

From 'human nature' to 'sex': sexualising 'xing' and reimagining sex in Chinese

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Although sounding old-fashioned, the Chinese saying '*tanxing sebian*' (談性色變, turning pale at the mention of sex) still applies to many situations today, as China remains a sexually repressive society on many levels and the capacity of the Chinese language to talk about sex remains restricted by social, cultural, and moral norms.

Although such restrictions exist in every language, the Chinese language, dominated by the party-state ideology and Confucian values, is quite different from the English context.

Before being modernised and sexualised in the early twentieth century, the Chinese character '性' (*xing*) was used to denote human nature and instincts according to Confucianism. On the surface, understandings of sexual morality that were long defined by Confucianism are now re-understood through Marxism and 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics'. The language that contextualises this morality has been reimagined in forms largely translated from English and Russian, but the moral restraints on sexual behaviour have not loosened as much as one might think. This has resulted in language that foreignises and marginalises sex.

'Xing' documented in Confucian classic

texts

As a philosophical term, the Chinese character ‘*xing*’ could be translated into English as ‘nature’—the ‘*xing*’ of humankind and other living creatures has been widely discussed in the contexts in which English speakers would talk about nature of things. However, the concept of ‘*xing*’ underwent a long journey inside and outside Confucianism and became to be translated into English as ‘sex’.

As Chinese linguist Fu Sinian and Welsh sinologist [Angus Charles Graham](#) have found, during the Qin and Han dynasties of Imperial China, the character ‘*xing*’ and ‘*sheng*’ (生) were integrated in many contexts throughout Qin and Han literature. This literature is arguably the earliest resource in which one can find what ‘*xing*’ meant in the Chinese language. In many cases, such as 養性 (*yangxing*—nourish the *xing*), the character seems to indicate ‘life’ in general, and health, wellbeing, and longevity in particular. ‘*Xing*’ also referred to the prosperity of humankind in the Zuo Zhuan (左傳, Commentary of Zuo), China’s first chronological history covering the years 722- 468 BC, such as the expression 勿使失性 (*wu shi shi xing*—do not let them lose their livelihood). Also, in the Zuo Zhuan, ‘*xing*’ was used to refer to the ‘*qi*’ (氣, energy) generated in humans by heaven and earth:

‘ 則天之明，因地之性，生其六氣，用其五行。 ’

‘Modelling ourselves on the luminaries of heaven, basing ourselves on the life-cycles [xing] of earth, we generate their six energies and utilise their five elements’ (trans. James Legge)

‘*Xing*’ therefore served as a commonly accepted term relating to vitality.

In the fourth century BC, ‘*xing*’ was still understood as being related to human health and the desire for longer life expectancy, as confirmed in examples such as ‘水之性’ (*shui zhi xing*), which suggests that the spirit can be flawless and unpolluted only if it is free and spontaneous.

Distinguishing between good and bad human nature remains amongst Confucian-preoccupied history and thus has had an impact on the shaping of the modern and contemporary language of sex. In a dialogue of Chinese philosopher Mencius (c. 372-289 BC), we are told that ‘有性善，有性不善’ (‘The nature of some are good, some are bad’). Not surprisingly, this may remind English readers of the phrases ‘good-natured’ and ‘bad-natured’.

The Chinese phrase ‘食色，性也’ (*shi se, xing ye*)’ is arguably the best example to enquire into the relation of ‘xing’ and sex from the ancient documents, which first appeared in Chinese philosopher Gaozi’s (c. 420-350 B. C.) *Gaozi I* of the *Works of Mencius* (孟子, Mengzi),

‘告子曰：「食色，性也。仁，內也，非外也；義，外也，非內也。」’

‘Gao said: Appetite for food and sex is nature. Benevolence is internal, not external; righteousness is external, not internal.’ (Trans. D.C. Lau)

However, scholar [Judith Farquhar](#) disagrees with the version of the Gaozi quote translated by Lau: ‘he remarks offhandedly, and with something else on his mind, that appetite for food and sex are natural’. Gaozi indicates he regards the desire for food or sex as indicating actual experiences and perceptions of the body. Without contextualisation, ‘shi se xing ye’ seems indicate an understanding of a universal common sense of human nature and self-indulgence in personal desire.

The concept of ‘Xing’ in Confucian classic texts involved the relationship between the body and other essential elements of human life, such as the desire for sex and food, and, importantly, how these things can be evaluated and judged. The theory was that it is human nature to desire one’s own health, longevity, sex, and food rather than the common good.

Sexualising ‘Xing’ in pre-Modern China

In the early twentieth century, China underwent radical social changes, such as the so-called May Fourth Movement (五四運動, *wusi yundong*) in 1919, which promoted Western ideas about science and democracy, and a move away from traditional Confucian ideas, moralities, and philosophy. It seems that some in China were eager to achieve modernity in a global context and ‘catch up with’ the West. During this time, as historian Matthew Harvey Sommer points out, [Western nations](#) ‘have greatly expanded individual freedom in decisions related to sex, marriage, and reproduction’.

The intellectuals of the movement introduced and translated many texts regarding sexology and sex education from the West. The proliferation of new terms and discourses that centred on sex and sexuality presented a view of sex based on health and [the newly emerging medical and psychiatric pathology](#), such as seen in Ye Dehui’s ‘*Shuangmei jing’an congshu*’ (雙梅景閣叢書, The Double Plum Sun and Shadow Anthology) and the Chinese translation of Havelock Ellis’ *Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students* by the Chinese sociologist and eugenicist Pan Guangdan. The shift from traditional metaphysics to Western science was particularly evident in manuals about marriage, birth, and sexual hygiene. Many used terms such as union, fertility, and genitals instead of sex itself, as in ‘*Shengzhiqi xinshu*’ (New Book of Genitals, 生殖器新書) and ‘*Jieyin yangsheng nannü zhongzi jiaohe xinlun*’ (New Theory of Sexual Abstinence, Health Cultivation, and Union of Eggs and Sperms, 戒淫養生男女種子交合新論).

It is worth noting that the modern definition of ‘xing’ is a re-translation of the Japanese translation of the English word ‘sex’: there is [some evidence](#) that the Japanese used the *kanji* called *xing* in Chinese to translate ‘sex’ and ‘sexuality’. But this does not necessarily mean that the concept of modernised ‘sex’ in China had the same definition and connotations of Western sexology and its understandings in the West. Meanings are not so much ‘[transformed](#)’ when concepts travel from the source

language into the target language and as they are ‘reinvented’ within the local environment of the latter. Therefore, ‘*Xing*’ became a neologism and the concept of sex was re-conceptualised as a manifestation of the sexual morality of Republican China and ‘[a panacea for China’s weakness and degeneracy](#)’.

‘*Xing*’ in the post-Mao era

Since the program of economic reform led by former President Deng Xiaoping, understandings of sexual morality that were long defined by Confucianism have been re-understood through Marxism and ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’. The language that contextualises this morality has been reimagined in forms largely translated from other languages, including English, Russian, and Japanese, but the moral restraints on sexual behaviour have not loosened significantly. The Chinese concept of Marxism, to some extent, took over from Confucianism as the mainstream ideology that projects a new morality onto sex and sex-related language, commodity, and behaviour; and Marxism and Chinese Socialism continue to influence the linguistic development of terms relating to sex.

This is particularly evident in terms like *tongzhi* (同志, comrade) and *liumang* (hooligan, 流氓). *Tongzhi* as a term has been widely circulated and studied since its reintroduction by Hong Kong-based filmmaker Edward Lam in reference to homosexuality in 1992. In fact, it was appropriated from the revolutionary legacy of Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong’s ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’. Like *tongzhi*, hooliganism, as a term broadly describing unlawful behaviours such as public indecency and vandalism, has a linguistic history attached to Marxism and Socialism. By categorising sex between males as ‘hooliganism’ (流氓, *liumang zui*) instead of sodomy, it shows that the state’s understanding of homosexuality is consistent with its [modern legal framework](#) (in which homosexuality is legal) as part of China’s Socialist modernisation.

The terms relating to ‘*xing*’ (sex and sexuality) indicates a sense of marginalisation

and moral judgment in everyday language as well as among mainstream academics and intellectuals. One example is the work of prominent sociologist and sexologist Li Yinhe. Li uses the phrase 'sub-culture' to signify homosexuality and what she terms as 'nüe lian'; and included homosexuality as a sexual practice in a similar category to bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism in her books '*Tongxinglian yawenhua*' (Subculture of Homosexuality, 同性戀亞文化) and '*Nüelian yawenhua*' (Subculture of Sadomasochism, 虐戀亞文化) both published in 1998. By categorising homosexuality as a 'sub-culture' and in some ways equating it with sadomasochism and homosexuality, same-sex relationships and queer lifestyles are marginalised.

In China today, a variety of loanwords adopted from English (without Chinese translation) are widely used, such as 'bi' (bisexual/bisexuality), 'les' (lesbian), 'fuck', 'gay', 'G' (denoting 'gay') as diverse communities and social groups have flourished on and offline. But the discourse surrounding sex remains tied with morality, and there are numerous terms in everyday language regarding sex denoting Confucian moralistic warnings and judgments. '*Xing biantai*' (sexual perversion, 性變態) and '*xing daocuo*' (sexual deviation, 性倒錯), and '*yinluan*' (promiscuous, 淫亂) are still used in the Chinese language to refer to sexual practices and sexual identities such as homosexuality, crossdressing, transsexualism, as well as those who practice sadomasochism, sadism, and fetishism.

Re-defining, re-translating and re-modernising 'Xing' today

The Chinese character '*xing*' has varied usage and multiple meanings across time, undergoing a process of invention, translation, and re-translation.

While the Confucian narrative of '*xing*' is premised on human nature, the modern-day discourse of sexual morality continues to be inseparable from Marxism and 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics'. This demonstrates a 'translated' modernity

that is repressed, foreignised, marginalised; and which needs to be re-translated, re-imagined, and re-understood. A nation boasting a 5,000-year history and civilisation, China seems to be continuing its journey of re-defining, re-translating, re-understanding 'xing' and/or 'sex'.

Image: A woman taking photos of a painting that depicts a nude female body at Art Beijing 2015. Photographed 30 April 2015 by the author.

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