pillow underneath his wife’s hips to make the missionary position more pleasurable, and to experiment with having sex while standing (Zhang et. al., 1927f: 5-6).

The letters were almost all written by men, but there were isolated female voices. From *New Culture*’s second issue was Mrs. He Zhifen, who asked Zhang how she could put some of his ideals into practice. Zhang had previously advised that a man ought to wait until a woman was thoroughly aroused—as evidenced by the release of lubricating fluids from the vagina—before penetration. Mrs. He was worried that impatient men like her husband would be unable to follow this advice, or might become humiliated or bored. In response, Zhang published the excerpt of an article by a Ms. Shuya (pseudonym). Shuya defined any intercourse in which a woman was not sexually aroused as rape, and argued that this kind of sexual assault could be eliminated through the dissemination of correct sexual knowledge (Zhang et. al., 1927b: 100-104). In the final issue, Mrs. Qingyun wrote to Zhang seeking advice on marital aids and medication:

Whenever I’ve sex with [my husband], just when I’m about to enjoy a wonderful sensation, he’s regrettably already ejaculated and considers it a job well done. But I really don’t feel satisfied! Sometimes my eyes convey to him a deep longing, and even when he wants to have another go, “his thing” [*ta de* 他的] ultimately can’t become erect. It doesn’t matter how much I fiddle with it, it’s just useless after ejaculation. Is this why I’m not getting pregnant? Please don’t be miserly with your advice. Please guide me and tell

me the scientific, artistic, and artificial methods such that [my husband] can delay his ejaculation! Then I'll feel really lucky indeed! I wanted to tell my husband to buy a few bottles of "Yohimbe" [Yuxiangbin 育亨賓] to try. Maybe this could help with his weakness? [...] I wanted to instruct my husband to go to a pharmacy and get hold of a vaginal warmer. So before sex, we can use it first so that "my thing" [wo de 我的] is heated and aroused [...] maybe this can help us achieve simultaneous orgasm? (Zhang et. al., 1927f: 2-3. Quotation marks in original)

Zhang responded that, while the use of a vaginal warmer—a pre-heatable dildo—was suitable, he was adamantly "against all medications that purportedly stimulate sexual desire". This was because these aphrodisiacs and medications were "like opium: once [one became] addicted, [one] could not do without" (Zhang et. al., 1927f: 3).

"Wanhua", who was soon to be married, had never had sex before. He wanted to know if Vaseline was a safe form of lubrication. Wanhua wrote that he was "extremely confused, terrified, and had no idea how to confront these issues". He heard that "many people made a total mess of everything when they had sex for the first time", and he was fearful that he would "utterly embarrass [him]self". Wanhua demanded from Zhang "an essay like an 'instruction speech'" so he could memorise it as "golden laws and precious rules" (*jinke yülü* 金科玉律) (Zhang et. al., 1927b: 112-113). Another correspondent, "Zhuozai", was disturbed by premature ejaculation, and by the sensitivity of his penis, which sometimes bled after intercourse. In fact, Zhuozai contemplated suicide "several times" (Zhang et. al., 1927d: 77-78).

Zhang's responses were always sympathetic, reassuring his readers that their problems were much smaller than they imagined. On many occasions Zhang replied with deadpan humour. For instance, he praised the rear-entry position as particularly pleasurable. Reader "Kuansheng" wrote: "According to Chinese customs, intercourse mostly happens under covers. This is because, during intercourse, [one] cannot be exposed to 'wind' [*feng* 風]. If [one] were exposed to 'wind', then [one] would contract a cold-damage illness [...] The

[rear-entry] sexual position cannot be accomplished under covers. Is this not very dangerous?” Zhang simply wrote: “Please get a heater installed or do it during the summer” (Zhang et. al., 1927c: 71). Even when Zhang could offer no direct solution to a reader’s concerns, his tone was compassionate. “Zhizhong” and his wife were desperate as various birth control methods had failed. Zhizhong’s wife tried using cervical caps, but found them scary to use. The couple then tried a contraceptive medication which caused vaginal inflammation. They also tried condoms—which broke regularly—and then a soluble spermicide (W.J. Rendell’s “Wife’s Friend” pessaries). The spermicide seemed to work for a while but then their fourth child was conceived. Zhang admitted that current contraceptive techniques were unreliable, and offered supportive words to Zhizhong (Zhang et. al., 1927f: 6-7).

The correspondents’ writing styles, and the snippets of information that they revealed, allow us to speculate about their social background. They were relatively privileged urban youth, recently married or engaged, likely to have received at least a secondary education, and had enough income to purchase self-help manuals. The letters suggest that they felt inundated by the sheer amount of information available on sex. They seemed happy to experiment for the sake of happiness and fulfilment in their relationships. They believed that sex was a fundamental part of human nature, and that they had to ensure they were behaving in a “correct” fashion. Zhang thus cast himself as the authoritative yet gentle teacher, soothing his troubled readers. In the fourth issue of *New Culture*, Mr. Zhou’s letter encapsulates this sentiment and explains Zhang’s appeal:

Because I feel so inadequate and agonised about my lack of sexual knowledge, I love reading all sorts of books [...] Many [sex manuals] seem really superficial, barely scratching the surface [...] Sir, you adopt an attitude of authentic research and you are unafraid of the attacks from so-called “righteous gentlemen” in our society. This spirit is something I salute (Zhang et. al., 1927d: 74-75).

Similarly, “Shifen” and his wife were impressed with *New Culture* and the Beauty Bookshop because they “improved [their] sex life”: “the love between

us as husband and wife moved with the times”, and “even our bodies feel stronger”. Following Zhang, Shifen and his wife would “listen to each other’s opinions” in order to “eliminate men’s thousand-year oppression of women”. The couple declared the “abolishment of all unequal treaties”, and “established a contract based on the mutual respect of each other’s sovereignty” (Zhang et. al., 1927a: 51). Shifen’s letter brilliantly—and humorously—appropriated the political buzzwords of the 1920s, drawing parallels between China’s relationship with the Western powers and the unequal relations between the sexes. Semi-colonial oppression was analogised to patriarchal oppression, and national sovereignty was tied to individual autonomy. But Shifen’s letter was exceptional; no other correspondent framed sex in terms of national or racial survival. This was, after all, the overarching aim of Zhang’s sexological project and his small business of sexual enlightenment: ensuring Chinese couples had “good sex”, which in Zhang’s eugenic vision would lead to better offspring and a better China.

Wen-hsin Yeh and Rana Mitter have analysed the readers’ letters published in *Life* (*Shenghuo*), another popular magazine from the 1920s edited by Zou Taofen (1895-1944) (Yeh, 1992; Yeh, 2008: 101-128; Mitter, 2005). Mitter argues that the “still-developing boundaries of the new environments for work and leisure which the emergence of capitalist, imperialist modernity had brought to China were not yet clear”, and that “one window we have in which [Chinese people] tried to puzzle out the way that they should behave in the transition between the old and new worlds is the lively ‘Readers’ Mailbox’ section of *Life*” (Mitter, 2005: 80). One of the problems with using anonymous or pseudonymous readers’ letters as a primary source is, of course, the possibility that the letters have been selected, redacted, rewritten, or even forged by a journal’s editor to advance a particular political agenda (Dobson, 2009; Gudelunas, 2008).

A detailed textual analysis of the letters in *New Culture* is beyond the scope of this article. However, based on the variation of language used in the letters, I do not believe we can dismiss all of them as Zhang Jingsheng’s fabrications; the letters offer a rare if imperfect look into the mentalities of educated urbanites in China. The letters in *Life*, like those in *New Culture*, were also full of feelings of anxiety. As Mitter points out, “the anxiety of the *producers* of the

New Culture was not the same as the anxiety of its *consumers*" (Mitter, 2005: 88, emphasis in original). Whereas the May Fourth generation of Chinese intellectuals—including Zhang Jingsheng—were worried about the fate of China, the young people who consumed the intellectuals' output were more concerned about "finding ways to take up new opportunities in work and love", and struggled "in trying to deal with a changing and unpredictable new world" (Mitter, 2005: 89).

This is the other side of the "Business of Enlightenment". It is a chiasmatic situation in which the intellectuals' agenda and their target audiences' priorities did not align. The average readers of a magazine like *Life* or *New Culture* wanted a point of anchorage in a sea of uncertainty. The consumers of the bookshops on Fuzhou Road might have wanted to be "enlightened" with new theories of aesthetic education or population control, but they were equally eager, if not *more* eager, to find quick answers to their personal difficulties or seek affirmation that their experiences were "normal". Intellectuals positioned themselves as missionaries of modernity and expected their readers to heed and learn, while the latter were often more invested in knowing modern alternatives to the missionary position. Reader "Nanxi" complained to Zhang:

I got married in April last year. I still haven't discovered the Third Kind of Water that you've spoken of [...] Maybe this is because I'm not very healthy, or I'm not having intercourse correctly, or maybe [my wife] has an illness because she always has cramps when she has her period? Sometimes there's a menses-like discharge flowing out [during sex]; is this leucorrhoea? As for my prowess, I can last around forty-five minutes at most. Sometimes my penis goes soft half-way, and I can continue after a brief rest, or I'll have to stop altogether. Sometimes I can't become erect before intercourse; is this because of impotence? But during last year's summer holidays, there were several days in which I was having sex every night, and there was no problem with my erection? (Zhang et. al., 1927c: 66-68).

In a similar vein, reader “Zhijun” commented that Zhang’s requirement to penetrate a woman for around thirty minutes was just too demanding for the average man, who might barely be able to last for seven to eight minutes (Zhang et. al., 1927c: 73-74). Another reader, “Caojun”, felt “very confident” with his sexual techniques, and he could easily last for an hour before ejaculation. Caojun’s wife would orgasm and release the “Third Kind of Water” every time, but Caojun nevertheless complained because his wife kept finding excuses to avoid sex, which became an exhausting ordeal (Zhang et. al., 1927d: 76). Since Zhang prescribed an ideal intercourse, he established a yardstick against which readers had to measure their own performances, and actually *added* to the feeling of alienation and inadequacy that he sought to remove through *New Culture* and the Beauty Bookshop’s publications.

From the producers of knowledge, I have shifted our attention towards the question of readership. I do this as a way of moving beyond the abstract ways in which scholars have characterised the impact of Western sexology on China, by tethering the story of the Beauty Bookshop onto the experiences—however filtered or selective—of educated urbanites who read *New Culture*. For Howard Chiang, Zhang’s theorisations of sexuality were evidence of the inauguration of an overarching “epistemic modernity” in early twentieth-century China: the empirical methodology, the use of scientific categories, and so on (Chiang, 2010a: 636). But I ask: what did this modernity actually *feel* like to people who were immersed in it? Once we start paying closer attention to the processes of dissemination and consumption, we find that these educated readers were not framing their intimate lives in terms of “enlightenment”, “science”, “race” or “nation”. Instead, they experienced modernity as a constant bombardment of information, as chronic trepidation, and as acute insecurity over what constituted acceptable or “normal” behaviours.

Conclusion

I argue that an enriched historical account of sexological knowledge should encompass the following: (i) the construction of knowledge in local contexts (which often involves drawing from sources from other parts of the world); (ii) the material movement of knowledge around the world, its appropriation by intellectuals to advance particular kinds of politics, and the long-range

networks enabling such circulation; and as I have argued in this paper using the case of Zhang Jingsheng, (iii) the specific consumption of such knowledge, subject to market conditions and local dynamics, by audiences who understand and practise these ideas in ways that may diverge from the intentions of the producers and distributors.

I argue that Zhang Jingsheng's "small business of enlightenment" was very typical of the intellectuals' bookshops that opened in Shanghai's "cultural street" in the late 1920s—contrasting with big companies like the Commercial Press. Reading Zhang Jingsheng's memoirs against the histories of other bookshops, I suggest that Zhang's "Beauty Bookshop" never managed to transition into a sustainable business with a diversified range of cultural products. The failure of Zhang's bookshop deprived him of a vital channel to continue disseminating his radical visions of sex. I also show that Zhang's "small business of enlightenment" was at once a "small business of anxiety". The letters in *New Culture* showcase a readership that did not necessarily speak in terms of the "national salvation" that Zhang wanted to achieve through a sexual revolution—but mostly just wanted reassurance and tranquillity. It is ironic that Zhang's theories, and his notions of sexual performance, perpetuated—and arguably profited from—the cycle of anxieties that Zhang claimed he could alleviate. These are the nuances that historians can draw out if we step back from the mutation and reception of ideas, and investigate the entrepreneurial dimension of knowledge.

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