

Problems for Adam and Eve

Jo McMillan

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Author Jo McMillan lived for many years in Beijing researching Chinese sexuality. Here she tells the story of visiting one of China's first sex shops - part of a state-run hospital.

Friday night at the gate of Beijing's People's Hospital. Doctors throw lab coats into panniers and pedal hard into the wall of home-time traffic. In the wintry air, their white, wet breath marks out their hurry to be gone. I watch a bus pull up at the stop and nurses lean into each other's backs until something gives and there is room to get on. There is a door in the perimeter wall, blanked out with paper snowflakes, and a window covered with Santas and piped with drifts of snow. It is 1997, and this is the Adam and Eve, the first legal sex shop to open in China - housed here, in a state-run healthcare facility.

Inside, I am met with the fat stench of bleach and Swan Lake turned up too loud. Around the walls are neon-lit displays draped with plastic vines, and a dozen men spread around them - one man at each, as if this were a gallery, with gallery etiquette, giving space, taking turns to study the pieces: bottles of disinfectant, breast enlargers, aphrodisiacs, condoms and vibrators. In the glass I see thin reflections of serious faces. One old man is in slippers and stripy pyjamas - he's probably wandered in from a ward next door. He leans on a stick, chews his cheeks, and takes an age to move along. He doesn't know where to put his feet without looking at the ground.

In the streets, sex is for sale illegally - in 'mistress villages' and in karaoke halls, massage parlours and hairdressers right across the country. Here, in shops like the Adam and Eve, it sells legally and with official approval. Since it opened for business in 1993, sex shops have spread across the country - some neon-lit, plate-glass and scented, others little more than walk-in cubicles no wider than their cash desk. But even so, it has not been an unregulated entrepreneurial bonanza. In China, sex shops have to serve their social function. They are not places for private desires, where under-slept men behind plastic-bead curtains let you buy what you want without asking why. Chinese sex shops are medical centres, drop-in clinics for the sexually dysfunctional. They deal with the body, and the body is a machine: its organs perform the functions vital to life. The lungs breathe; the heart pumps; the stomach digests; the sex organs have sex. And mechanical components need maintenance. They need attention when they break down.

The music falls quiet, and in the lull, I hear a rustle. I look up to find a woman in a lab coat standing at my shoulder. She is rubbery, round-chested, her hair permed into a stack of black curls that the neon lights have turned blue. She introduces herself as Doctor Wang and welcomes me to the Adam and Eve Sexual Healthcare Centre. 'Not many foreigners come here. They sort their problems out at home. They prefer their own doctors. So tell me,' she says, moving an inch closer, 'what is it you need?'

'I don't need anything,' I tell Dr Wang. 'I don't have a problem. I'm not here to buy.' Her mouth opens a fraction. I see a small pink pad of tongue and a ring of even teeth.

She waits.

I wait.

I watch the men shuffle on a place.

Swan Lake comes back.

Dr Wang tells me not to be shy. She understands medicine. She's worked all her life in family planning. She speaks in a voice brassy with encouragement. 'All the staff here are doctors. And we're all married. You can speak freely. There's nothing we don't understand.' I look around for other staff. Behind the cash desk a man daydreams into his newspaper. Over his head, a row of framed certificates. An office door stands ajar and through the gap I see a tight-dressed woman under a poster of Cranach's Adam and Eve feeding banknotes into a counting machine.

Over the 1990s, more and more people were drawn to the money-making opportunities of the sex shop industry, and the sector mushroomed. But so too did concerns that developments had not been properly managed. Goods were failing to meet the most basic standards for hygiene and safety. What were supposed to be scientific instruments were, in reality, little more than 'toys', officials remarked, marketed with hyperbole (in Chinese) and obscenities (in English). In 1998, the Chinese Sexology Association - the professional body for medics and sex researchers - stepped in to become the industry regulator, setting up a committee to oversee the development of the market and manage manufacturer-retailer relations. It required producers to apply for certificates that would guarantee standards to retailers. But it was a body lacking in clout. Underfunded and under-recognized, the CSA for many years had a handful of part-time staff, and its journal, Chinese Sexology, was banned from public sale. One of the ways the straitened CSA has been known to raise funds is by selling sex-shop product endorsements.

My gaze comes back to Dr Wang, and suddenly I see how soft-boned she is. I am sure that if I hug her, I can squeeze until I feel my own fingers. I see she is here to endorse and reassure. In this shop, she has the same effect as plastic grapes and Tchaikovsky. She cushions, takes the edge off embarrassment, makes having a problem less of a problem.

'Where is your husband?' Her question takes me by surprise and I find myself replying with the truth.

'He's in England.'

'So you live apart?'

I nod.

'For a long time?'

'A while.'

We've been separated for four years. The divorce papers are at this moment lodged at the British Embassy in Beijing waiting for a signature. Dr Wang turns her long, soft cheeks to the displays. Her eyelids close, and she stands there as if asleep on her feet. But she isn't sleeping. She is thinking.

I let my attention wander to the books. I see *Marital Medicine*, *The Science of Sexual Love and Diagnosing Marriage*. Books like these are thick with text and tables, with flow charts and maths. They offer close-up, colour plates of genitals wet with disease. But there is no pornography here - not even under the counter. In the post-Tiananmen crackdowns, pornography was named one of the Six Evils, and the death penalty

instituted for traffickers. Today, the law remains strict (and ambiguous) and the authorities still launch regular 'Strike Hard' campaigns to rid the country of 'pornographic poison'. It might not be sold in sex shops, but it is still easily found - peddled by old migrant women too old to waitress, to work as chambermaids or sell sex, and not clean enough or with the wrong papers to be taken on as a nanny or domestic help. They appear out of tumbledown lanes, flap their pockets at you and sell CDs for 100 yuan a time. Some of the discs are genuine, others just look it, and when you play them, nothing happens, or hymns spill out, or Mormon sermons.

Dr Wang opens her eyes. She is ready now to pronounce, to prescribe for my lack of man. She fishes keys from her pocket and unlocks a cabinet. 'This is what you need,' she says, and offers me a pink baton, a face moulded into the head, the shaft embossed with rows of nodules that look - here, in this clinic, in this doctor's hands - like an unusually disciplined rash. She balances the vibrator in the tips of her fingers, showing it off to me. I catch the smell of garage forecourts. 'This device is very advanced. It uses high-quality imported macro-molecular materials that are soft and comfortable to the touch. The internal electric circuitry has functions including vibrating, revolving, lashing, extending and contracting. By adjusting the frequency and amplitude, it is possible to stimulate and massage the vagina, labia majora, labia minora, perineum and the clitoris.' She waves her hands, kneading the air with enthusiasm. As her exposition progresses, I watch the cuffs of a home-knit jumper edge out of her lab-coat sleeves.

'This device underwent repeated clinical trials on more than one hundred people suffering from sexual dysfunction at two large hospitals in Zhejiang Province. It always met with remarkable success and the leaders of relevant government departments, specialists and professors unanimously agree that this product meets high international standards for design, quality and clinical effectiveness.'

Dr Wang presses a button and I hear a woman's voice cry, 'Kuai dianr! Kuai dianr! Wo shufu! Shufu!' Faster! Faster! Oh that's nice! That's nice! I am glad of the Tchaikovsky. No one has turned to look.

I hesitate. I don't need this vibrator, but I know I've had enough of this encounter. I think, all it will take is a smile and 'No thank you,' and I can go. But my gaze moves from the hard face of the vibrator to the soft face of the doctor, and I think that maybe I do need it. Or that it would make a curious souvenir. And all of a sudden, I am telling the doctor: yes. Yes, I will buy it.

It costs more than 400 yuan - a month's salary for many people - and I barely have enough money on me. Dr Wang writes a receipt in triplicate. I take it to the cashier who stamps it without looking up from his newspaper. Jian wei qi, it says. Health consolation machine.

Sex shops describe their goods as 'machines', 'devices', 'aids', or 'tools' to avoid breaching medical boundaries and maintain their status as 'healthcare centres'. But things have started to change. The profit motive is pushing the market into areas that have no clear curative purpose. It is a driving force that is proving hard to resist. Medicine is retreating as the justificatory principle on which these shops operate. Pleasure, fashion and what happens in 'the West' are taking its place. It might still be a small corner of the industry, but it is now possible to find the Anal Assault Grenade, Red Spider bondage gear and the Big Bertha Inflatable Love Cow.

Dr Wang wraps the vibrator in reindeer paper, and tells me I should always use it with a condom because it's more hygienic.

'I will.'

'And don't let anyone else use it.'

'I won't.'

'And don't miss your children too much over Christmas!'

'I don't have any children,' I say and immediately wish I hadn't. It is time to go, not start another conversation and as Dr Wang looks at me with a question, I turn my head and let my gaze move around the room. I take in the bottles of disinfectant, the lab coats, the bleached white floor.

'Medical problem,' I tell her. She gives me a face pinned between doubt and compassion, then hands me the vibrator and says she understands.

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