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‘Abstinence is panacea’: Reconstructing the ideal of Chinese masculinity through online community

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Abstract

This article discusses the experience of Chinese young men relating to sexual abstinence through the Abstinence Bar (*jiese ba* 戒色吧) – an online community, with over six million members, dedicated to preaching the benefits of sexual abstinence – to identify how it represents a problematic strategy of ‘doing gender’ in post-socialist China. Based on a critical discourse analysis of the posts in the Abstinence Bar, we argue that the prosperity of the Abstinence Bar has re-stabilized the hegemony of dominant masculinities through cultural changes which intersect with individualism and nationalism. Consequently, it is essential to advocate evidence-based sexuality education among Chinese young people.

Keywords

China, masculinity, online community, sexual abstinence, sexuality education

Introduction

> ‘How I wish to drop off the black umbrella of sin. How I want to immerse myself in holy sunshine’ (Lonelywinter 2018-08-03 00:49).

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The quote above, taken from a very active online community with a total of 92 million posts, indicates a painful feeling: a desire to get rid of 'sin'. This online community called the Abstinence Bar is one of the most popular sub-groups on *Baidu Tieba* (百度贴吧) which claims to be the largest Chinese online community in the world which is operated by a leading Chinese search engine company Baidu.com. It connects over six million like-minded members together. They are mostly young men, especially teenagers, who desperately want to change from *diaosi* (屌丝) (literally meaning dick hair in Chinese, an internet buzzword that refers to a young man of mediocre appearance and low social status) to good-looking and successful men by maintaining sexual abstinence. In contrast to the idea that masturbation is a natural and harmless expression of sexuality as professed in the general medical community, the Abstinence Bar upholds the idea that 'masturbation is pernicious' as its core principle, supporting this argument by collecting example stories from both China and the West. Unlike many online discussions that often trigger 'flame wars' or cyber-bullies, the members of the Abstinence Bar are unusually friendly and supportive of each other. Like online games, every member gets experience points according to time spent logged in and the number of published posts. There are 15 levels of the Abstinence Bar membership ranging from freshman, with the least experience, to master, with the most experience. This demonstrates that the Abstinence Bar is a stable and well-organised community with steadily increasing member numbers. Moreover, many related media products of the Abstinence Bar have been established such as applications for mobile phone use, Weibo and WeChat social media accounts, as well as broadcasting to produce and disseminate knowledge related to maintaining sexual abstinence.

The Abstinence Bar to some extent reflects the status quo of sexuality education in China and plays a role in the dissemination of sexuality knowledge, as well as shaping young people's understanding of sexuality. Since the access to sexuality education services is limited among schools, families and communities, and the quality of sexuality education materials in Chinese varies (Liu, 2022), the Internet thus has developed as an easily accessible and anonymous channel for young people to acquire and share their knowledge and experiences of sexuality. Among the news reports and research on the Abstinence Bar, only a few tend to attribute its popularity to the lack of evidence-based sexuality education and the lower educational attainment of its members. In addition to this, there is little consideration relating to the broad cultural context, namely, a shift in the understanding of masculinity in post-socialist China, especially when metrosexual and androgynous men (e.g. idols in K-pop and 'gender benders') have gained currency in popular culture and a so-called 'boy crisis' has been proposed by the state (Lin and Mac an Ghaill, 2019). Thus, this article asks: What is the ideal masculinity in the Abstinence Bar? By what strategies is this masculinity constructed? Is there a possibility that keeping sexual abstinence is able to restabilise Chinese masculinity according to the indigenous *wen-wu* (文武) paradigm and the government's official discourse?

It is worth mentioning that the focus of our paper here is to understand the nature of the Abstinence Bar and to understand why in China's specific social context it can be built and attract so many men's attention. Therefore, in this paper, we first situate our intervention in relation to the literature on Chinese masculinity and sexual abstinence culture in China.

After we outline our methodology within which we address how members in the Abstinence Bar mobilise the term *yinxie* (淫邪), which means the failure to maintain sexual abstinence in Chinese language and the Abstinence Bar's context, to provide the collectivity of community formation and nationalism. We further examine why it has gained popularity in an online environment with sexual-sensitive censorship.

Literature review

Wen-wu *paradigm and the shift of masculinity in contemporary China*

It is instructive to identify the construction of Chinese masculinity in the context of globalization and increasing research scholarship on men and masculinities in non-Western societies, given the pluralities and complexities of masculinities in local culture. Before we further discuss masculinity in contemporary China, we first cite an important and influential paradigm – the *wen-wu* (literary-martial) dyad proposed by Louie (2002) – to present a better view of the historically hegemonic masculinity in Chinese culture. According to Louie (2015), the commonly used *yin-yang* (阴阳) dyad (*yin* means feminine and *yang* means masculine) does not provide a constructive model for describing and analysing Chinese masculinity because such a dichotomy for conceptualising the universe is reflected in many philosophies. Different from the *yin-yang* dyad, the *wen-wu* paradigm excludes women and denotes the ideal masculine qualities for Chinese men, especially in the period of imperial China.

Wen refers to cultural attainment, associated with the (idea of/figure of the) gentleman-scholar (*junzi* 君子) promoted by Confucius, who was a respectable person, who regulated the family, and governed the state rightly. Being a gentlemen-scholar requires 'restraining self and returning to the rites' (Louie, 2015: 2). That is to say, he can exercise self-control extremely well and follows social expectations strictly. Gentlemen-scholars normally gain a position in the ruling class and elite by passing the men-only civil service examinations (*keju* 科举).

Wu refers to martial masculinity, but loyalty and brotherhood are emphasised rather than violence and power. Although the pursuit of body-mind excellence as the ideal manhood is not uncommon in many cultures, Louie (2014) argues that 'the Chinese case prioritises the mind more than most Western cultures, and certainly more than the Euro-American one' (p. 22), which is a negotiation between brains and brawn. In Hollywood movies, the police, soldiers and cowboys have occupied the male heroic images for a long time, and it is only by their violation of rules that justice can be achieved.

In such European–American discourse, the *wen* quality can hardly be part of the ideal manhood. Even though a strong body has been emphasised as a vital step of modernisation since modern China met Western knowledge and military force, it does not subvert the prioritised position of *wen* (Kipnis, 2011). It is noteworthy that the civil service examinations to attain *wen* quality, as an 'examination mania' (Kipnis, 2011; Louie, 2014: 23), have long-lasting influence and continued significance today, known as the University Entrance Examination (*gaokao* 高考), which interacts considerably with notions of ideal masculinity among young people. We return to this point in the findings section.

Connell (2014) reminds us that when considering masculinity in the South and during the post-colonial era, we are not looking for a static alternative to the North, but the complex history of different cultures must be fully considered. In a similar vein, masculinity in contemporary China is not fixed or monolithic but ever-changing and connected to power relationships in society. For example, the crisis of masculinity and men's anxiety in the post-Mao era are highly related to the pursuit of modernity brought about by economic reform and opening up, as well as the rise of consumerism (Baranovitch, 2003; Yang, 2010; Zhong, 2000). Song and Hird (2014) argue that since the 2000s, 'the coexistence of a variety of competing discourses has replaced the overwhelming pursuit of one particular type of masculinity' (p. 10). They summarise several noteworthy characteristics of the diverse shifts of Chinese masculinities in the context of globalisation: persistent criticism and anxiety about the quality of Chinese men compared to Western men; an interaction between masculinity in popular culture and the rise of nationalism, that is, 'a "good" man is a man who brings honour to the motherland and safeguards national dignity on the international stage' (p. 12); and that consumerism plays a vital role in the construction of masculinity, especially that masculinity is increasingly defined as having wealth and power. Importantly, in popular culture, and especially with the influence of K-pop and Japanese drama, good-looking 'flower-like men' are now highly popular among young Chinese women. As young women's buying power has improved, they have become increasingly important in the construction of masculinity (Louie, 2012). The popularity of metrosexual and androgynous men seems to defy the traditional *wen-wu* paradigm. Whether such a shift contributes to the anxiety of Chinese young men's understanding of masculinity, as well as how they react to such a shift in the online space, is a significant focus of this article.

Religious ideas, negotiation and power: Understanding the sexual abstinence culture

Understanding the Abstinence Bar as a closed community, it is then rational to see how hierarchy and governance have been applied within it and amongst its members by popularising these various religious ideas (Fang, 2018). 'Religious ideas' rather than 'religions' is used here because the members of the Abstinence Bar, through their words and the circumstance in the community, rarely read the original religious classics, but most accept second-hand information from others who might also have not read any. The authenticity of the information based on 'religious ideas' could hardly be guaranteed. Another reason for choosing the terminology 'religious ideas' instead of 'religions' is in consideration of the complex position of Confucianism. Tu (1998) argued that Confucianism was a cultural thought rather than a religion. However, Miyazaki (2020) recognised the long-lasting debate and indicated that it was not a problem of Confucianism whilst a problem of religion itself. As he explored, religion was a word which originally and specifically referred to Christianity in Western countries. As a result, people and researchers tended to use the word 'religion' as an umbrella word to include similar concepts. In this case, as proclaimed by Miyazaki (2020), the discussion of Confucianism should no longer be limited within the Christianity-centred framework, and the criteria

need to be re-examined. Since the Confucian classics have regulated people's everyday lives, including but not limited to etiquettes from various perspectives, they have also explained the theories and philosophies regarding the universe and human beings, it thus becomes convincing enough to call Confucianism a religion.

Additionally, seeing Confucianism as an unfixed being, to a certain extent, echoes the discussion of the differences between the diffused religion and the institutional religion (Yang, 1973). The institutional religion refers to the ones which have theological systems, ceremonies and organisations beyond secularisation; whilst the diffused religion is more embedded in people's everyday lives (Von Glahn, 2004). Resonating with Yang's (1973) argument, diffused religion has played a particular and significant role in China's society. However, in this paper, the focus is not on the selection of the terminology. Instead, the purpose is to investigate how young people are reconstructing their masculinity in the Abstinence Bar. The consideration behind the use of 'religious ideas' in this paper, therefore, has been established.

Sexual abstinence culture has deep roots in China. The religious ideas, that emerged from Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, have influenced people's view of sexuality in consideration of their specific pattern of development in China's context. These mixed ideas then became the foundation of sexual abstinence views in the Abstinence Bar. For example, Confucianism ideologically persuades married couples to conduct sexual activity only for human reproduction. It is a moral standard for well-behaved gentlemen with regard to the promoted *junzi* ideal (Louie, 2015); Taoists believe that sexual behaviour is a religious ceremony to increase longevity and become immortal; and Buddhists assert that being sexually conscious helps people to realise their value of lives (Fang, 2018; Wang, 2006). Thus, it is not surprising to see the absence of sexual joy and pleasure from all these three philosophies. Additionally, sexuality can be seen as a long-standing outcome of the non-linear social development in China.

In the Abstinence Bar, although they are spreading the ideas from Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, their fundamental values are actually conflicting. Fang (2018), in his research about Buddhism and China's traditional culture, revealed the myth behind this conflicting status. To be specific, in China's history, religions have always been used as a tool to serve the regime and its governance. For example, before Buddhism entered China, originally in India, the authentic Buddhist idea was quite open about topics related to sexuality, and there was even no discrimination against prostitutes. However, when Buddhism was trying to enter and get promoted in China's society, since the idea was against other traditional ideas, such as Confucianism, the limitation on sex-related topics was then added to Buddhism with 'Chinese characteristics'. Moreover, the idea of equality promoted by the original Buddhism classics was also in conflict with the hierarchical society advocated by Confucianism. Under the limitations, Karma, a Buddhist idea which dictates that people would suffer retribution for their sins and achieve good luck for their kindness, soon became a weapon for threatening people who broke sexual morality within the conflicting nature. Fang (2018), thus, concluded that the three mainstream religions in China's society, namely, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, were supported by the authorities comprehensively but used for its governance selectively. However, it would not change the conflicting nature of these religious ideas.

These conflicting religious ideas serve power (Fang, 2018), and so does sexuality (Foucault, 2020 [1976]). Similar to the idea of framing sex as taboo, brought by Victorian Puritanism to people in the West, Chinese traditional culture addresses the concept of '*li*' (rites and propriety) as a way to regulate human behaviours and social orders, which excludes sexuality from the public discourse and makes it a private and secret issue that is only reasonable to exist in the bedroom and be associated with reproduction. All sexual behaviours not resulting in breeding offspring are immoral and unspeakable. In the meantime, sexuality is under the watchful eye of power because it is highly associated with human reproduction, health and population, which can ensure the sustainable and stable development of society. Therefore, it is important to note that sexuality has always been a crucial means for the state to discipline people and mediate the population, as well as an ideological strategy for the reclamation of power and propagation of moralisation.

In 2020, for the first time, a revised law on protecting minors was passed by the top legislative body. To be specific, the National People's Congress Standing Committee declared that schools are required to teach students 'age-appropriate sex education for minors, increasing their awareness and ability to protect themselves against sexual abuse and sexual harassment (China Law Translate, 2020)'. However, it is necessary to state that in this case, the meaning of sexuality education is different to comprehensive sexuality education which has been advocated by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) since the 2000s. Comprehensive sexuality education means more than the prevention of sexual abuse and sexual harassment (UNESCO, 2018). It is a concept which suggests children and young people are responsible for themselves and others when they make sexuality-related decisions. By contrast, in the newly revised law in 2020, though conducting sexuality education had been written in the law and obtained legitimacy, the definition and the rule of practice are still tightly held in the authorities' hands rather than in the hands of academics and practitioners. Resonating Foucault's (2020 [1976]: 42) discussion regarding children's sex and why it was seen as unacceptable:

> '[…] it may have been designated as the evil to be eliminated, but the extraordinary effort that went into the task that was bound to fail leads one to suspect that what was demanded of it was to persevere, to proliferate to the limits of the visible and the invisible, rather than to disappear for good'.

In this case, in consideration of the purpose of protecting children and young people against sexual abuse and sexual harassment, it is unsurprising to see how sex and sexuality education have been utilised and controlled by power. Therefore, the interpretation and guidance of sexuality by power is a smart strategy to track sexuality discourse and to categorise sexual behaviours more hierarchically. Those practices of non-reproductive and non-heterosexual behaviours are made pathologic. This effectively distinguishes 'healthy' people with normal sexual desire and 'pathological' sexual desire and behaviours. Importantly, people who are classified as 'normal' will spontaneously assist the power to monitor and attempt to correct those who are 'abnormal'.

Through the literature we have reviewed, it suggested that *wen-wu* masculinity, religious ideas and state governance were closely intertwined but rarely explored. For example, Louie's (2002) on theorising Chinese masculinity unpacked how Confucianism influenced the construction of the *wen-wu* masculinity. Additionally, other academic discussions reveal how Taoism and Buddhism impacted Chinese people's understanding and practice of sexuality (Fang, 2018). Our exploration between the religious ideas and power authority also indicated the nature of the unauthentic application of some of the guidance of human sexuality, especially when religious ideas were selectively utilised as the tools to govern people and society. Resonating Foucault's (2020 [1976]) notion regarding power and sexuality, we thus determined to connect the discussion of *wen-wu* masculinity, religious ideas and governance together. In the following part of this paper, we are aiming to investigate how masculinity is (re)constructed by learning about young men's understanding of sexual abstinence in the Abstinence Bar in China's context.

Method

As discussed, this study aims to explore the relationship between the online discourse of sexual abstinence and the construction of Chinese masculinity among young Chinese men. The research questions underlying the study are the following:

RQ1. What is the ideal masculinity in the Abstinence Bar?

RQ2. By what strategies is this masculinity constructed?

RQ3. Is there a possibility that keeping sexual abstinence is able to restabilise Chinese masculinity according to the indigenous *wen-wu* paradigm and the government's official discourse?

To investigate the research questions, from June to August 2019, we employed online observation to collect 90 posts (as well as the comments) circulated in the Abstinence Bar, which include the knowledge, experience, emotions and commentary relating to sexual abstinence. Although people of different ages are active in the Abstinence Bar, we focus on young people in this study. There are multiple reasons for choosing young people: First, in China's national education curriculum, especially in the framework of the 9-year comprehensive education (normally 6-year primary school education and 3-year middle school education), only in biology classes in middle school students would be taught about the reproductive system (Liu, 2022). However, due to inadequate teacher training programmes for teaching sex-related topics as well as teachers' psychological barriers, this knowledge cannot usually be imparted effectively. Therefore, Chinese young people often only gain limited knowledge about sexuality from schooling (Gao et al., 2001). Second, in China, as Pan and Huang (2013: 64) argued, parents are one of the primary obstacles to implementing evidence-based sexuality education. Sex is considered taboo or immoral content for the parent–children conversation. Third, according to the China Internet Network Information Centre Report (2016: 2), by the end of December 2015, the

number of young internet users aged under 18 years old was 134 million, which implies that young people's participation is an important part of online discourse. Finally, because of young people's physical development and pubescent curiosity, they are particularly keen to search for and communicate their questions regarding their sexuality via the Internet, which has already proved to be an efficient channel for delivering sexuality education (Borzekowski and Rickert, 2001).

In the sampling process, we first looked at the posts shared by teenage members. Given the Abstinence Bar is a supportive community and sharing life experiences is an important part of communication between members, many of them directly state their age (or the year they were born), when they started to keep sexual abstinence, what grade they are in and whether they are in college or have a job. These posts about sharing sexual abstinence experiences include lots of life information. Therefore, it was not difficult for us to rule out the posts from members over 18. In addition to sampling the posts with age information, we also selected them according to their life information, such as preparing for junior and senior high school mid-term exams or describing their daily school life. We observed that among these young people's posts, some were simply clocking in every day, and some were sharing and pasting 'inspiring' articles. These posts were considered of little relevance to the research questions and therefore were eliminated. The posts we selected are 800–1000 words (in Chinese), and some of them have over 1000 comments, which guarantees a certain level of reach. It is necessary to note that we also observed the comments on the posts, which may not all have been published by teenagers. However, these comments contribute to the interactions between young members and the community of Abstinence Bar. These posts and comments provided detailed stories of confusion surrounding masturbation, reasons for sexual abstinence, how to conduct and maintain abstinence every day and the results of abstinence.

We applied critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the textual discourse sourced from the selected posts. CDA focuses on the relationship between discourse and society and scrutinises how power, domination and inequality are shaped in relation to specific social structures and cultural contexts (Fairclough, 2006; Van Dijk 2008; Wodak 2014). A three-dimensional framework was provided by Fairclough (1992) to analyse textual data, which includes the levels of texts, discourse practices and social practices. In this framework, Fairclough takes discourse as the use of language that reproduces social practice and discourse presents a dialectical relationship with social structure – on the one hand, the shaping of discourse is constrained by social structure; on the other hand, discourse also has a socially constitutive role in social structure. Therefore, guided by this framework, we noticed the communicative style, metaphor and language choice in the selected posts. We then identified the patterns and strategies emerging in these textual data and analysed how these features contribute to the construction of specific Chinese masculinity.

The qualitative analysis software NVivo was used for data coding and organisation. We categorised the data into four clusters based on different contents shared by the users: personal stories of successful/failed sexual abstinence experiences, comparisons of maintaining/not maintaining sexual abstinence (including imagery and textual data), reasons for maintaining sexual abstinence, as well as comments (most of them are encouragement and compliment). Open coding was applied to identify keywords, sentences

and paragraphs to develop the initial codes. Then the relationships between the initial codes were analysed to form thematic codes. To be specific, these posts, without exception, show the desire of the Abstinence Bar members to control themselves and achieve self-set goals through sexual abstinence. Therefore, the ideal appearance and behaviours of men were intensely mentioned, with sexual abstinence being the unifying standard of being 'good men'. We coded such content as 'ideal masculinity'. Correspondingly, failing to be sexually abstinent (failing to persist/watching pornography/having sexual fantasies about women) was also very common in these posts. Notably, *yinxie* was a key term that was repeatedly discussed. *Yinxie* has various definitions. For example, Rocha (2010: 82) translates it as pornography. In Buddhism, it means debauchery and improper/extramarital sexual behaviour. In contrast to those above-mentioned definitions, however, we addressed *yinxie* – as used widely in the Abstinence Bar – as lust or sexual desire that might hamper people's development towards successful abstinence.

Given that usernames are easy to trace online, we present pseudonyms for the usernames. Importantly, the limitation of this study should be recognised; within the limited timeframe and efforts, this study collected data from one online community to explore the fanaticism of keeping sexual abstinence as a distinct cultural phenomenon in relation to masculinity construction. Using in-depth interviews to investigate how the users know this platform and how online knowledge impacts their offline life will be a valuable field for further research.

Results

Community formation: Yinxie *against ideal masculinities*

The Abstinence Bar works as an online community for communicative purposes in which members are both the producers and consumers of information (Wellman, 2001). It produces 'a sense of immersion that mimics reality' (Preece, 2000: 16), keeping members together as well as expressing and assuming a common identity. In turn, such identity has been shown to impact the degree to which an individual feels part of the online community (O'Connor, et al., 2015). In light of this, we first examine how people's individual experiences played a role in the formation of identity and community.

In the Abstinence Bar, there is a close connection between sexual abstinence and being an 'ideal' man. Many 'successful' and 'role model' posts received a large number of 'likes' and have been repeatedly circulated. For example,

> 'I did it! I have kept sexuality abstinence for a year! I think my body condition has improved…I no longer have insomnia and headaches…my rhinitis has got much better' (Badman, 2018-06-21 23:55).

> 'I have kept sexual abstinence for almost two years…I think my mental health has become normal…I am back to being a sunny and confident man, and I no longer feel depressed…our

psychological problems are caused by the high consumption of sperm' (Godsheep 2018-06-24 20:18).

'Only because I have kept sexuality abstinence, it is such a hard journey, I go to a first-level university!' (Savepeople 2018-05-21 07:47).

'Keeping sexual abstinence has improved my concentration so I can focus on my studies' (Fininshway 2018-08-04 21:05).

The comments on these posts were mostly 'congratulations'/'*Shixiong* (师兄), thank you for your sharing' or '*Shixiong*, we must learn from you'. The term *shixiong* comes from Chinese martial art culture. The senior, male, fellow apprentices are usually called *shixiong* respectfully. Junior apprentices learn knowledge and skills from the senior ones, namely, *shixiong* in this case. Therefore, it shows that the results of successful sexual abstinence are a common expectation of members. First, by keeping sexuality abstinence, they hope to improve their poor health – to be energetic, to cure their chronic illness and to be good-looking. They believe that when their body gets better, their mental well-being and study performance will improve. This is in line with the *wen-wu* paradigm for the ideal masculine qualities of Chinese men. As mentioned before, the ideal character of man in Chinese culture is called *junzi*, who is required to be ' restraining (him)self and returning to the rites' (Louie, 2015: 2). It indicates that restraint and self-discipline play a very crucial role in achieving the *wen-wu* paradigm. For teenage members in the Abstinence Bar, in order to obtain ideal masculinity (good study performance and strong body), restraining their sexual behaviours has become a relatively easy-way to achieve.

Additionally, confession also plays a vital role in the interrelationship between sexuality and governance (Foucault, 2020 [1976]). In Foucault's words, '[the confession of sexuality] exonerates, redeems and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him and promises him salvation (p. 62)'. Correspondingly, many posts confessed the 'failed' experiences, including masturbation, watching pornography and thinking about women, whereby these members felt deep remorse, guilt and shame. Among these posts, a key term *yinxie* was widely and frequently mentioned. This term originates from the idea of the 'five precepts (*wujie* 五戒)' in the classic works of Buddhism (Kumar, 2020). It was defined as sexual desire in a form that poses an obstacle on the path to enlightenment. The Five Precepts require Buddhist lay people to abstain from sexual misconduct (e.g. adultery with a married or engaged person, rape and sex with a prostitute). Although masturbation is not prohibited for lay people in the early texts, it is considered against the spirit of the precept (Laqueur, 2003). Avoiding *yinxie*, promoted by members, was also an important part of conventional Chinese virtue and its influence lasts till nowadays (Fang, 2018). Notably, in the Abstinence Bar, *yinxie* has been equated to lustful thoughts and masturbation that significantly impacts young people's physical and mental development. For instance, the harmful results of *yinxie* were presented across several aspects:

(1) Physical impact:

'I ... became fat, stopped growing, got angry easily, and lost self-control. I am too sad to find any hope' (Wiseman 2018-06-21 14:42).

'Masturbation makes me […] only 1.64 metres high' (Brighttomorrow 2018-06-22 22:18).

(2) Academic Performance:

'I used to be the top student in my school. Because of masturbation, I became the last' (Flyingaway 2017-08-14 08:18).

(3) Well-being and mental health impact:

'If you continue to jack off, you will lose your happiness and well-being' (Tatooguy 2018-07-30 22:41).

(4) Friendship and relationship impact:

'(Masturbation) influenced me […] to attract female friends' (Forgetme 2018-7-30 15:43).

All these areas relate to problems that young people may face in their adolescence. Each of them consists of complicated elements, such as physiological changes during puberty (e.g. oily skin and acne), learning ability, communication ability, life habits and school and family education. However, in the Abstinence Bar, all these contributing factors were flattened out and presented as solely the consequence of *yinxie*.

Due to the unequal access to sexuality education resources, the widely recognised channels for imparting sexuality education – parenting, schooling, peer education and social education – have become awkward to develop in the context of Chinese society (Liu, 2022). Discussing sexuality-related issues between generations is taboo, and schoolteachers have little time for things that will not improve students' exam results (Lou et al., 2006). Therefore, when members are too shy to talk about their problems with their parents or friends, and they do not have an available channel for reporting problems in school and with their family, the Abstinence Bar plays an important role as young users' spiritual home. This space is important not only for protecting their self-esteem but also for guiding them to approach the problems in their lives. Peer communication in the online community guides young people to a particular understanding of sexual desire and abstinence.

More importantly, the discourse of resistance to *yinxie* and its connection to 'Chinese traditional culture', as an umbrella term but without any specific explanation, has been cleverly utilised by members as a basis for justification of sexual abstinence. It is worth noting that 'traditional culture' in this online community refers to a specific type of Chinese culture rather than the meaning of culture in a wide range, such as philosophy, virtue, etiquette and traditions. Echoing Fang's (2018) argument stating the so-called

traditional culture, to some extent, was a tool of governance, and Foucault's (2020 [1976]) thought thinking sexuality could also be utilised by the authority to govern people, it is thus not difficult to understand why members in the Abstinence Bar have been trying so hard to justify the reasons behind their abstinence decision. Their concluded reasons can mainly be categorised into three parts: ancient Chinese literature, religion and traditional Chinese medicine. For example,

> 'The body, hair and skin, all have been received from the parents (*shenti fafu, shouzhi fumu* 身体发肤, 受之父母), so one doesn't dare damage them. The ancients have never lied to us… I hope you can confess your sins and make a fresh start' (Gospring 2018-06-26 11:32).

> 'Keeping sexuality abstinence will be beneficial to your (health) recovery… and accumulate blessed rewards' (Streetlight 2018-07-30 23:19).

> 'Masturbation will consume your kidney energy which will also consume your spinal cord and brain. This is the reason people who masturbate have problems with their spinal column and suffer humpback and cervical spondylosis' (Smilemaple 2018-07-24 08:10).

Regarding these three examples, concepts and ideas have been cherry-picked from the so-called Chinese traditional culture to formulate a credible narrative that can serve as a piece of 'foundational' knowledge for members seeking explanations for their behaviours and spiritual support with practical suggestions. *Yinxie* has been framed as a serious misconduct that violates filial piety, trades bad Karma and leads to loss of well-being. This effectively constrains the behaviours of members and further reinforces their desire for the 'ideal' masculinity.

As mentioned earlier, with the economic reform and the rise of neoliberalism, the Confucian and Maoist models of manhood have been swept away (Song and Hird 2014), while hybridized and diversified masculinities co-exist in contemporary China, especially as consumerist masculinity and androgynous men have become increasingly popular. In such a context, *yinxie* is conceptualised in the Abstinence Bar as the main target to be defeated in order for members to achieve self-value and ideal manhood, while sexual abstinence is oversimplified as the only way to save young people from trouble. We argue that the circulation of hatred towards *yinxie* can be theorised as the key to community formation within the Abstinence Bar, not only through reproducing the successful and failed manhood dichotomy but also by mobilising the credibility of *yinxie*'s negative impacts. We suggest that *yinxie* is the embodiment of collective imagination and projection. The fear of *yinxie*, namely, losing control of oneself which results in the loss of physical and mental health, good academic performance, as well as attractiveness to girls, expresses fundamental male anxiety engendered by the shifts of ideal masculinities and the change of social power relationships.

According to Liu's (2011) dual-modernity theory, China's rapid economic development and modernisation should sometimes be seen separately from its cultural modernisation as they are not always overlapping. Therefore, keeping sexual abstinence as a form of self-governance, especially after the 'justification' of Buddhism and Chinese traditional culture, has become a life-saving straw against such anxiety. Importantly, such

non-sexual masculinity aligns with the state's propaganda of healthy masculinity (Rogaski, 2014). When the mobility of social classes in China is gradually fixed, wealth and power as key features of Chinese masculinity will be further strengthened (Osburg, 2013; Zhou and Xie, 2019). Since it is difficult for members of the Abstinence Bar to gain wealth and power, disciplining one's body has been generated as a way for self-improvement, which makes them invest time and effort to achieve the maximum rationalisation of their anxious life.

Yinxie *as a symbol linking the individual and the collective*

> 'My seven-year experience of *yinxie* has deprived me… I could only go to a low-level university' (Brighttomorrow 22:18 22/06/2018).

Yinxie has become the core discourse and the main enemy amongst community members who advocate sexual abstinence. Being able to 'shake off' *yinxie*, thus, has turned into the headline criterion to be successful. In this section, we unpack the myth of being successful in China's society, considering its specific political background concerning individual and collective values.

It is impossible to discuss sexuality and the dynamics in China's society without setting out the current political propaganda and ideological construction in China (Pan and Huang, 2013). It is particularly noteworthy that, in 2013, Xi Jinping came to power and became the current president of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Whilst in 2012, when he was still the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi promoted the Core Ideology of Socialism (*shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhiguan* 社会主义核心价值观) and the Chinese Dream (*zhongguo meng* 中国梦) at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Until now, these two ideologies have continued to play important roles in the public and political discourse along with the maintenance of his political power.

The CCP raised the Core Socialist Values in 2012. It includes both national values and individual values. The national values are 'prosperity (*fuqiang* 富强)', 'democracy (*minzhu* 民主)', 'civility (*wenming* 文明)' and 'harmony (*hexie* 和谐)'. The social values include 'freedom (*ziyou* 自由)', 'equality (*pingdeng* 平等)', 'justice (*gongzheng* 公正)' and the 'rule of law (*fazhi* 法制)'. The individual values are 'patriotism (*aiguo* 爱国)', 'dedication (*jingye* 敬业)', 'integrity (*chengxin* 诚信)' and 'friendship (*youshan* 友善)'. So far throughout Xi's administration, these 24 Chinese characters exist everywhere, in students' textbooks, schools, hospitals and streets. People are required to learn them by heart and are tested randomly (Miao, 2020). For example, students are asked questions about the values in schools by their teachers. There are three different levels – the national level, social level and individual level.

The Chinese Dream was also raised and promoted by Xi Jinping and the CCP in 2012. As explained by Xi, the Chinese Dream refers to the greatest expectation of China to realise the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. He also proclaimed that in 2049, in which year the People's Republic of China will have been established for 100 years, the

goal of making China a prosperous, democratic, civilised and harmonious socialist modern country would come true. In 2013, Xi said that Chinese people would support the idea of realising the Chinese Dream from the bottom of their hearts since the Chinese Dream, first of all, was the mutual dream of 1.4 billion Chinese people. To some extent, the most significant feature is to link the nation's, society's and individual's destinies and interests altogether. Xi also stressed that the only possible way to achieve the Chinese Dream is to follow the route of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

To some extent, it means that in China's ideological system, it is almost impossible to separate them. In other words, it is nearly impossible to only talk about the individual level. Accordingly, we can see that in the sexual abstinence community, advocates were also trying to expand the theory about their personal well-being in relation to the country's development:

> 'This is the truth told by our ancestors and originated in our 5000-year traditional culture. Keep your distance from all forms of lust and sexual desire! You are a man and you should take responsibility for your family and our country! There are so many problems in our country, such as the Senkaku Islands dispute and the South China Sea issue. How can you protect our country if you masturbate? Do not be the sick man of East Asia (*dongya bingfu* 东亚病夫) who is manipulated by the pornographic opium from Japan! Be a real man! Do you know how wretched you are when you watch pornography and masturbate?' (Saddrop 23:04 04/01/2017).

In China, after the First Sino-Japanese War from 1894 to 1895, intellectuals and the public started to consider the reasons for China's failure during the war, assuming this was because of the poor physical health of citizens (Lu, 2018; Rogaski, 2014). Since then, personal health has been tightly linked to the country's destiny. Therefore, it is understandable that the South China Sea problem has been discussed together with masturbation and sexual abstinence, especially when most people in the community believe that:

> 'Masturbation will let your essence out. If this happens, how will you get nutrition to grow?' (Flyingflower 18:29 20/06/2018).

Kennedy (2011: 9) argues that the government-advocated 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' was like a protective cover for keeping space for further interpretation and mediation. Therefore, restricting sexuality has the legitimacy of being a part of governance (see Foucault, 2020 [1976]). To be specific, some politicians during the revolutionary times believed that both revolution and sex required people to expend passion and energy (Pan and Huang, 2011: 23). In order for people to focus more on the socialist construction (Evans, 1997: 2), it was advantageous to make people pay the least attention to sex-related activities and thoughts. Thus, on the one hand, it is not difficult to see how personal life has been linked so tightly to the national discourse in China. On the other hand, the importance of highlighting the *yinxie* discourse in the sexual abstinence community has obtained its legitimacy.

The popularity of the abstinence bar and state governance

The denunciation of masturbation and the emphasis on abstinence have occurred in different periods and in different cultural contexts (Laqueur, 2003). Sexuality as a tool for controlling people's minds and behaviour occupies an important place in the discourse of state governance (Pan and Huang, 2013). The discussion around masturbation has gone far beyond the discussion based on health issues or one's own body but instead regards masturbation as a violation of rationality and morality. Sexual topics are subject to certain restrictions in public areas in China, both online and offline, such as the deletion of nude pictures and videos, as well as the control of sexually descriptive texts under censorship (Liang and Lu, 2010). Netizens must create new expressions to replace 'sensitive' terms relating to sexuality or sexual behaviours. In such contexts, it is worth noting that the detailed descriptions of masturbation, times of nocturnal emission, fears of excessive ejaculation and sexual fantasy towards various parts of women's bodies in the Abstinence Bar have not been removed. Members are encouraged to share these experiences in the name of *yinxie* and as a productive way of community formation to reflect and repent. Considering this, sexual discussion in the Abstinence Bar seems to circumvent the strict policy of censorship online successfully. However, it is necessary to consider this *non sequitur* with the understanding of state governance and to ask why such discussions are both less restricted and very popular.

First, the Abstinence Bar chooses its category as 'health and wellness' among many other communities with different themes on the Baidu Tieba platform. The banner on its homepage is designed with a blue sky and a few fleecy white clouds with gentle sunshine. It reads in a white font: 'Stop pornography and masturbation. Retrieve health and positive energy'. The text and image both create a predisposition that the Abstinence Bar aims to centre around public health and young people's well-being. Public health has always been a vital area of national governance in China. The Chinese government started a health reform in 2009 and made a political commitment to establish a good and well-organised health system. A series of policies were launched to make investments in health and to make health a foundation of China's development (The Lancet Public Health, 2019). Importantly, the eagerness of Chinese people for a healthy physique is associated with colonialist stigma and humiliation. The Chinese were once known as 'the sick man of East Asia' in the late 19th and early 20th centuries after the eruption of the First Opium War (Hanson, 2020; Hu, 2013). This metaphor has left a long-lasting mark of shame on modern Chinese history and even to this day with regards to the depiction of China's healthcare development. The official website of the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China and the cabinet-level executive department of the State Council in charge of formulating national health policies still displays reluctance and resistance to this metaphor: 'With years of strenuous effort, marked progress has been achieved in making the Chinese people healthier – China is no longer the sick man of East Asia' (National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2019). Therefore, the role of the Abstinence Bar, or at least its claims to regain a healthy body, is consistent with the requirement of national development and the desire of Chinese people to shake off a sense of inferiority and notions of a weak body. This is very similar to the visibility of

gay men in China in that the state remains conservative to the LGBTQ people, but because of increasing HIV infection among gay/bi men, cooperation with gay NGOs has become the central approach in the government and mainstream media's AIDS prevention strategies (Cao and Lu, 2014). Thus, the role of improving people's health and fitness shields the Abstinence Bar in terms of sexual discussion.

Second, as we previously argued, ideal masculinity is constructed in the Abstinence Bar in terms of controlling oneself not to masturbate, having good academic performance, having a strong and healthy body, having a good-looking appearance and attracting girls. This is in line with the *wen-wu* paradigm of ideal manhood qualities in Chinese traditional culture. Such re-stabilised traditional masculinity appeals to the need of the state to control the rising visibility of effeminate male stars. In January 2021, China's Ministry of Education claimed that it plans to reform physical education in schools, giving more attention to the cultivation of students' masculinity. This is in response to a proposal from the National People's Congress that proposes to prevent Chinese adolescent boys from becoming feminine. In September 2021, China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television ordered broadcasters to ban 'sissy men' from TV to encourage more masculinity in celebrities and influencers as the 'correct' aesthetic (Song, 2022). Therefore, the revival of traditional masculinity advocated in the Abstinence Bar corresponds to and mirrors the tendency of national self-strengthening. This agreement further supports the popularity of the Abstinence Bar, especially among those who remain conservative with regard to gender norms and who support heteronormativity.

In sum, the continuous development and popularity of the Abstinence Bar are not just because it provides young men with a way to release their anxiety and a platform to discuss their sexual problems. However, it is noteworthy that such popularity is due to the way in which masculinity is constructed in that it involves many interacting discursive formations; for example, the metaphor that links state, health and manhood together and the state enaction of androgynous young men. Exploring the engagement of masculinity and sexuality is valuable for considering the formation of men's identities.

Conclusion

The idea of seeing masturbation as harmful is not exclusive to China (see Hartmann, 2021). According to Laqueur's (2003) book *Solitary Sex*, which explores the societal and cultural history of masturbation, the ban and the stigma of masturbation and the things that might lead to masturbation could be seen as a developmental issue regarding scientism and modernisation. To be specific, even in the UK, before medical and biological science were developed, it was normal to link the personal body to wider morality as constructed by the public. In this case and echoing the connection between the existence and development of the Abstinence Bar and China's social development, it is unsurprising to see how the online community has stabilised its legitimacy under China's societal and political circumstances.

Since the Abstinence Bar, to a certain extent, has influenced its members' sexual identities, practices and relationship, it could be seen as a kind of sexuality education, especially as it is attached to China's traditional values. The dilemma of sexuality

education's development in China can, therefore, be seen as the dilemma of social development in China. Resonating with Shih's (2001) argument in her book *The Lure of the Modern*, on the one hand, China did not have any specific enemy in colonialist discussions; on the other hand, the resistance was also more rational under this context. To be specific, not having any specific enemy could alternatively be interpreted as everyone could potentially be the enemy. It thus can explain why in the Abstinence Bar, nationalism and the collective discourse have their significant place.

As 'soft' masculinity has become popular now, it is worth noting that not all online communities and youth cultures contribute to such a consequence. In the Abstinence Bar, only when the most dangerous enemy, *yinxie*, has been defeated can the members' individual values and the dream of national prosperity be achieved. The formation of this logic exhibits essential elements of *wen-wu* paradigm, thus re-stabilising the Chinese ideal of masculinity with traditional norms. Importantly, this reconstructed masculinity as an instrument of control manipulated by the privileged class (Louie, 2015) caters to the needs of state governance. This individualised logic denies any structural problems and intersectional injustices that young people may encounter. Thereby, the responsibility for solving the problem falls back on to the individual.

Regarding the development of sexuality education, even in evidence-based sexuality education, it is still essential to look at the specific cultural elements and understand the reasons behind them rather than simply criticise them. Since the *yinxie* discourse and the legitimacy of the Abstinence Bar can be seen as an outcome of China's propaganda and governance, it is not surprising to see how the *wen-wu* paradigm has shaped and reshaped interactively with the gender norms in China. In this case, sexual abstinence culture is more likely to have originated in ideological conflict. Evidence-based sexuality education still has a long way to go in China.

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