

The Impotence Epidemic: Men's Medicine and Sexual Desire in Contemporary China by Everett Yuehong Zhang.

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***The Impotence Epidemic: Men's Medicine and Sexual Desire in Contemporary China* by Everett Yuehong Zhang (review)**

Xia Zhang

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Xia Zhang



The Impotence Epidemic: Men's Medicine and Sexual Desire in Contemporary China is a beautifully written and intellectually stimulating ethnography on a controversial topic that few anthropologists have examined: male impotence and the prevalence of *nanke* (medicine that treats male sexual disorders) in post-Mao China. Based on over ten years of fieldwork in two major Chinese cities—Beijing in the north and Chengdu in the south—the author, Everett Yuehong Zhang, deftly shows that impotence is much more than a “neurovascular event,” as it is treated in Western biomedicine. Embedding the rise of *nanke* in the radical cultural and economic transformations that have rocked China over the last few decades, Zhang argues that the impotence epidemic is a “social, gendered, and intercorporeal event” (200) that reflects the unique opportunities and challenges of contemporary China.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, which includes the first four chapters, examines the rise of the impotence epidemic in post-Mao China as the revival of individual aspiration and desire. It also contextualizes impotence as a political, state, familial, and gendered issue. Part II, which consists of Chapters 5, 6, and 7, focuses on the unique cultural resources in China that serve to regulate the flow of sexual desire. If Part I's focus is the liberation and production of sexual desire in China, Part II is concerned with how liberation and production are limited in culturally specific ways.

Drawing on rich ethnographic data, well-structured methodologies, and insightful interpretations of China's recent social changes, Zhang debunks many popular and scholarly stereotypes about male impotence. First among these is that the “impotence epidemic” in post-Mao **[End**

Page 817] China reflects an increased incidence of impotence—it does not. In his first two chapters, Zhang provides a historically contextualized analysis to explain the emergence of China’s impotence epidemic. He argues that impotence was largely unheard of in the Maoist period because of the “moral symptomatology” (32) of Maoist socialism; impotence was not considered a disease since pursuing sexual pleasure was deemed morally problematic. Examined against this historical background, the appearance of the impotence epidemic in the post-Mao era does not necessarily demonstrate Chinese men’s lack of desire or declining manliness; rather, it signifies the de-politicizing of impotence and the revival of individual desire in Chinese society. Following Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of desire as desiring production, Zhang contends that the market economy and consumer society of post-reform China unleashed a flow of desire that had been constrained by the Maoist regime. The simultaneous emergence of nanke suggests Chinese men’s active search for medical treatment, evincing not only the legitimization of individual aspiration but also a new Chinese subjectivity as the “subject of desire” (30). Thus, Zhang states that the impotence epidemic could even be called “a contagion of desire” (15).

Did the Maoist state systematically oppress Chinese people’s desire? In Chapter 2, Zhang argues that it may not have been Mao’s intention to discourage sexual desire, but the state achieved the effect of sexual deprivation through institutions such as the unified job assignment system, which often kept young lovers geographically apart, and a workplace culture that intruded into employees’ private lives, often resulting in years of long-distance relationships among married couples. Through such social structures, the Maoist state suppressed “a historically specific pleasure or desire for closeness” (66), if not sexual desire itself. However, Zhang also shows that even Maoist collectivism could not completely deplete individual desire; the prohibition of intimacy and closeness ironically heightened male desire to search for the “body visible” through voyeurism (68).

What Zhang does exceptionally well in this book is to center his analysis

on impotent men's bodily experience. He insightfully shows that trauma and suffering are produced by the massive social and cultural transformations in China inscribed on men's bodies. In Chapter 3, using extensive ethnographic data from his fieldwork, Zhang demonstrates how political, economic, and social changes affected men of different classes and...

NEW RELEASE BOOK REVIEW

Xia Zhang, *Manhattanville College*



Everett Yuehong Zhang, *The Impotence Epidemic: Men's Medicine and Sexual Desire in Contemporary China*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. 304 pp.

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The Impotence Epidemic: Men's Medicine and Sexual Desire in Contemporary China by
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Staying Unleashed or Back to the Leash, the giant planets do not have a solid surface, so
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Sexuality education and desire: Still missing after all these years, non-residential premises vertically enhances the Anglo-American type of political culture without the exchange of charges or backs

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