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## **Student-Centered Pedagogy in the Chinese Classroom: Let's Talk About Sexual Empowerment**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper looks at the politics of teaching sexuality education, healthy and comprehensive focusing on issues specific to female sexuality, in the context of a Chinese university ELL classroom. Through feminist pedagogical approaches and feminist beliefs in healthy sexuality, this article explores how a university ELL classroom was transformed. As with their U.S. peers, many Chinese young people rely on unhealthy and inaccurate information about human sexuality through pornography or dubious internet searches. Through feminist pedagogical approaches that focus on student-centered learning, critical thinking, and open debate, teachers can integrate controversial topics into a classroom setting to benefit the health and well-being of their students. Because my students did not perceive discussing sexuality as a U.S. cultural taboo, as an American teacher and "out" feminist, I was able to integrate lessons on sexuality into my Chinese classroom. However, first I had to lay the groundwork to establish a student-centered community where debate and discussion were central to the work of the course.*

**Keywords:** China, birth control, sex education, ELL, ESL, university curriculum, abortion, female sexuality, feminist pedagogy, female sexuality.

As Chinese youth access Western mores of sexuality and relationships via the Internet (songs, videos, movies, television shows), they are often learning unhealthy, uninformed sexual practices. I am not suggesting that Chinese youth are different from their U.S. peers – I find my U.S. students also access unhealthy sexuality information through these same sources. However, there are some significant barriers to getting accurate information in China that my U.S. students do not encounter, specifically the Chinese government blocking web sites that might provide comprehensive and health information about sexuality. As a feminist teacher, I am concerned with making sure my female students feel empowered and have healthy information regarding sexuality. I carried these beliefs over to my Chinese ELL classroom when teaching at a university in Xi'an, China. Through feminist pedagogical principles of a student-centered classroom and a commitment to female empowerment, I was able to transform my ELL classroom into one of civic engagement, healthy debate, and sexuality education.

Similar to their U.S. peers, Chinese youth report having sexual relationships before they marry (Ren, 2016). Assuming Chinese youth are similar to youth in the U.S. and elsewhere, when there is an absence of sexuality education, teens rely on peers and pornography for sexual education, learning unhealthy sexual attitudes (Orenstein, 2016). When there are cultural taboos against pre-marital and same-sex relationships, youth often do not have access to accurate and healthy information regarding pregnancy prevention and prevention of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). Consequently, STIs and unplanned pregnancy are on the rise among unmarried Chinese youth (Gao et. al., 2001). Recognizing the shift in mores and the risk of pregnancy and STDs, Chinese university administrators report they are not opposed to offering courses in sexuality education, but few do (Li et. al., 2004). As an exchange faculty at a large Chinese university in Xi'an, China, I was able to integrate sexuality education in my English language classroom with little controversy. Students, through open discussion, articles about U.S. teen sexuality, and Socratic approach, responded well to my lessons on sexuality in the context of their English classes. However, I didn't introduce the topic of sexuality until I had first established my credibility with students and a warm, open relationship of discussion and honest exchange in the classroom. My feminist pedagogical approach of being attentive to student voices, creating a student-centered classroom, and engaging in student-centered learning facilitated these discussions.

By initially assigning reading that were considered controversial (gay marriage in the U.S., China's one-child policy, racism in the U.S.) and creating an open, student-driven classroom, I was able to establish a classroom community where students trusted me and their peers to engage in active, respectful debate. I was careful of social mores and student comfort, establishing a dynamic of openness and caring before we got to the topic of sexuality. Although some of my students, particularly some of the women, were hesitant about topics of sexuality in reading and discussion, the majority of the students expressed an appreciation for the conversations. Because I perceive healthy sexuality as an imperative for all young people, I was committed to careful and critical integration of these topics in my English Language Learning classroom at Xi'Dian University.

Before proceeding, the politics of a U.S. foreigner teaching healthy sexuality in a Chinese university need to be interrogated. When I integrated lessons that focused on issues specific to female sexuality, pregnancy prevention, de-stigmatizing homosexual relationships, and STI prevention in the context of a Chinese university, I understood that many students would find these issues taboo and an affront to their cultural identity. Even with my students in the United States, I find there are students resistant to considering beliefs that run counter to their family, church, or community of origin. However, I believe that one of my jobs as an educator is to present ideas that run counter to students' beliefs so that they are presented with new, controversial ideas as sites of critical thinking. I do not want to suggest that Chinese youth are "behind" their U.S. peers in understanding healthy sexuality. Only that, in the specific context of a Chinese university classroom, as a U.S. foreign exchange teacher, I had an ability to integrate these topics in my classroom because of my cultural difference. Many of my students believed that U.S. cultural more openly discussed and experimented with sex than Chinese, therefore they did not see it as odd or strange that I would be willing to talk openly about issues of human sexuality in the context of my class.

### **The politics of birth control, abortion, pre-marriage sexuality and gay sex in China**

As with most cultures, there is a complex history and relationship to sexuality in China. As in many cultures, a main concern of sexuality education is related to birth rate. Due to a population that could not be sustained by the resources of the country, contemporary China, a culture that is a hybrid of rapid development and commitment to tradition, began an earnest and organized attempt to curb the birth rate in 1979 (Festini & de Marino, 2004, p. 358). The one-child policy limited the majority of married couples to one child. There were exceptions that allowed families to have more children, but they involved paying fines, the amount of which depended on family connections, ethnicity, and geographic location (Hesketh et. al., 2005). The government's policy had unforeseen consequences in the Chinese culture, such as disproportionate abortion rates for female fetuses in rural areas, an elderly population that has fewer family members to care for them, a rise in urban girl status and opportunity, and a rise in female empowerment in career environments (Hesketh et. al., 2005; Higgins and Sun, Li et. al., 2007). With the one-child policy came a demand for birth control, but available methods are typically limited to abortion, sterilization, and intrauterine devices (Li et. al., Sun et. al., 2004; Wu, 2010); abortion was often the only birth control available to unmarried women.

Not all outcomes of the one-child policy are negative. Due to the one-child policy, there was an increase in the status of daughters in some areas. Consequently, many girls are being educated and have agency in ways they didn't in the past (Fong, 2002). Coupling this increased agency for females with exposure to Western pop culture that features dating relationships and pre-marital sex, younger generations are increasingly accepting of pre-marital sex (Sik Ying Ho & Ka Tat Tsang, 2002; He and Blum, 2013). However, with birth control education largely limited to married couples, many young women find themselves unexpectedly pregnant (Wu, 2010; He and Blum 2013). It is difficult for an unmarried young woman to access an I.U.D. or other birthcontrol options because of the cultural taboo against pre-marital sex. Most of my female students said that there was taboo for an unmarried woman to seek out birth control. These women often relied on peer-to-peer information about pregnancy prevention, most of it incorrect or dubious. My students told me that coitus interruptus, jumping up and down after sex, douching with coca cola, and drinking cold water after sex were all ways they had been told would avoid pregnancy.

Although abortion is not often openly discussed, abortion in China is a regular practice. Although abortion is not uncommon, it is considered a private issue (Li and Newcomer, 1996). Because there is a strong social taboo against being single and pregnant, most unmarried Chinese teens or young women who become pregnant seek an abortion (Wu, 2010). There are no Chinese government statistics on unmarried women and pregnancy or use of contraception (Li et. al., 2013, p. 149).

A recent report by the Chinese government (2013) stated that 13 million abortions are performed each year in China, half of those abortions are to women under the age of 25, the demographic of most university students (Jiang). However, these 13 million abortions only count those performed in government clinics and hospitals. The number of abortions performed in unlicensed clinics or abortions achieved through emergency contraception, available in pharmacies without a prescription, are not included in this statistic. Therefore, the number of abortions is much higher for this “women under 25” demographic; how much higher cannot be estimated.

In China there are billboards and commercials that advertise private clinic abortion services, specifically targeting a high school or college market. Most college campuses have unlicensed abortion clinics nearby. One television commercial that aired regularly on Chinese television stations in 2013-2014 was a jaunty commercial featuring several different young women going about daily activities, ultimately comparing getting an abortion to making a bowl of instant soup, texting one’s mother, or having tea with a friend: quick, easy, and on with the day in less than an hour. A billboard campaign in Xi’an, where I lived, advertised discounts on abortions if the woman presented her student I.D. The billboard featured a smiling young girl in a plaid miniskirt, white blouse, and knee socks reminiscent of a school uniform.

Even as there are open advertising campaigns regarding abortion, there are very few open conversations about female sexual health, sexually transmitted infections, ways to prevent pregnancy, or sexual empowerment. Recently Xi’dian University, the science and technology university in Xi’an where I taught, was in the news for offering a course to female students that focused on healthy relationships; as part of the course the students were asked to sign an “abstinence-until-marriage” pledge (Du, 2016). These “abstinence-only” courses that are offered under the guise of sex education are similar to those used in the U.S. But U.S. research has shown for decades that abstinence-only education does not work to decrease age of sexual activity and, in fact, increases rates of pregnancies and STDs (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Besides spotty sexuality education in school, many parents attempt to provide some information, but similar to U.S. parents, fall short in effective and ongoing conversations with their children. As in many other parts of the world, Chinese parents are ineffective at conversations regarding sexual health, do not provide accurate or comprehensive information, or do not have conversations about sexuality until the child has already engaged in sex (Hong et. al., 2007; Zhang et. al., 2007; Huang et. al., 2009; Liu et. al., 2011; Song et. al., 2013). Young people who attempt to engage their parents in honest conversations are often met with shock, silence, and embarrassment (Zhang et. al., 2007). As with their United States peers, Chinese young people are turning to pornography, illegal “blue movies”, that are downloaded and shared or bought on the black market or accessed online, to learn about sex (Hong et. al., 2007). My students confirmed this; when I asked them where they learned what they know about sex, almost all said “blue movies” or “porno.” What they learn in porn is neither healthy (sexual violence, rape, and unsafe sex are often the themes) nor answering the questions sexually active young people have (means of birth control, healthy sexual communication, how to avoid pregnancy and infection). None of this is very much different from countries like the U.S. where sexuality education is driven by conservative religious agendas. What is unique about China is the young men and women are caught between wanting to be sexually empowered, often taking cues from Western television, movies, and internet posts, and feeling the expectation of family pressure to be traditional.

The tension between wanting to be Western and yet honoring Chinese traditions is particularly pronounced in young women. When I surveyed my classes of college students, 100% of the young women wrote that they strived to be obedient Chinese daughters. In their papers, they wrote “obedient” as a descriptor. When I asked them about this word “obedient” and how/why they all chose to use it, the class discussion turned to traditional Chinese values, some pointing to Confucian teachings about daughters and obedience. The traditional Confucian and Taoist values of Chinese culture mandate that women remain virgins until they are married. Although there are similar regulations for men, women’s sexuality is much more regulated through traditional Confucian and Taoist mores (Gao, Lu, Shi, et. al., 1991; Ruan, 1991; Higgins, Zheng, & Liu, 2002; Zhang, 2007; Li et. al., 2013). In addition to the traditional mores, there is a lack of accurate or honest information about sexuality on China’s internet. Whereas in the U.S. a young person will be able to find sites such as Planned Parenthood that will provide comprehensive sexuality information, such information is not available in China. I was made aware of this when a student told me that there was data to show masturbation caused mental illness. When we did a search on the internet for information about masturbation, the top results documented research at a reputed Chinese medical school (Chengdu Medical College) that “proves” masturbation decreases I. Q., increases depression and socially deviant behavior, decreases fertility, and causes mental health problems (Peng, 2007).

Other research on sexuality health published on China's version of the world wide web, which is strictly monitored by the Chinese government with objectionable material blocked by the government servers, promote beliefs such as sex before marriage decreases marital happiness (Xu et. al., 2007), female orgasm is not important (Lau et. al., 2006; Huang, 2008), tampons destroy a woman's virginity, and birth control pills are unhealthy.

Because of the general belief that birth control pills are extremely bad for a woman's health, very few Chinese women use birth control pills or other hormonal forms of birth control. Only 1% of Chinese women report using oral contraceptives (Li et. al., 2013, p. 151). My female graduate students reported that they were turned down by physicians when they asked for birth control pills. Condoms are regularly available for purchase in pharmacies and grocery stores, but many young men will not buy them for the shame involved in being unmarried and purchasing condoms; 45% of male college students and 60% of female college students reported they would be too embarrassed to buy condoms (Sun et. al., 2013, p. 779). Young women, socialized to be submissive and obedient, do not feel they can refuse to have sex even if their partner does not use a condom (Sun et. al., 2013). This disempowerment combined with the increase in pre-marital sex results in unintended pregnancies ending in abortion (Pan, 1993; Cui and Liang, 2001).

For unmarried women there are many factors creating a perfect storm for high rates of pregnancy and STIs. Shame regarding sex outside marriage, unavailability of reliable birth control, lack of information regarding birth control, and women's disempowered subject position within the context of traditional family and relationships collide with many young women's desire to "Westernize" and engage in sexual relationships. Consequently, there is a dire need for sexuality education. As in the U.S. current sexuality education in Chinese school systems is largely limited to lessons about biology or not taught at all (Gao et. al., 1991; Li, Cottrell, Wagner, et. al., 2004). Considering the sexual activity rate and abortion rate of university students, sex ed at the university level is necessary. One study determined sexually active university women only use birth control 25% of the time (Yu & Zhu, 2009); another study indicated the rate was 50% (Zhou, Xiong, Li, et. al., 2011). In the absence of basic knowledge of contraception and sexual health (Zhou, Xiong, Li et. al., 2011; Zheng, Tan, Ren et. al., 2012), unmarried women find themselves seeking multiple abortions before marriage which can lead to scarring of the reproductive organs and subsequent fertility problems. Universities have more freedom to talk about sexuality and "college students tend to be more open and to more easily adopt new ideas and perspectives on sexualities and gender" (Huang et. al., 2009, p. 286). Although most universities do not have sex ed classes, administrators said they would not forbid them (Huang et. al., 2009).

Because university administrators see the need for sexuality education, college classes provide a ready site for communicating information to students. However, many of my Chinese colleagues stated they would not feel comfortable or did not have the knowledge to create lessons on healthy sexuality. Because some Chinese teachers feel that talking about sexuality is taboo – even as they agreed their students needed the information – it may be easier for a foreign born teacher to execute such lessons. Chinese students may feel less shame or embarrassment asking frank questions to a foreign teacher than they would with a Chinese teacher due to the cultural norms against open conversations regarding sex, especially cross-generationally. Because I was an "American" teacher, my students expected me to be more open and knowledgeable about sexuality as they perceive the U.S. culture as being more sexually free and open. Because I had experience and education regarding how to approach sexuality education from my time as a Planned Parenthood community educator in the U.S. and my work as a community health educator as a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa, I had the language and training to talk about taboo issues of sexuality with cross-cultural sensitivity. Due to these reasons, I was a good candidate for teaching sex ed in the context of my university ELL classrooms in China.

However, a foreign teacher cannot go into a Chinese classroom on the first day and have these conversations and teach these lessons. To do so would be a grave error in cultural sensitivity and ego. A foreigner must first do a great deal of groundwork to prove to students that the teacher not only respects the Chinese culture, but respects the students as smart, critically thinking young people. It is only after much work is done to create trust and open communication, focusing on a student-centered classroom where students are discussing and thinking through complex social issues, that a foreign teacher can then successfully and openly teach sexuality education. To do so before an environment of trust and openness has been established would shut down the classroom. To attempt to engage in frank discussions of sexuality before the students trust the teacher would create a dynamic in which students might feel assaulted by the information, uncomfortable, embarrassed, and potentially angry and resentful.

Before topics of sexual health can be taught in any context, students must feel comfortable expressing opinions openly and honestly, must feel empowered enough in the classroom to question the teacher, and must have agency in questioning, commenting, and criticizing topics of discussion. For me, these are all elements of my feminist pedagogy. The foreign teacher must humble her/himself in front of the students, listening and allowing for their voices to be heard – also themes in feminist pedagogy (Siebler, 2008). As with all cultures, our beliefs and attitudes towards sexuality are deeply imbedded with complex cultural values and mores. A foreign teacher who does not recognize and honor these complexities will fail in his/her endeavors to educate. Because of my commitment to female empowerment, especially in regards to sexual health, I was able to transform my ELL classroom into a site of critical learning for my Chinese students.

### **How to approach the teaching of sexuality education as a foreign teacher**

The remarks made in this section are based on my personal experience with Chinese university students who were attending a technology-focused university in Xi'an, China. As a U.S. college professor of English arriving in China to teach ELL university students, I brought my training as a Peace Corps volunteer ELL teacher in Morocco. In that context, I was extensively trained in cultural sensitivity and how to be a sensitive and attentive teacher when in the context of another country. China's import of English-speaking teachers to China is a relatively recent phenomena in a here-to-for closed society. Within the past 15 years there has been a steady increase in demand for native English speaking teachers in China (Gamlam, 2016). Part of the appeal of U.S. teachers, both for the institution and the students, is a cross-cultural exchange. Regardless of the topic of the course (literature, technical communication, computer programming, linguistics), the foreign-born English speaker is seen as a source of cultural information and curiosity. I was the first U.S. teacher to teach ELL at Xi'dian University and therefore of great interest to my Chinese students and colleagues. Because of the novelty of being the first "American" teacher, many of my lessons – regardless of official topics related to the course – evolved into question/answer discussions on cultural differences or cultural practices.

In addition to cross-cultural exchange, the approach to teaching that many foreign-born teachers bring to a Chinese classroom offers interesting problems. In traditional Chinese classrooms, the model of education is one where the students sit silently and listen as the professor lectures. Rote memorization and performance on quantitative exams is the primary mode of learning from primary school through graduate level education. A professor attempting to create a seminar-like, Socratic classroom needs to work to create discussions. Most Chinese students have not experienced a classroom where they are asked to discuss or ask/answer questions. I found that my Chinese students were very unsure of how to respond to the questions I posed. Many times they would ask me what *I* thought before venturing an answer. They were also slow to offer an alternative opinion or disagree with the teacher or their peers. However, through my insistence that there was "no right way of thinking" and my explanation of how I perceived of critical thinking exercises (asking and answering how/why questions from multiple perspectives), my students learned to adapt to my discussion-based lessons.

Before engaging in any sort of complex or controversial discussion, I had to create a classroom environment that included trust, openness, and a focus on the students' lives, perspectives, and opinions. In order to create such a learning environment, I informed my students of the expectations on the first day, explaining what a seminar is and what it means to be engaged in a Socratic classroom and an open debate. As with my U.S. classrooms, I modeled this approach on the first day of class and every day after. I began with topics that were risk averse such as "Should English be a subject on the Gaokao (college entrance exam)?" or "Should students be allowed to live off campus?" Gradually, once the discussions format was comfortable for students, I was able to move on to more controversial topics. During discussions, I had to work to make sure *all* students in the room were articulating an opinion and that many opinions were presented. My commitment to making sure all students participate is something I do in every classroom, not just my Chinese ELL classroom. I tell my U.S. students, "No passive learners. Education is not a spectator sport. You are required to add your voice to class discussion." Once I had established a norm of discussion, I broached more controversial topics with my Chinese students, often driven by their interests. Topics of interest that emerged from Chinese news and therefore provided fodder for class were "Should *Big Bang Theory* be banned from television?" or "Should a woman leave her career once she has a baby?"

Once there was a standard of open discussion, trust, diverse opinions and risk-taking regarding the topics of debate, I was able to move carefully into the issues of sexuality education, still by posing questions and engaging students in question/answer debate. Format. Only by doing this careful work to create the environment of trust and openness could I have success in broaching the topic of sexuality education.

### **How to approach a sexuality education unit in an English Language classroom**

*Excerpt from student paper reflecting on discussion-based, student-centered classroom: “In China, most of our Chinese teachers are always traditional and conservative, but you are different. You are fearless and have passions. Their lessons are seldom related to the topics like femininity, abortion, gay/lesbian, etc. But you give these topics to us and let us have discussions. And I think these topics are closely related with our vital interests and our daily life, and they will not disappear even if we avoid to talking about them. So it is necessary for us to know those knowledge, and discussion can deepen and broaden our thoughts. These knowledge we learn will be helpful for us in our life. . . . In Chinese classes, students are treated like sausages, teachers just inject things in. When the sausage is full, teachers pack the sausage up and go onto another bunch of sausages. Students in China are being put on the position of passive learners. They do not have to be active thinkers. What they have to do is just to learn what teachers told them and to get high scores in examinations. You are different, you teach us to think – why things should be like these. What you taught us is a way of thinking, which can benefit us for a lifelong time. You teach us to live a life that we truly want to. “When we sit around the desks to have our class, I feel very close with my classmates because we can see each other and listen to each other carefully.” –Third year undergraduate student*

Universities across China employ a wide range of native speakers to teach English. Typically these English classrooms have few curricular guidelines, especially if they are taught at the university level. This gives the teacher a wide berth in how to construct the classroom. The primary objective of these English language classrooms is to have students write and speak more fluent English, taught by a native speaker. Therefore, most teachers are offered a lot of leeway in lessons. At the university where I taught, as long as speaking, writing, and research skills were emphasized, the topics of lessons were open to teacher discretion.

In approaching the sexuality education unit, something that emerged after several months of teaching, I began by first discussing the status of sexuality education and pre-marital sex in the U.S. Because I had been trained and had experience as a sexuality educator in the U.S. and internationally as a Peace Corps volunteer, I had experience in initiating this discussion. I began by speaking about how children learn about sex, what attitudes parents might have about sex, and how emerging sexual health is addressed and practices among young adults. This began the conversation as a cross-cultural exchange: here is what is going on in my country regarding sex education. Talking about different kinds of birth control available, teen pregnancy rates, taboos regarding abortion and teen parenting are a good way to start. Chinese students have a difficult time comprehending that teen pregnancy is openly discussed and accepted in the U.S. In the United States many high schools have day care programs for babies and toddlers of teen parents. For a Chinese student, this can seem unfathomable because there is such a taboo against teen pregnancy. A good introduction to these issues is the documentary *Let's Talk about Sex*, a film that compares attitudes of teen sexuality and education in the U.S. to countries in Europe. The issues raised in the film (parents' roles in open conversations about sex, access to comprehensive sex education in schools, attitudes regarding condom use, abortion, and teen pregnancy) offer many sites of interesting debate for Chinese students. These topics also open the door to allow students to talk about their own experiences and Chinese cultural attitudes regarding sex, especially sex before marriage. I discovered that my students enjoyed watching this film because it includes many interviews with English-speaking teenagers.

In my Chinese university classrooms, I was able to facilitate discussions with readings on birth control available in other countries, attitudes about abortion in the United States, and essays on what can be covered in sexuality education. These discussions began by asking how attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors either reflect or conflict with Chinese attitudes/behaviors. One way to approach discussion is to facilitate formal debates in the class: “What should be taught and when? Why?” “Is premarital sex a good idea or not?” “Is pornography a good way to learn about sex?”. These debates allow the students to do their own research and express opinions on topics that may be otherwise taboo. Researched debate also allows the teacher a venue for adding to the information the students find. Teachers can assign reading and writing assignments about the topic (a research paper; an opinion paper). As they move through the readings, debates, research, and writing, most students will become more comfortable talking about these issues.

Once we had spent several days on reading, talking about, and writing about issues of sexual health, I asked students to write down – anonymously – their questions about sex that were still unanswered. This allowed students to honestly ask anonymously what they wanted to know. I then took the questions and wrote out answers or verbally answered the questions in the classroom. Writing down the questions and answers and then distributing them to the class, as opposed to answering the questions on the fly, allowed me to research and formulate answers in language I knew the students would understand. By writing out the questions/answers, students had something to refer to later or pass among peers.

If the classroom includes both males and females, it may take longer for these honest exchanges to happen. I found that girls and young women, especially, often were shy about asking questions or talking honestly about sex in front of their male peers. This dynamic also existed in many of my U.S. college courses. However, despite initial discomfort, the use of a student-centered, discussion-based pedagogy allowed my Chinese students to build up slowly to critically thinking and talking about complex cultural issues. Sexuality education is one of those issues that will not only make a difference in their understanding of healthy sexuality, but will keep them safe from unplanned pregnancies, unnecessary abortions, and STIs.

### ***Methodology***

This paper made use of small-scale research. The sample consisted of four different classrooms of university students at Xi'dian University in Xi'an, China. The classes range from first year students who were studying English translation in the field of technology and computer science to graduate level linguistic students in a research writing course. The courses were taught by a U.S. visiting faculty with a Ph.D. in English who also had experience and training as a sex educator. The sample consisted of 98 students across these courses (40 first-years, 20 second years, 20 third years, and 18 graduate students). The sample was chosen for convenience. All participants consented to taking part in the research exercise and signed consent forms that their writing could be used in publication, names removed for anonymity.

### ***Findings and Discussion***

After working for a semester with students to foster open communication and a discussion-based classroom based on feminist pedagogical principles, I was able to create lessons and discussions on healthy sexual practices and comprehensive education. With my students, I facilitated discussions on birth control, female sexual pleasure, same-sex sexual relationships, abortion, and STIs. Although females in a mixed-sex class were slower to speak, journal entries and questions written and then handed in to the teacher revealed that female college students were as engaged as their male peers on these topics, even if they were less vocal in class. In classrooms where females dominated or were the majority, the females were less inhibited in their open discussions of sexuality. Examples of what students were curious about and how they approached asking about sexuality with their U.S. teacher are included below. These excerpts were pulled from student papers. These papers were a result of the sexuality education unit as well as some questions/answers students posed as part of class discussion. The questions and comments show the openness the students had when engaging with these topics. The openness was possible only due to groundwork regarding student-centered pedagogy, Socratic debate, and critical thinking between and among teacher/students.

*Female graduate student:* My sister is an anesthetist and she has seen the process of many abortions. She said most women are from 16-23 years old and most of them are scared and embarrassed when they come to the hospital, and some of them are accompanied by their boyfriends or friends, some are alone. For these women, they are already puzzled by the unexpected pregnancy and the abortion will be another terrible disaster. The scared faces and the embarrassing conditions for these poor women tell us abortion is not what they need. What they need is education of contraception.

*Female graduate student:* My friend was having sex with her boyfriend, but he didn't want to use condoms. He said he was too embarrassed to buy them at the store. She got pregnant and went to the clinic. He didn't go with her, so she had to go by herself. The abortion cost 700Yuan and she couldn't tell anyone because of her shame. She is still with this boyfriend and they still have sex without a condom. She says she can't do anything about it.

*Male undergraduate student:* My friend came to me and said his girlfriend was pregnant. We got together and gave him money so that she could have an abortion. Something went wrong and she bled too much and almost died. She had to spend a long time in the hospital. She couldn't tell her family why she was there. My friend had to gather more money to pay for the hospital.



*Male undergraduate student:* I had a girl who was my friend in high school. A teacher had sex with her. She didn't know what was happening and she got pregnant. She didn't know she was pregnant and when her parents discovered it, they were angry at her. She got an abortion, but she was never the same after that. She is very depressed and left her studies. Now she is at home with her family, but they do not treat her well.

*Female undergraduate student:* I had a friend who needed an abortion. She didn't have money to afford a good hospital so we went to a small clinic. It was dirty and the nurses were unkind. She had the abortion, but it was very painful. She is not the same person now. Her boyfriend sent her away when he found out she was pregnant.

*Female undergraduate student:* In the United States parents do not care if their daughter is pregnant, but in China it would bring great shame on the family. No daughter would allow this. If a girl is pregnant she will either kill herself or get an abortion if she can. There is no other choice for her.

*Female graduate student:* Most of my friends who have boyfriends have sex, but we do not have birth control pills or other methods to use. We have to depend on our boyfriends and many times they do not want to use condoms. Some girls think if they eat or drink certain foods after they have sex, they will not get pregnant. Someone said if a girl jumps up and down after sex she will not get pregnant. I do not know if these things are true or not.

The above excerpts, a typical sampling of the narratives and personal experiences that students wrote about to the teacher, reveal not only that young women are often disempowered during heterosexual encounters but that when they become pregnant, they have traumatic abortion experiences either due to shame, lack of support (emotion and financial), or fear. Increasing sexuality education can help avert many of these problems. If young women feel empowered sexually, they will have more positive relationships. If they are knowledgeable about pregnancy and STI prevention, they will be able to largely avoid negative outcomes of sexual relationships.

In addition to asking students to write about questions or comments they have about sexual health and sexuality education in China, I also invited students to pose questions anonymously. The following questions are a sampling of those questions posed anonymously (written on pieces of paper and handed in at the end of class). After collecting the questions in class, I typed up the questions and wrote answers, providing URL links to give more comprehensive information when I could. I then emailed the question list and my answers to everyone in the class. By emailing the questions and answers, students may have gained additional information that they did not think to ask or were too shy to ask. By emailing them instead of addressing them during class discussion, I gave students who did not want the information or those who felt embarrassed by the information to avoid it. After the student question (in bold), I have included my answer. In answering the questions, I attempted to keep my language simple and use vocabulary that we had covered in class and readings.

**Can a woman have sex during her period? What should a woman NOT do during her period? (shower? drink cold liquids?)**

Yes, a woman can have sex during her period. There is nothing that a woman can't do during her period. I know in China there are many myths about what a woman should/should not do during her period, but it is healthy for a woman, during her period, to exercise, bath, shower, eat/drink whatever she wants. She can do anything during her period that she does at other times. Some women say that having orgasms during her period helps decrease menstrual cramps.

**What causes disease during sex?**

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are similar to any other disease. You come in contact with someone who has a virus and you get it. The only way to prevent sexual diseases and infections is to always use a condom. If the two people having sex are women, they need to use a barrier between the vagina/mouth or vagina/vagina to be safe. You cannot "see" whether someone has a sexually transmitted disease. Therefore, you never know whether the person you are having sex with is infected or not. Even if the person says, "You are my first," they may not be telling the truth. Women often do not talk about when they have been raped. A woman may have been raped and could have been infected during the rape. Most people who have a sexually transmitted disease do not know that they are infected because they don't get tested.

**If someone doesn't want to have sex, is that OK?**

Yes. Everyone's sex drive (libido) is different. If you don't want to have sex, you should NOT have sex. Even if your partner really wants to have sex, if you don't want to have sex, tell him/her.

And just because you say yes to sex once, does not mean you have to say yes all the time. Each time is a new situation. You can say yes or no. You decide. If your partner does not accept your answer, you need to find a different person to be with!

### **What can I do to avoid pregnancy? What contraceptives are safe for a woman's body?**

In order to NOT get pregnant, men should ALWAYS use a condom and a woman should use some form of birth control. There are birth control pills (they must be taken every day, not just when she has sex). There are also hormone shots and patches she can use. There is something called an IUD (Intra Uterine Device) that is also used by many women, but this needs to be inserted by a doctor. Some women use a diaphragm (a cup that fits over the cervix during sex). All of these devices are proven safe and effective if used properly. You should determine which is best for you by taking this quiz and then talking with your doctor.

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/all-access/my-method-26542.htm>

### **What is a hymen and why do some men think it is good to "break" it? Do all women have a hymen?**

A hymen is a small flap of skin between the vagina and the cervix. Many girls "break" their hymen by doing normal physical activity (playing, running, jumping, falling). Many girls don't have hymens. Many girls/teens break their hymens through masturbation. There are some women who still have hymens when they are adults, but more commonly they do not. Here is more info on what a hymen is: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/info-for-teens/sex-masturbation/what-virginity-33827.htm>

It is silly (and not very kind) for a man to think it is "good/cool" to "break a hymen." That is male ignorance. A man should want a sexual partner who is eager to have sex with him and he should respect her. It should have *nothing* to do with whether she has a hymen or not. Both men and women should be free to explore sex without shame. A man should care about a woman before he has sex with her. It should make no difference to him whether she has had sex before.

No one knows whether you are a "virgin" except you. A woman may tell a man she has never had sex before, but there is no way for the man to know that. There is a myth that some people believe a woman who has never had sex will bleed the first time she has sex. This is not true. Some women do bleed, but most don't. No one can tell whether someone has never had sex before.

### **How often is healthy?**

How often you have sex is different depending on who you are and how you are feeling and what your libido (sex drive) is. Some people, if they are in love and have the time, will have sex several times a day with the person they love. Some people will only desire sex once a week or once a month. Some people will go through periods where they don't want sex at all. All of it is healthy. It depends on the person. It also depends on whether you have a partner who has the same desire as you do.

### **How do men or women react when having an orgasm?**

This is very individual and is based on each person's comfort level and response. Some people are loud. Some are quiet. Just like laughter, everyone's orgasm is a little bit different and unique to them.

### **If someone has AIDS (or another infection/disease), is using a condom 100% safe?**

Condoms are the only effective way to stop sexually-transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS. You must use a condom correctly (put it on before there is *any* sexual contact and take it off immediately following orgasm so it doesn't leak). Condoms can break, so it is essential to make sure you are using new condoms and that you store condoms in a location that does not have a lot of heat as the latex in the condoms will become weak. Here is a link to show you how to use a condom: <http://www.wikihow.com/Use-a-Condom> NOTE ABOUT CONDOMS: Latex (what condoms are made of) gets old. If you keep a condom in a hot place or a sunny place, it will break. Store your condoms in a cool, dry place (away from the sun) and always check the date on the condom.

AIDS, as any sexual disease, can be the result of *any* sex with *any* partner. A person can get AIDS from sleeping with *one* person, if that person is HIV positive. The only way to ensure you don't get AIDS is by not having sex or by using a condom correctly. If he doesn't have a condom, he doesn't get to have sex with you. Full Stop. No exceptions.

## Conclusion

Through careful attention to fostering classrooms of discussion-based pedagogy that deal with increasingly controversial social issues, a foreign born feminist teacher can begin to broach more complicated and complex issues. By doing so, teachers can create an environment of critical thinking as well as facilitate learning important to health and well-being, particularly for their female students. In the context of this paper, the topic of critical thinking and student health is sexuality education for university-aged Chinese students with the tertiary goal of female sexual empowerment. After several lessons that engendered critical thinking and debate, the teacher was able to delve into the complex cultural issues of sexuality with Chinese university students, providing a venue of question/answer critical to student health. The lack of healthy information about sexuality that Chinese young adults have access to can be a barrier to healthy adult sexual practices. This lack of information affects female students quite dramatically in the form of unhealthy sexual relationships, unplanned pregnancy, traumatic abortion experiences, and increased risk of STIs. As a feminist teachers, we are obligated to change this dynamic. Before being able to successfully engage in discussions hinging on controversial or taboo topics, a feminist teacher needs to create a classroom environment of trust, open conversations, debate, and critical thinking. Once this environment has been established, complex cultural issues such as sexuality education can be integrated. The findings of this research demonstrate that Chinese university students are eager to engage in critical thinking and debate formats of student-centered classrooms. Even as some of the women in the classes were hesitant at first, particularly in the presence of their male peers, they were eager for the information on healthy sexuality. Through integration of contemporary social issues, building up to controversial topics such as sexuality, feminist teachers can help students learn important critical thinking and analysis as well as empower them to be more knowledgeable about their world. Chinese university students, given an open and encouraging classroom environment, are eager to engage in frank discussions about many controversial topics, including their own sexual health and sexuality questions. Through fostering a classroom environment of trust and open discussion with feminist pedagogical practices, a teacher can be a great resource to furthering students' knowledge on important topics such as sexuality, contraception, and AIDS prevention. Such information is essential in empowering the next generation of female students.

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