Lost Bodies, Lost Authenticity: The Paradox of Premarital Sex in 1980s China

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Abstract

This paper explores the views and practices surrounding the issue of concern over Chinese women’s premarital virginity during the 1980s. To this end, the analysis concentrates on a series of letters to the publisher from 1985 issues of a Chinese women’s magazine entitled *Chinese Women*. In the first of these letters, a 27-year-old man who identifies himself as “Xiao B” asks for advice on how to cope with his recent discovery that his girlfriend was not a virgin before they began dating. Following a flood of reader response over the next few months, the magazine published five letters from other readers offering their personal stories and recommendations. Through a detailed examination of the themes presented in this material, a comprehensive picture is painted of the role of premarital sex in the lives of young people during this time. In the context of a period when the rate of premarital sex had recently risen significantly but it was not overwhelmingly accepted, both men and women faced substantial pressure from various members of society to act in often contradicting ways. For men in situations similar to that of Xiao B, their decision to either break up or stay in the relationship often came down to an internal battle between ‘emotion’ and ‘reason’, neither of which could be consistently defined. Women who engaged in premarital sex with a given man and failed to marry him afterward encountered struggles such as the threat of rejection from future love interests and a severe loss of self-esteem. Such circumstances greatly increased the degree of power held by the man and resulted in a range of outcomes for ongoing relationships. By looking forward to manifestations of preoccupations with premarital chastity in the 1990s and present day, it is demonstrated that higher instances of premarital sex over the past decades have been accompanied by individual efforts to hide this fact from the public eye.
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Introduction

In the April, 1985, issue of the magazine *Chinese Women* (*Zhōngguó fùnǚ 中国妇女*), there is an intriguing letter from a reader entitled “Can This Tattered Love Still Give Me Happiness?” (*Zhè pòsuì de ài hái néng gěi wò xìngfú ma? 这破碎的爱还能给我幸福吗?*)¹ Within this note, a 27-year-old man who identifies himself as “Xiao B” asks for advice on a very personal dilemma: he has recently been informed by his girlfriend of a year, whom he loves very much and who even helps take care of his sick mother, that she lost her virginity to a previous boyfriend. Xiao B is distressed by this news and finds himself vacillating between two regrettable choices: break up with her and face the loss of a wonderful partner who makes him happy; or stay with her and have to cope with others’ negative judgments of him. He asks the columnist (who passes the question along to the readers) whether or not his relationship is salvageable and how he should handle the situation.

Over the following months, more than 600 people wrote in with their own similar stories and advice for Xiao B. In August of the same year, *Chinese Women* selected and published five of these submissions under the heading “If I were Xiao B…” (*Jiànrú wǒ shì Xiǎo B…假如我是小B……*)²³ These accounts provide rich material for studying a wide range of opinions and experiences involved in the topic at hand. Additionally, the fact

¹ “Can this tattered love still give me happiness? 这破碎的爱还能给我幸福吗?” *Chinese Women* 中国妇女 Apr. 1985: 9. This text will hereafter be referred to in parenthetical citations as Xiao B and in the main text by Xiao B’s name.

² “If I were Xiao B…假如我是小B…” *Chinese Women* 中国妇女 Aug. 1985: 10-12. This text will hereafter be referred to in the main text by the names of the individual writers (Wu Wei, Deng Jianmin, Zhang Guorong, Cheng Jun, and Unfortunate).

³ Xiao B’s original letter and these responses will hereafter be referred to collectively in the text as the Xiao B letters. The authors of these letters will be referred to collectively as the Xiao B writers or authors.
that they were all written by young people (four males and one female) living in China at
the time make them an invaluable resource of insights into real young people’s views on
virginity and the roles that these perspectives played in their lives.

The primary sources analyzed here are both challenging and engaging, and as a
result present a uniquely interesting outlook on the issues under consideration. On the one
hand, these sources are undeniably biased, based on the fact that they are letters
submitted to a Chinese feminist magazine known for simultaneously educating about and
promoting the views of the government as well as a progressive women’s movement.4

*Chinese Women* was founded in 1939 in Yan’an as the Women’s Union of China’s
official publication. In 1949, its ownership was transferred to the All-China Women’s
Federation5, making it the first women’s magazine to be published by the Chinese
Communist Party, and it has since been issued from Beijing. In 1988, three years after the
Xiao B letters were published, *Chinese Women* had a circulation of 810,000, placing it
among the more popular of Women’s magazines (Chen 11).

The editors of *Chinese Women* of course had control over what was published and
easily could have skewed the viewpoints presented to more closely match their own,
particularly in selecting which letters to print. Furthermore, the readership (not to
mention the readers who would take the initiative to write in) in itself was a biased group.

Although *Chinese Women* was nationally distributed, its readership base was weighted

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4 For more about the mission of *Chinese Women* at this time, see Appendix A: Partial
Transcript of My Interview with Guo Nanning, Editor-In-Chief of *Woman of China* in Chen,
Zhimin. “A comparative study of three women's magazines in China.” Master’s dissertation,
University of Nevada, Reno, 1994, p. 43-44. This text will hereafter be referred to in parenthetical
citations as Chen.

5 Yin, Yue. “Cultural changes as reflected in portrayals of women and gender in Chinese
This text will hereafter be referred to in parenthetical citations as Yin.
toward those people working for the government and others in the country interested in or in need of education about women’s issues and progress (Chen). It is likely that the majority of the readers were female, but it is also noteworthy that the magazine was intended to be geared mainly toward women while still being accessible to male readers (Chen 11), and the fact that the Xiao B letters include so much male participation is evidence of this goal’s success. Additionally, all government personnel involved in women’s issues (men and women) were encouraged— and at some times required— to subscribe (Chen 38).

Thus, I am not claiming that the articles speak to the views of every person in the entire country, but, rather, they capture more of a cross-sectional snapshot that, through the stories told, also portrays some of the thoughts and actions of other members of society. Moreover, they point to many of the trends in thought and behavior in the country as a whole. As Yin asserts, “magazines have been known to carry the ‘comments of the time’” (4) and, thus, are an incredibly useful tool for studying just this. Indeed, the fact that even a progressive women’s magazine was discussing this topic in such detail and that the response to it among the readers was so strong demonstrates the considerable relevance it held in many people’s lives. Chinese Women would not have published an extended discussion of this theme, and these responses in particular, if they did not feel that readers would personally connect to it. It is also notable that the Xiao B letters are all personal notes written by members of the public, as opposed to the staff of the magazine, which should help to counteract some of Chinese Women’s institutional partiality.

The usefulness of the magazine as an object of analysis is especially relevant in the case of China, where reliable data can be difficult to attain (Chen 1) and many forms
of media have been tightly controlled by the government and designed so as to match and promote its viewpoints (Chen 4). Magazines, however, have been somewhat more ignored by the government due to the longer periods of time between issues and their smaller audiences as compared to other forms of media (Chen 5). For these same reasons, they have also been studied less by researchers, despite their potential for providing valuable material that has escaped some of the governmental influence and therefore is arguably more representative of the views and lives of members of the general public.

Overall, the scholars who have spoken about similar topics during this time period have shown that premarital sex was becoming more tolerated and commonly practiced among young couples and that this resulted in some tensions with older generations, with a degree of leeway if the couples were already engaged and married shortly thereafter. A woman’s virgin (or non-virgin) status was indisputably a significant factor in marriage negotiations and romantic relationships in general previous to the 1980s and still often played a major role during this decade, but surprisingly few authors have discussed this influence in any great detail.6 Most other papers that have been published on virginity present results from studies attempting to quantify the rise in premarital sex while offering little analysis of the factors at play and effects on the lives of actual people.

Many other authors have addressed the “sexual revolution” taking place in more general terms, perhaps only mentioning issues of chastity in particular in passing. Likewise, there is some literature (Chen; Yin) examining gender roles as displayed in Chinese Women

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and other similar publications in China, but, again, most of these say little or nothing about the specific topics addressed here. The exception to this, as far as I have found, is Honig and Hershatter’s *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980’s*, which draws from a multitude of primary sources, including the exact articles that are my focus of study. This book explains some of the content of the Xiao B letters and also explores other examples that help to flesh out the picture of the “changing patterns of courtship” in the 1980s. With these resources available, I am able to incorporate such additional examples while doing a significantly more in-depth dissection of the exemplary Xiao B articles. This work thus contributes to the existing literature by moving further with the analysis begun by Hong and Hershatter and bringing together the generalized approaches (i.e., sexuality or women’s magazines as a whole) taken by most other authors in order to achieve a more comprehensive picture.

With the use of the ethnographic data provided by the Xiao B letters, I aim to gain insight into a generally unexplored realm of historical inquiry. The thoughts, worries, problems, and actions of these young people reflect a prevalent popular discourse on the topic of premarital sex and gender relations as a whole. One consideration, indeed, is the fact that the Xiao B letters were all composed in Chinese and intended for a Chinese audience, with (to my knowledge) no full translations available. As such, they will be able to make a rare contribution to our existing knowledge on this topic. In saying this, I do not want to suggest that everything stated by the writers should be taken at face value as unquestionable fact of the reality of life in China in the 1980s; rather, their stories provide a window into the ways in which these people conceptualized their own
relationships and struggles, which may or may not have always been consistent with the reality and, in any case, is often the much more difficult perspective to obtain.

This paper begins with a brief background on how traditional views on chastity in China developed up to the time in question. Next, the majority of the paper enters a detailed discussion of the Xiao B letters, beginning by addressing the various societal (outside of the couple) pressures on women to maintain their chastity and on men to only be with women who had done so. This is followed by an analysis of the struggles faced at the time by men like Xiao B, which were continuously redefined based on a blurred dichotomy between ‘emotion’ and ‘reason’. The next section considers the ordeals of the women who, like Xiao B’s girlfriend, engaged in premarital sex and did not ultimately marry the man with whom it first took place. For the final piece of analysis of the letters, there is an examination of the effects of the multitude of tensions surrounding the issue of premarital sex on the relationships between men and non-virginal women. Lastly, the discussion connects to the present by explaining some of the changes that have taken place since the 1980s. The paper ends with a couple of examples of Chinese advertisements and other forms of current media that relate to the topic of female virginity and which raise some questions as to how their existence today should be interpreted. In looking at the issues surrounding premarital sex during periods before and after the one of focus, the account of the 1980s is placed in the context of an era of rapidly changing views on sexuality and male-female relations and elucidates some of the primary transformations that were taking place as well as what was generally preserved.
Historical Background

Premarital chastity, especially for women, has long been an issue of great import and attention in Chinese society. The twentieth century saw an overall maintenance of underlying principles in an interesting and tumultuous period of changing practices and approaches to dealing with the topic. These changes, as outlined below, were often accompanied and influenced by shifts in governmental power and ideology.

During China’s long imperial history, there was a great deal of importance placed on a woman’s virginity upon marriage, as evidenced in part by how a recent groom might be appalled not to ‘see the red’ on the wedding night. In the early Republic period of the 1920s-30s, however, a new emphasis was made on love between men and women, with “the hymen los[ing] much of its symbolic power.” While a “successful defloration” on the wedding night was still considered ideal (and more conservative thinkers continued to have detailed discussions about the hymen), such success was often more focused on the man and woman acting in harmony with one another and thereby ensuring a happy and healthy future for themselves, their children, and their community (Dikötter 53).

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came into power in 1949, it made conscious efforts to lessen parental control over marriage and to allow young people to

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choose their own partners,\(^9\) while concurrently discouraging premarital dating and sex.\(^{10}\)

The CCP wanted to promote commitment to and focus on one’s society rather than family, romance, or sex (Yi; Hershatter). Official punishments were set for those who disobeyed the new rules, including public criticism or expulsion for students in relationships and imprisonment for people engaging in premarital sex.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a particularly interesting period in terms of the practice and discussion of sex, which was officially repressed. As Honig asserts, this explicit repression of sexuality, including of premarital love and intercourse, was not enforced as much by the state as by local branches of Red Guards and peers.\(^{11}\) In fact, the CCP adopted a less vocal stance on sexual relations than in previous years, effectively making any talk of sex taboo by failing to implement official laws or regulations and even ceasing to publish guides for young people and couples. Meanwhile, local cadres imposed their own unofficial censures for “immoral” sex and those who were found to partake in it were shunned and tormented by those around them. On the whole, there was very little talk about sex, and youths growing up during this period thus had little in the way of sexual education.\(^{12}\)

According to Honig, however, a story of widespread and total sexual repression is not entirely accurate. Some sent-down youths living and working in the countryside did

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\(^9\) One way in which this free choice was promoted was through the Marriage Law of 1950. For more information on this topic, see Hershatter, Gail. “State of the Field: Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63.4 (2004): 991-1065. This text will hereafter be referred to in parenthetical citations as Hershatter.

\(^{10}\) Whyte in Yi, Chin-Chun (ed.). *Family Formation and Dissolution: Perspectives from East and West*. Taiwan: Sun Yat-Sen Institute for Social Sciences and Philosophy, 1995, p. 60-61. This text will hereafter be referred to in parenthetical citations as Yi.

\(^{11}\) Honig, Emily. “Socialist Sex: The Cultural Revolution Revisited.” *Modern China* 29.2 (2003): 143-175, p. 153. This text will hereafter be referred to in parenthetical citations as Honig.

experience a degree of exposure to sexual practices and experimented with premarital sex themselves, as reflected in the growing numbers of abortions and abandoned infants (161). Sex between sent-down youth and party officials was also prevalent, either in cases of rape or of the woman seeking political benefits, and some sent-down youths also engaged in homosexual relations. In urban areas, too, young people continued to engage in romantic relationships and premarital sex, despite the overall assumed culture of repression of these acts during this time.

At the beginning of the reform era, in 1980, a new Marriage Law was put into effect, with purposes including the renewal of the movement to eliminate arranged marriages and brideprices and the raising of the age of marriage (to 22 for men and 20 for women) (Hershatter 1000). In the years of the Cultural Revolution, people had been called upon to eradicate any and all differences between the sexes, but this began to change in the 1980s, when young women were instead encouraged to make themselves femininely beautiful (H&H 67). Meanwhile, however, they were also expected to protect their virginity until marriage, a stipulation that they were generally less eager to uphold than the former. During these years, it was not uncommon for people who were known to have premarital sex to be arrested for ‘hooliganism’ or sentenced to administrative detention for ‘antisocial behavior’. Unmarried couples discovered to be engaging in intercourse in urban public parks were actively sought out by security patrols, chastised, and sometimes arrested (H&H 116). Alongside the prominence of premarital sex in such


legal actions, it also became a popular issue of discussion and debate in the urban press (H&H 113), as evidenced by the Xiao B letters. By the mid-1980s, the views of many youths that restrictions on premarital relationships were stifling and unfair began to affect actual practices, such as in rising numbers of cohabiting college students (H&H 114).

A summary of many of the changes that took place in heterosexual relationships over these years can be observed more quantifiably here:15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year First Married</th>
<th>33-48</th>
<th>49-57</th>
<th>58-65</th>
<th>66-76</th>
<th>77-87</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Type of Marriage:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Arranged</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Intermediate</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Individual choice</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dominant Role in Mate Choice:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Parents</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Mixed</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Respondent</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How Met Husband:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Directly</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Intro-others</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Intro-parents</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Dated Husband Prior to Marriage?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Often</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Sometimes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Rarely</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Never</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Number of Romances:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. None</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. One</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. More than one</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Had Other Marital Prospects:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How Much in Love When Married?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Completely</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Not at all</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Had Premarital Sex:</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Timing of First Birth:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Before marriage</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Within 8 mos.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Later</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Changes in Freedom of Mate Choice in Chengtu by Percentage

15 This table is adapted from Yi and presents the results of a 1987 survey in Chengtu of 586 married women ranging in age from 20 to 70. The numbers listed for sections 1-9 are percentages of the respondents. Make particular note of section 8, which demonstrates the rise in instances of premarital sex leading up to the 1980s.
These statistics reflect a marked shift in the nature of romantic relationships and marital unions in the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution. Young people exercised more autonomy in choosing their mates and were more likely to have premarital sex, especially in comparison with their counterparts prior to the revolution and socialist transformation beginning in 1949. In the 1980s themselves, the numbers were not necessarily rising as steeply as before; however, the fact of the relative continuity in the practice of premarital sex made the noticeable changes in discourse about it over the course of this period and increased incidences of it in the following years all the more startling. While the recently-raised numbers began to stabilize, young people were charged with the challenging task of determining how to approach this new reality in their own lives. As will be demonstrated through the Xiao B letters, the contradictions of partially-changing conceptions of morality among individual youths combined with continuing expectations of chastity within society as a whole made handling issues of impurity a true test of a person’s character.

Part I: Outside Pressures

One of the major themes that arise in the Xiao B letters is that of pressures originating outside of the two people engaged in the relationship themselves. Family, friends and members of society as a whole might sometimes provide encouraging advice to young men trying to come to terms with their girlfriends’ past experiences, but the vast majority of the time their influences serve to make these couples understand that a non-virgin girlfriend would not be tolerated. The extent to which Xiao B and his contemporaries speak about the advice they’ve received or repercussions they expect to
face if and when their relationships become public knowledge demonstrates the pervasive role that social pressures played in shaping interactions between men and women, especially when it came to topics such as premarital sex.

Family

In China, the family has traditionally been very involved in the courtship and marriage process, but by the early 1880s the rates of arranged marriages had dropped significantly and free-choice marriages were on the rise, even in rural areas. This change was accompanied by increases in premarital sex and displays of romantic affection. Not surprisingly, many members of older generations took issue with these developments and were adamantly opposed to women losing their virginity if not already married or engaged to be so (H&H 114). As displayed in the example below, these elders were not restrained from making their views known to their younger kin.

This conflict between increasing freedom of partner choice and courtship among youths and the strict expectations of their families is exemplified in Deng Jianmin’s response letter to Xiao B. Deng, a 27-year-old man, was once in a relationship with a wonderful girl with whom he though he would have a great future. One night, however, his girlfriend was forced into sexual relations with a liúmāng, a ‘gangster’ or ‘hoodlum’. Deng attests that despite his own disquietude over this incident, it didn’t occur to him to break up with her until his parents became involved. They called upon the concept of jiāguī, or ‘family rules’, which likely refers to a set of regulations that all of


17 This and all subsequent translations from the Xiao B letters are my own, with editing assistance from Professor Pauline Lin.
his family members are expected to follow and whose violation merits some form of punishment. Deng’s parents reprimanded him for even considering having such an unchaste girlfriend, demonstrating the fact that traditional views on such topics certainly persisted among older generations at the very least. They also brought up their family history, reminding Deng of how they had toiled away for years to finally raise their family from their poor beginnings to their prosperous standing today. Hearing these stories, possibly undergoing disciplinary action, and seeing his parents’ distress over the situation, Deng was profoundly moved and eventually decided to break up with his girlfriend. This case shows that not only did Chinese families place great value on their own ascendance in society, but also that a relationship with one unchaste woman was seen as enough of a threat to potentially destroy everything an entire family had worked to build. Additionally, the fact that the pressure from his parents caused Deng to break up with his girlfriend despite his original instincts to the contrary is evidence that it was not uncommon for young people to take their parents’ preferences very seriously, thus allowing such familial pressure to carry a large amount of weight.

Parents also got involved in young people’s relationships in other ways, including as promoters of premarital sex. As Zhou found in her research, some parents of young men in fact encouraged premarital sexual relations with fiancés for their own benefit (283-284). One motivation was that it was the duty of the man’s family to pay for a wedding, and the price expected was lower if the bride was not a virgin. Additionally, the groom’s mother in particular had a vested interest in coercing her son to have premarital sex with his fiancé, as this ‘unlawful’ act on the girl’s part provided the mother-in-law with additional resources with which to control her after marriage. Thus, according to
Zhou, there was a common practice in Wuhan at the time termed ‘mother’s lock’, whereby a to-be mother-in-law would lock the fiancés in a bedroom in order to allow them complete privacy to engage in intimate relations (284). In fact, 46 of the 100 women she spoke to in urban areas had lost their virginity under such circumstances.18

As these instances show, while parental control over matchmaking between young people had decreased by the 1980s, parents’ influences on their sons’ views and actions regarding premarital sex were still acutely felt. Whether they were discouraging a young man from staying with a girlfriend who had lost her virginity to someone else or assisting him in taking his fiancé’s virginity, a few points were clear. Family members could use a number of methods to reassert their control over a relationship, ranging from punishing and guilting a son who was breaking the family rules to locking a young couple in a bedroom. Notably, such parents only considered premarital sex to be in any way acceptable if marriage was imminent. If the relations had taken place with a man other than her current boyfriend, the situation was damaging to the two families involved and would thus be discouraged by them both. Premarital sex between fiancés, on the other hand, was detrimental to a woman and her family, while it could be advantageous for a man’s, so in this case the man’s family might become positively engaged. This variety in responses on the part of the family suggests that, even among members of the older generations, views on premarital sex were not clear-cut and could be manipulated in order to be most beneficial to them, turning a woman’s chastity into a bargaining chip of

18 Zhou collected this information through informal interviews, mainly of female factory workers and peasant women aged 22-29, during the years 1978 to 1985, in addition to her own observations as a resident and employee in rural and urban China. This method of sampling, like the Xiao B letters, provides unique insights into the ways in which ideologies surrounding virginity were experienced by actual youths living in China at the time.
sorts. In either case, however, there was still the underlying belief that a virgin bride (or girlfriend) was more valuable than one who was deemed unchaste.

Friends

Just like family members, so too did friends hold great influence over the ways in which young people conceptualized and acted upon their relationships and feelings towards romantic partners. In most of the instances in the Xiao B letters, this peer participation comes in the form of advice, much as in the case of the letters themselves. The suggestions these friends provide, as well how they treat their peers in situations like that of Xiao B, are often conflicting and thereby all the more confusing for the people on the receiving ends.

In his own letter to Chinese Women, Xiao B describes the two entirely opposing sets of advice he has received:

Someone said to me, “You’re so obsessed. If you go out with her, won’t you be losing out?” Yet there are also others who advised me, “She is so utterly devoted to you; where would you find this type of upright person? Why are you being so picky?” My friends are all offering their opinions with sincerity, and yet I somehow feel that they are sorry for me. It would be difficult to say that, later, they wouldn’t be laughing and sneering at me…

It is not entirely apparent who the people are who have expressed each opinion, although he does refer to his friends afterward, so it seems that both set of advice are coming from them. The contradictory sentiments they express demonstrate the range in views even among young people as well as the fact that they, like the elders, were not hesitant to share these thoughts with their peers. Furthermore, Xiao B’s mentioning of his comrades’ remarks and reflection on their true feelings shows that he certainly felt pressure from them and was affected by it. Indeed, the perspectives expressed by his friends correspond
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well with the internal battle he is fighting (see Part II). Furthermore, he recognizes that his current situation has influenced the ways in which he and his friends interact (they are “sorry” for him) and that it will likely continue to do so in the future if does not break up with his girlfriend; even those people originally advocating for him to stay with her might eventually be sneering at him.

This very fear that Xiao B expresses of his friends turning on him because of an ongoing relationship with an “unchaste” woman is manifested in the story told by Zhang Guorong in his response letter entitled “I am Not at All Happy” (Wǒ bìng bù xìngfú 我并不幸福). After finding himself faced with a decision similar to that of Xiao B, Zhang chose to leave his girlfriend. Half a year later, however, he was still filled with regret over this decision and some of his friends, seeing his misery, began to advise him to take her back. Taking their words to heart, Zhang got back together with her, and two years later they are now married with a baby son. But, despite having what should and appears to be a happy marriage, Zhang says, his life is in fact filled with problems, and this is due in part to the influences of friends and others around him. Nasty rumors have begun to spread, he no longer likes to go out and talk with people in public places, and his friends— the very people who only just recently urged him to take his girlfriend back— have deserted him.

Zhang’s case exemplifies both the influence of friends on each other’s decisions and happiness as well as the inconsistencies in what they might say and do. Although his peers assured Zhang that they would support him in his decision, their later abandonment of him tells otherwise. His and Xiao B’s stories paint a picture of friendship in which even the conflicting advice friends provided could not be taken at face value. As they
attempted to situate their own feelings and instincts within the spectrum of views presented to them while also taking into account how they might be treated by their friends in the future, young men like the two of them were left in a difficult position.

Society

In addition to the people closest to them, society as a whole had a number of expectations for how young women should act as well as the kinds of women with whom men should associate. And as the authors of the Xiao B letters indicate, young people were acutely aware of these expectations and the potential consequences of failing to live up to them. They often saw public opinion as limiting their options or preventing them from acting on their true feelings.

Wu Wei, for instance, eventually decided to marry his girlfriend despite the fact that it was common knowledge that she had slept with her previous boyfriend, but he acknowledges that Xiao B has a difficult choice to make. As he describes his own struggle, he explains the part that societal pressure played: “If I married her, how could I face my teachers or classmates later on? How could I face my coworkers? How could I explain it to my own parents?” He expected ridicule and blame from nearly everyone with whom he might interact, and he was not alone. Zhang Guorong also laments the role of society in producing his unhappiness in his marriage with an unchaste wife: “I want to forget all of this, but society won’t let me. I want to move away to a distant place, but this notion is so absurd!” Wu’s and Zhang’s comments about societal influences reflect a feeling among the youth that they were being watched and judged, especially
when it came to such sensitive matters, and a general resentment of this pressure. As Wu puts it, “Public opinion is frightful! 舆论是可怕的！”

Among these fears and warnings about negative public reactions in the Xiao B letters are some bits of hope. Deng, in his response letter, tells Xiao B, “As for your worry about whether afterwards people will ridicule you or laugh at you— that is not necessary. 至于你担心以后是否会有人讥笑，嘲讽，那是没必要的。” Given the wide range in experiences and outcomes among the respondents, it certainly does seem plausible that the public backlash will not be as severe as Xiao B fears, if there is indeed any at all. This points to the possibility that some youths’ perceptions of outside pressures were even more acute than the reality.

**Part II: Men’s Internal Struggles: Emotion vs. Reason**

In this way, I tried to convince myself [to stay with her or leave her], but I really just wanted to burst out crying! I feel like I’m living such a wronged life! Thus, going back and forth, I do not know whether reason has prevailed over emotion, or emotion has prevailed over reason. (Xiao B)

我这样说服自己，可是，我真想放声大哭阿！我觉得自己活得是这么委屈，窝囊。就这样，我颠三倒四地，不知是理智战胜了感情，还是感情战胜了理智。

In the excerpt above, taken from the second-to-last paragraph of his letter, Xiao B condenses his struggle in making a decision (between staying with his girlfriend or breaking up with her) into an intriguing dichotomy: a battle between ‘emotion’ (gànmíng 感情) and ‘reason’ (lǐzhì 理智). What, a reader might ask, does Xiao B consider to constitute gànmíng as opposed to lǐzhì? Upon initial analysis, a logical supposition would be to equate the gànmíng-motivated response with remaining with his girlfriend. This term, while roughly translated to ‘emotion’ in English, has a connotation in Chinese that it is related to connections or love between people. Thus, it would not be unjustified to
presume that Xiao B is referring to his feelings for his girlfriend and the personal distress he is facing at the prospect of leaving her; indeed, it is likely that this is what he intended in his use of the term gânqíng. But, then, what to make of the dramatic and certainly ‘emotional’ language he and some of his peers also use in writing about how their respective discoveries of their girlfriends’ perceived betrayals have wronged and hurt them to the extent that they must consider leaving them? These sections of their letters, too, unequivocally demonstrate high levels of emotion, but here associated with the impulse to break up.

Under these considerations, what could Xiao B mean by ‘reason’? If this is understood to indicate cases of thinking through a situation and deciding upon a logical course of action (one that may transcend an initial instinctive emotional response), we can indeed identify numerous instances of such lìzhì in the stories of Xiao B and the other men. But here, again, the distinction between what is ‘reasonable’ and not is unclear, with seemingly ‘logical’ decisions being made in both possible directions.

The following examples drawn from the men’s Xiao B letters display the true battleground that constitutes their decision-making process. All of them struggle with the same appeal of both ‘emotion’ and ‘reason’, although it appears that the definitions they hold for each change over time and along with a multitude of factors. The wide range of ways in which each of them grapples with the situations at hand illustrates the confusion and uncertainty that they felt.

*Emotion*

The strong attachment the male writers feel— or once felt— to their significant others is incredibly evident in the ways in which they speak about these women. Many of
them describe in detail their girlfriends’ numerous positive traits, including their caring dispositions, beauty, work ethic, and moral integrity. Xiao B, in fact, declares that while others may call his girlfriend “one of the seven goddesses,” or “like an angel,” she is even greater than that in his heart. A few of the men also explain how they and these women are (or used to be) perfect couples, and both love each other deeply and make each other happy.

The men’s love for their girlfriends is also reflected in the misery they describe over the notion or reality of leaving them. As Xiao B laments, “I just could not leave her! If I didn’t have her, what happiness and trust would I still have?” Zhang Guorong experienced severe regret after deciding to break up with his girlfriend: “[T]hings hadn’t completely ended. My suffering and agony was the same as hers. Her face, her smile, her voice and her affectionate gaze… made me completely unable to extinguish the blazing love for her in my heart.”

These two men unequivocally express that breaking up with their girlfriends for such a reason as the fact of her sexual impurity is a source of personal pain and regret for them, but perhaps the most outspoken and dramatic on this topic of the Xiao B writers is Deng. The term gânqíng, ‘emotion’, is in fact prominently featured in his long-winded bemoaning of his suffering since leaving his unchaste girlfriend and marrying another woman. He speaks about how he cannot rid his previous girlfriend from his thoughts and will even call out her name as he dreams. He claims that he no longer dares to watch movies or television out of the fear that he’ll witness a story about true love overcoming
all and be unable to control his ‘gănqíng’. This really is, he says, “a separation turned the regret of 10,000 years." Deng’s dramatic prose and evident effort to convey the extent of his suffering emphasize the intensity of the connection—explicitly, ‘gănqíng’—he has with this woman and, thus, his emotional desire to be in a relationship with her in spite of her flaws. He, like Xiao B, also contrasts this gănqíng with lìzhì, ‘reason’. As he says, “Thinking of her, the waves of my emotion often rise to a high tide. And the rational dam [within me] that oversees ‘morality’ also grows ever higher. 思念她，感情的潮水常常涨潮，顾‘道德’，理智的堤坝又层层加高。” This makes it clear that Deng sees a strong association between reason and the decision to break up, while the choice to stay together would be an emotional one. For him, the discovery of his girlfriend’s mishap caused him pain, but not enough to warrant a breakup: “At that time I was so angry that I couldn’t eat or sleep. But I never considered breaking up with her; I couldn’t be without her. 当时我气的吃不下，睡不着。可我没想过和她分手，我不能没有她。”

While Deng asserts that his emotional response would be to be together with his ex-girlfriend, for some of the other men the line is not so clear. As much as they might blame some of their fear and worry on the abundant social pressures (see Part I), it is apparent from their letters that they have also internalized these messages and, as a result, experience deep personal distress over the notion of their girlfriends having slept with other men before them. This emotion also heavily influences their decision-making processes, here providing a major impetus for them to favor breaking up. In fact, Xiao B’s description of his misery and need to separate after finding out about his girlfriend’s past demonstrates significantly more distress than that of his need to stay with her:
Since then, I’ve fallen into an abyss of sorrow… I have no way to convince myself this is a dream. This bitter reality has taken this heart that once passionately sought pure love and torn it to pieces. She is no longer the same, and can never belong to me. Losing my reason, I bang my head on the bookcase and bed railing……I decided to leave her. [Emphasis added]

From within this section, where the language is consistently dramatic—even melodramatic—, there is one phrase in particular that stands out: just before stating that he decided to leave her, he says that he was “losing his reason.” This shows that even Xiao B himself recognizes that his gănqíng does not lie solely with his girlfriend; indeed, it was when he lost reason and felt the full force of his emotion that he strongly considered leaving her.

Reason

In the midst of their emotional trials and tribulations, Xiao B and the other men have also tried, at various points, to convince themselves of what would be the “right” or “best” course of action. Sometimes, being ‘reasonable’ in this way entailed taking into account the social consequences and acting as culturally competent members of their community by terminating the relationships. The prevalence of such considerations can be seen from the discussion of the outside pressures above (Part I). Deng, for instance, views his initial decision to leave his girlfriend as one dependent largely on reason. He chose to take this action in order to appease his parents and uphold his family’s honor rather than on account of his own feelings. He, like the other writers, recognizes the fact that there are many people, not just the people in the relationships, who would perceive themselves to be affected and to have the right to hold an opinion if they were to stay together. With a mindset that takes into account the potential negative effects on their
own credibility, it is therefore not surprising that the male Xiao B writers might see the choice to break up as one that demonstrates lǐzhì.

The reality, however, is that the path of reason is complex and multiple. Just as emotion can lead these men in two opposing directions, so too can reason. Throughout their letters, they can often be seen struggling to make themselves act in the way they think they, as men, should. Beginning with Xiao B, they frequently evoke the concept of the nánzīhàn, a ‘real, manly man’, as the ideal person to be in this situation. Notably, while the original meaning of this term was that of a traditional, custom-abiding man, they appear to have adopted it to refer to a modern ideal of a strong, accepting figure, one who would be able to stay in the relationship in this case. Xiao B, for example, exclaims, “I thought, just be a nánzīhàn! A nánzīhàn should be able to be tolerant of people, especially those he loves! 我想，就做个男子汉吧！男子汉就该能容人，更何况是自己所爱的人。” In this excerpt, he is telling or even yelling at himself to be a nánzīhàn, showing that he is trying to make himself behave in a particular way, or with lǐzhì. He includes this call to reason as part of his deliberation on the decision to stay together with his girlfriend, demonstrating that this choice, too, can be considered ‘reasonable’.

Arguably the most ‘reasonable’ (and least ‘emotional’) of the men is Cheng Jun. It was 6 years ago, in 1979, that he faced the same situation with his girlfriend as Xiao B is currently confronting. But he maintained his senses and tried to gather all the details so that he could make an informed decision by inquiring as to how this came to pass and if she truly loved him. She, in turn, assured him that she was not frivolous and that her love for him was indeed pure. The fact that he asked these questions shows that he, too, felt that his girlfriend’s previous experience might mean that she was unsuitable for him, but
not necessarily. Now, having maintained a successful relationship with this woman, Cheng advises Xiao B to follow his example as a true nánzǐhàn: “Nánzǐhàn, take out your courage! Real people are those who can best bear the pain of love and create joy. 男子汉，拿出你的勇气来吧！真正的人，是最能承受痛苦和创造欢乐的人。” This comment emphasizes the strength and bravery expected of a nánzǐhàn. Here, Xiao B is being encouraged to choose the path that is more mentally taxing and thereby ‘reasonable’.

Aside from having a strong and accepting personality, the other major component of the nánzǐhàn discourse is that of purposefully challenging the norm. Indeed, Cheng comments that he hopes Xiao B is not ‘like most people who would not be able to stand this kind of blow. 象一般人一样受不了这样的打击。’ Furthermore, Cheng also forces Xiao B to confront his own biases by pointing out that a woman’s physical chastity is not all that constitutes her worthiness as a lover: “A person’s heart and body are the two aspects of love, but it is the heart that represents the essence of love. 一个人的心和肉体是爱情的两个方面，而代表爱情本质的是心。” A number of the other men, although they might not explicitly allude to the concept of the nánzǐhàn, support Cheng’s sentiment by arguing that it is important for Xiao B to do what he knows to be right (i.e., stay with his girlfriend) despite—or even deliberately contrary to—what society as a whole says or demands. Wu Wei advises Xiao B that he should not allow other people’s influences to keep him from achieving his own goals and happiness. If their love is real, he says, it is in no way ‘tattered’ but rather very much intact and worth sustaining. Wu, like Cheng, engages in the call for courage along with conscious resistance: “Xiao B, you should muster your courage and challenge the norms of society! 小 B，你应该鼓起勇气
These writers underscore the struggle for young men in Xiao B’s position to overcome the prejudices of society, along with their own emotions, by tapping into their resources of ‘reason’ and refusing to break up with their girlfriends.

Deng presents an interesting case, for he tells Xiao B to learn from his own experience by taking a progressive stance, but only to a certain extent: “We should of course look down upon the type of mistaken, immoral, hasty sexual liberation views, but we should also oppose the kinds of feudal, backward moral views where ‘only chastity’ matters. 我们固然应该鄙视那种放荡的，轻率的性解放的错误观点，也应反对那种‘唯贞操’的封建的落后的道德观。” Within this statement, we can see the changes taking place in the minds of the members of a generation caught between ‘feudal’ and ‘liberated’ perspectives. At this point in time, they still considered a woman engaging in premarital sex to be wrong, but they were also beginning to reach a threshold where they could use their lizhi to look past such infidelities.

Part III: Women’s Internal Struggles

In discussing a topic of which women are such an integral part, it is important not to leave their voices and stories unheard. Although nearly all of the writers of the Xiao B letters are men, the final response is submitted by a woman. She chooses not to identify herself by name, but rather as “An unfortunate woman 一个不幸的女人”. While she certainly cannot be considered representative of all women living in China at the time, between her personal letter, a few anecdotes from the male writers, and some other sources, we can begin to achieve an understanding of the ways in which women

19 This writer will hereafter be referred to in the text as Unfortunate.
interacted with the problem of premarital sex.

*The Aftermath*

The “premature” loss of one’s virginity had both practical and emotional consequences for a Chinese woman in the 1980s. This was especially true, as noted earlier and demonstrated in the men’s stories, if the consummated relationship did not end in marriage. Women were cognizant of this reality even before having faced a rejection, and as a result might be hesitant to confide in a new boyfriend and anxious about the outcome if they did. While for men the decision involved was whether or not to stay with a girlfriend known to not be a virgin, for the women it was more a matter of whether or not to tell a significant other the truth or even to pursue a new relationship in the first place.

As Honig and Hershatter found in a sample of Chinese magazine articles from the time period, some women felt that the risks of desertion or abuse by a new boyfriend or husband were too great and so chose to keep their pasts secret, while some others saw their innocence as unsalvageable and thus became brazenly promiscuous (120). Those who decided not to tell sometimes went to great lengths to preserve their chaste images. According to Zhou, such women “[could] usually use men’s ignorance about sex to fake their ‘virginity’” (286). For instance, they might wait until they were menstruating to have sex with a new boyfriend or husband or fake pain during the act in order to make it appear to be their first time. There were women with whom Zhou spoke who had used such tactics to fake their virginity three times with three different men before eventually getting married. This demonstrates both the widespread expectation that women be virgins upon marriage as well as the acknowledgment of this fact by women, some of
whom then took practical steps to protect themselves. In these instances, women were able to assume some form of control over their own circumstances, but they did so in a manner that actually perpetuated the very expectations that had allowed for their predicament to begin with.

Whereas some women approached their situations in these ways, still others opted to refrain from engaging in any romantic relationships whatsoever, and this is the category into which Unfortunate falls. A self-described once ideal, confident and optimistic woman, she met a male student during her first year at college who intently pursued her and for whom she also had feelings. One day, this man forced her to have sex with him. Unfortunate was upset, but hoped that he would at least treat her well afterward; instead, he dumped her and found a new girlfriend. Since then, Unfortunate has thrown herself wholeheartedly into school and work, forsaking any and all potential relationships:

Is it that no one has expressed love for me? No, and moreover there has been quite a number of men who have done so; there are college classmates as well as friends of friends. Some of them know about that thing [my losing of my virginity to my classmate], while some don’t know. But the door of my heart hasn’t opened to anyone. Is it that I don’t want to love? No, there is a classmate with whom I went to junior high and high school… His actions and eyes told me that he loved me, and very deeply… If I tell him everything, can he forgive? I don’t dare to imagine the consequences. I love him, but I cannot express it even the slightest bit. It is in this kind of agony that I scratch out a difficult, meager existence.

In this excerpt, Unfortunate raises a couple of interesting points. In describing the attraction between her old classmate and herself that she cannot pursue, she demonstrates the hold that her fear of rejection has over her. She loves him and is sure he loves her, but
even so she feels threatened by the idea of telling him. It is not that she is incapable of love, but rather that she is paralyzed against expressing her feelings by the weight of her past. On the other hand, she attests that her decision to avoid men is not based entirely on the fear of their unknown reactions; in fact, there are a number of men interested in her, some of whom already know about her experience. Thus, it is clear that the depth of her own internalization of the ideal of the virginal woman surpasses even some men’s demands.

Those women who chose to engage in new relationships and take the risk of being upfront with their partners were often aware of the variety in responses they could encounter. This is exemplified in a comment made by Wu Wei in which he notes that his wife “still frequently asks me why I didn’t bow to the pressure of public opinion and came to marry her. 为什么不怕舆论压力而和她结合？” By continuing to raise this question, she shows that women in her position perceived a high level of instability in their relationships.

Wu’s wife also demonstrates the low self-esteem that often accompanied a woman’s premarital loss of virginity. Unfortunate, in particular, has faced severe depression and a decrease in self-confidence following the experience with her college classmate. When she first discovered that he had left her for another woman, she says, “I gave up all hope, and thought about dying. 我绝望，想到了死。” Now, she only finds any sort of hope or relief in the realms of school and work, which she uses to keep herself busy and distracted. This, however, can still never compensate for the loss she feels: “But I am, after all, a young person with blood and flesh, and I have my own feelings and love. 可是，我
Some women made an effort to show their repentance for their acts. When Zhang was facing his own grief over having broken up with his girlfriend, one of the arguments that his friends offered to encourage him to take her back was: “You didn’t originally know about this; it was she who took the initiative to tell you, which shows that she already had remorse in her heart and is sincere about her love for you.” The degree to which women such as Zhang’s girlfriend actually felt that they had committed a wrongdoing as opposed to recognized that an outward display of regret was socially mandated is debatable. There was likely a conflation of these two factors, as women clearly personally experienced great shame but probably also realized that showing remorse was expected and necessary in order for their behavior to be considered forgivable.

Unfavorable Circumstances

A common theme in the Xiao B letters and other literature from the time is that of women losing their virginity under circumstances that didn’t correlate with their own choices or preferences. The prevalence of these accounts is evidence that many women who found themselves with a shameful and limiting status did not end up in this situation of their own volition; indeed, the very act for which a woman was blamed may have involved a degree of coercion or deceit on the part of the man with whom it occurred.

There are a couple of instances of forced sex in the Xiao B letters. The wording surrounding the topic of sex is never very explicit, but in these cases the sentiment of
coercion is still clearly conveyed. Deng, for example, describes his girlfriend’s infidelity by stating, “But one night she was... by a hoodlum [ellipses included in text; see Chinese]. 但一天晚上她被一流氓...” This phrasing implies that the ‘hoodlum’ did something to Deng’s girlfriend, against her will. Unfortunate, too, says that she was not a willing participant in the taking of her virginity: “When I still hadn’t realized this was ‘love’, he already forced me to... 当我还没意识到这就是‘爱情’时，他就将我强行...”

In both of these cases, the women have been compelled to comply with the sexual desires of men, but this detail does not appear to be taken into account by others when they consider or pursue new relationships. That is, the fact that Deng’s girlfriend was potentially the victim of rape does not absolve her in the eyes of his parents, and Unfortunate does not expect acceptance from her love interest despite her similar situation; rather, they seem to be in much the same predicament as the other girlfriends described in the letters who simply had previous lovers.

These relatively frequent references to coercion into having sex are consistent with the findings of Zhou, who was able to obtain more explicit examples of the ways in which this could occur. According to her research, since women had more power than men in the relationship before marriage and especially before having intercourse for the first time, men generally could not use physical force but instead relied on ‘soft strategies’ (“indirect and more emotional strategies, such as helplessness, empathy, and dependency”) to persuade their partners (284). The strategies a man might utilize included calling upon certain myths perpetuated due to the low levels of sexual education at the time that claimed, for example, that he would fall ill or become disabled if he did not have sex after becoming sexually aroused (285). These and other ‘soft strategies’
accounted for the loss of virginity in 58 of the women in her urban sample (n=100) and 6 in her rural sample (n=50). While these techniques might not have been considered sexual assault or even seen as force by the women, their high numbers demonstrate the prevalence of some form of coercion in the act of premarital sex during this period. Furthermore, an expansive genre of ‘cautionary tales’ existed in magazines for youth and women during the mid-1980s (H&H 63; McMillan 63). In these stories, women were portrayed as victims who fell prey to the trickery of conniving men. Such articles were designed as warnings of the perils for women of surrendering both to their own sexual desire and to that of men.

Many women who engaged in premarital sex with their own boyfriends, whether tricked or having made a conscious decision, did so under the impression that the relationship would end in marriage but then found that this was not the case. Although Unfortunate doesn’t mention marriage per se, she does explain that after she slept with her classmate she had hoped he would stay with her and treat her well, and it was only after he left her instead that she fell into the despair she is still facing and decided to forsake all romantic relationships. Unfortunate was not alone in her feeling of betrayal; in another magazine, there was a forum focused on how premarital sex resulted in social ostracism for women only if they did not ultimately marry the boyfriend in question (H&H 118). One writer in this forum advised women to handle this situation by refraining from having sex with a boyfriend until they were positive of both the fact that they wanted to marry him and he wanted to marry them (H&H 119). Such advice demonstrates the relative frequency with which intimate couples did not eventually marry and the threat that this posed for the woman in particular if she were to agree to sexual
intercourse.

The great conundrum of premarital sex for women during the 1980s lay in the fact that not only were they in danger of being cajoled into engaging in the act under circumstances not of their choosing, but also they were the ones who were expected to uphold the moral character of society and would feel the greatest backlash if they failed to do so. Indeed, the cautionary tales emphasized that the virginity of a woman was necessary for a successful marriage, and it was her responsibility to maintain it, meaning that she must control the sexuality of both herself and her boyfriend (H&H 66). The failure to meet this expectation and any drama that ensued was blamed on the woman, as depicted in Zhang’s lamentation, “It was all done by her hand [emphasis added].

Furthermore, there is, strikingly, no mention within the Xiao B letters of whether or not the men involved were virgins and if this had any moral or social implications. This helps to explain why “[b]oth the older generation and the youth of the 1980’s agreed that the risks of premarital sexual activity were greater for women than for men, particularly if the relationship did not culminate in marriage” (H&H 114). Chinese women were made acutely aware of the pertinence of their own purity at the same time that they were pressured by their believed fiancés or forced by ‘hoodlums’ to throw it away. As we will see in the next section, this left those like Xiao B’s girlfriend in a compromising position.

Part IV: Changing Relationships

In order to complete the illustration of their lives, it is imperative to take into
account the fact that the men and women discussed individually thus far interacted regularly with one another in the course of their relationships and that the nature of these associations was often affected by the reality of a woman’s previous sexual experience. On the whole, this situation resulted in a significant increase in the man’s power in the relationship and a correlated decrease in that of the woman, especially during the period of crisis when it was unclear if the couple would stay together. Some who remained together and got married found happiness and contentment, but others continued to have problems.

*The Power Shift*

In the course of discussing the tensions that arose in relationships when the woman was found to not be a virgin, there has been a frequent recurrence of the terms ‘decide’ and ‘choose’, almost always in reference to the man having to make up his mind as to whether or not the relationship would continue. This highlights the significant increase in authority relative to their partners that was accorded to men in this situation. They may have struggled with the decision, but it was still *their* choice, never their *girlfriends’*, to make.

According to Zhou’s findings, this marked a great shift from the courtship relations that would have existed otherwise in China at this time. In general, women, as opposed to men, saw marriage as bringing them very little benefit, and so this was one of the only arenas in which they wielded some power (Zhou 283). By resisting marriage as a whole and premarital sex in particular, they were able to maintain their bargaining power up until they agreed to wed and thus relinquished to their new husbands any control they previously held over “major decisions” (Zhou 281). But if women engaged in premarital
sex with their boyfriends, they automatically lost this bargaining power, as it became
favorable for them and their families to save face by pushing for a ‘shotgun wedding’ and
the wedding gifts they received from the groom’s family were diminished.

In the cases like that of Xiao B and his girlfriend, then, the transfer of control was
even greater. Not only had the women already forfeited their original bargaining power
by having premarital sex, but they had also failed to marry the men to whom they lost
their virginity and then entered into new relationships. Thus, their current boyfriends
were granted the same (if not more extensive given that the women were even more
“tainted”) advantages in courtship and marriage arrangements as those described by
Zhou, in addition to the decision-making authority to determine the future of the
relationship.

In her letter, Unfortunate describes what she imagines Xiao B’s girlfriend to have
been experiencing throughout their relationship as a result of her status:

When she was wooing you, she surely experienced countless mental struggles and
deliberations. While the two of you were together, her heart [probably] was not calm for
even a moment... Now she is hoping and waiting. Your each and every move will
influence her existence and her demise.

She later advises Xiao B, “She needs your love. Only you can heal her wound. 她需要你
的爱，只有你才能治愈她的创伤。” Such a depiction of a woman’s perception of and
interaction with the power held over her by her boyfriend shows the degree that women
like her felt they were subservient to the men with whom they were involved. If a man’s
“each and every move” could determine his girlfriend’s “existence” and “demise” and
she was in need of his acceptance and affection, he certainly held a great deal of sway
and she had little choice but to comply with his demands. This also reinforces the feelings
of insecurity and lack of self-esteem among women in such positions that were
demonstrated earlier (Part III).

As indicated by the male writers of the Xiao B letters, when boyfriends of impure
girlfriends made the decision for them to stay together, they claimed to do so for two
main reasons. One motivation was their own happiness and feelings of love. Zhang, for
instance, took his girlfriend back after undergoing months of misery without her. Such a
decision might have also been tied to a conscious denunciation of the influence of social
pressure in favor of personal contentment, as stated by Wu: “My decision wasn’t for
them [the people who had been saying unkind things to him], but rather for myself. 我的
选择不是对他人，而是对自己。”

Another justification for staying together that arises is that of the merit of the
women. Indeed, this was one of the central arguments from Zhang’s friends that helped
him decide to be with his girlfriend: she had shown remorse and was therefore worthy of
his love. Cheng made his choice after deeming his girlfriend sensible and her love pure.
Wu’s reasoning also reflected this sentiment: “I finally had confidence in that she was
deserving of love. 我终于自信，她是值得爱的。” While all three of these men cite
their girlfriend’s worthiness as a reason to stay with them, none of them directly imply
that they took into consideration the trauma that would otherwise be experienced by their
girlfriends, as Unfortunate urges Xiao B to do. This may indicate a lack of awareness of
or value placed on women’s struggles on the men’s part.

*The Long-term*

As a final point of consideration in analyzing the Xiao B letters, we will look at
the outcomes that the authors describe of their continuing relationships with their
girlfriends or wives. For two of the men who wrote in with their advice, the decision to remain in their relationships with “unchaste” women has been very successful. Cheng is still with his girlfriend and they are, in his words, “getting along well. 相处得很好。” Wu feels that he and his wife complement each other in every way to the extent that “everyone calls us ‘the model husband and wife’. 大家都称我们是‘模范夫妻’。” In this instance, both the husband and, seemingly, the other people who originally opposed his association with her have become convinced of the success and validity of their relationship.

Not all stories, however, had such favorable outcomes. Zhang attests that while, on the surface, he and his wife may appear to be a good couple, their relationship is in fact very strained and there doesn’t seem to be a possible solution:

Since we got married, I always felt this layer of invisible wall blocking off communication between our two hearts. She has also always used her love and gratitude to compensate me. Can this type of unequal love bring contentment? Our love cannot foster a type of free, equal, and mutually respectful feeling.

He later describes the disconnect between himself and his otherwise perfect wife as a ‘ghost’ or ‘alien body’ (yiù 物) among them. In this passage, Zhang says that his wife’s uneasiness with the situation at hand has translated into a tense and unhappy home environment. She seems to have never been able to fully come to terms with her impurity and, as a result, cannot relax enough allow them to enjoy each other’s company.

Despite Zhang’s unhappiness, he claims to have done his best to salvage the relationship and, as mentioned earlier, blames their discontent on his wife and society as a whole. He does not take any personal responsibility for the circumstances, and without
any further insight into his life it is unclear whether or not this is justified. But there is
evidence that the husband in such a relationship, as well as his family, sometimes played
a part in preventing his wife from forgetting her past and thus in maintaining his
additional unequal power over her. One woman who sent her account to another
magazine in the same year that the Xiao B letters were published, for example, explained
how after nine years of marriage, her husband, who knew about and claimed to have
accepted her sexual past, began to abuse her. He started bringing up her past as an excuse
for beating or insulting her and any other men with whom she happened to interact (H&H
119). This example, as well as Zhang’s, demonstrates that a boyfriend’s forgiveness and
agreement to marry a non-virginal woman did not ensure that the fact of her previous
experience would cease to be a significant aspect of their relationship; rather, it could
continue to haunt their interactions with one another or be revisited even years later to
justify maltreatment of the wife.

Epilogue: Looking at China Since the 1980s

By the mid-1990s, some noticeable changes had taken place in terms of public
representations of premarital sex. Laws targeting those engaging in it began to loosen as
the focus that had once been placed on combating this societal evil was instead shifted to
tackle prostitution (McMillan 63). In the media, premarital sex often had a more romantic
portrayal as opposed to the tales of warning and disapproval seen in the Xiao B letters
and other articles of the 1980s (McMillan 63). However, the press still felt compelled to
avoid a positive tone in discussing such matters. It began to be increasingly more
common to see advice promoting the chastity of both sexes, not only women, before
marriage, although it was still emphasized that it was the woman’s responsibility to ensure this and that she would likely be rejected by men if she did not maintain her virginity (McMillan 64). This was also reflected in the continuing expectation, despite efforts to educate young people of its invalidity as a test of virginity, to ‘see the red’ on the wedding night and women’s increasing efforts to find ways to compensate for prematurely-broken hymens (McMillan 66). Operations to repair hymens at hospitals became more and more of a popular occurrence, and do-it-yourself kits began to appear in the market.

While these changes may seem moderate and demonstrate an overall continued valuation of premarital virginity, instances of premarital sex and its relative acceptance among various sectors of society were, in fact, rising significantly during the 1990s. With greater numbers of young men and women working together and often leaving home to do so, combined with increased enforcement of the higher legal marriage age, there were more opportunities to form premarital romantic relationships. Meanwhile, couples began to be required to officially register their marriages, resulting in a separation between the date of betrothal and the later wedding ceremony, only the latter of which was considered true marriage by the public. Interestingly, this temporal gap resulted in many couples cohabiting and engaging in “premarital” sex, as it was seen by the community, after registering their marriages with the state, and this became the accepted norm. Sex among teenagers, too, was spoken of and practiced with greater frequency, but

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the state only had means to regulate the sexual activity of married spouses and so could not intervene except to require known pregnant teens to undergo abortions.

Such changes in the practices of youths were accompanied by a degree of (somewhat begrudging) tolerance among their elders. According to Friedman, most members of older generations did not approve wholeheartedly of the decisions of youths to engage in sexual relations prior to their wedding ceremonies, but they also did not fight the trend since the old moral association of sex with marriage was still maintained (159). A study in the late 1990s found that parents of unmarried grown children were generally opposed to premarital sex and tended not to discuss such matters with their children, finding the topic difficult and embarrassing to broach.21 Those living in rural areas were, on the whole, more accepting of their children’s premarital sexual relations, which is consistent with the increasing occurrences of cohabitation among engaged rural couples (Cui 139). However, both rural and urban parents in the study acknowledged that, at a time when unmarried youths were being exposed to more and more sexual references on an everyday basis, the education they received about sex was not sufficient to enable them to avoid undesirable circumstances such as pregnancy, abortion, or the contraction of STDs (Cui 140). Thus, all of the parents agreed that the expansion of sex education would be more beneficial than harmful and that this should be the responsibility of the government. Such views reflected a considerable increase in sex among unmarried youth

21 Cui, Nian, Minxiang Li, and Ersheng Gao. “Views of Chinese parents on the provision of contraception to unmarried youth.” Reproductive Health Matters 9.17 (2001): 137-145, p. 140. This text will hereafter be referred to in parenthetical citations as Cui. This study was conducted between 1998-1999 and involved rural and urban parents with 18 to 24-year-old unmarried children in romantic relationships.
within a society that was reluctant to embrace this change but was beginning to make accommodations.

‘Virgins get in free’

In light of these trends, it is interesting to consider some of the ways in which premarital virginity remains outwardly favored and promoted in China today. Both in-hospital procedures and do-it-yourself kits as “solutions” to a hymen broken before marriage are still available and utilized, especially among recent college graduates.22 One can also find multiple examples of advertising geared specifically toward virginal women. A park in Changsha, for instance, offered free admission and an entry prize to its September, 2011, floral festival, the Zhouluo Wild Osmanthus Fragrans Festival, for women aged 22 or older who were still virgins.23 The park authorities justified this ‘creative thinking’ by likening the osmanthus fragrans to a virgin woman on the grounds that they are both “pure and simple.” The publishing of an article on this event in the Shanghai Daily sparked a heated debate among its readers posting on the website, many of whom were adamantly opposed to the park’s policy. Nevertheless, the fact that such advertising is considered effective enough to be utilized demonstrates that there are still significant contingents of Chinese women who value virginity as a virtue enough to publically declare that they have preserved it until the age of 22. There are also, presumably, large numbers of Chinese men who would be attracted to the festival by the promise of virginal women with whom to socialize.

Over the past century, the practices of Chinese youths and openness of the discourse surrounding premarital sex among heterosexual couples have experienced significant changes, often in line with major political shifts. Each jump in instances of premarital relations has been accompanied by relatively slight degrees of increased acceptance of the situation by society as a whole, but the underlying valuation of premarital virginity has always remained. I want to suggest that, over the past couple of decades in particular, such idealized chastity has become more of an idea than a fact. That is to say, even as youths are experimenting more and more with their sexuality, they continue to feel pressures, both internal and external, to present themselves as chaste (for women) or as only associating with those who are (for men) once it comes time for marriage, and they will go to great lengths to maintain such images. During the 1980s, women who lost their virginity prematurely had to decide whether to reveal this truth and potentially face rejection and ostracism or to keep it a secret and pretend to still be virgins upon marriage. In the years since, their efforts do the latter have reached new levels, at the same time that the likelihood of them having, indeed, engaged in premarital sex has steadily increased. Women today who have hymen repair surgery or attend a festival where they can assert their virginal status without the requirement of physical proof are evidence, rather hypocritically, of a generation of youth who both promote and reject premarital chastity; they are increasingly open to the act of premarital sex itself but simultaneously wish to hide its occurrence from public view.
Works Cited


“If I were Xiao B… 假如我是小B…” *Chinese Women* 中国妇女 Aug. 1985: 10-12.


