

## **Vilifying and Promoting Condoms: Condom Debate During the Time of AIDS in China<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Through exploring the fervent condom debates by the state and the alliance of health realists and condom companies in China, this paper argues that, unless the state has a proactive stance on the marketing of condom use, the empowering and persuading effect that condom marketing was supposed to have upon the population cannot be realized. The impediment – in this case, the state’s position and attitude towards condoms – can only thwart the progressive effect of HIV prevention.

### **Introduction**

On November 7, 1998, the first condom advertisements appeared on 80 buses in Guangzhou. These advertisements were sponsored by the Wuhan division of the U.K. Jissbon Global Company. The advertisement showed a messenger of love who, wearing a pair of sunglasses and a yellow robe, expressed a sweet smile to the public and promised “a love without worries or anxieties” and “a condom to ensure safety” (*quebao anquan, ziyou yitao* CHI 1). This messenger of love did not live long. The company received a document about management of advertising from the Guangdong municipal government demanding that all condom advertisements be stopped immediately. After 33 days, the advertisements were stripped from the buses.

On November 29, 1999, as part of World AIDS Day education, CCTV aired a public interest advertisement that lasted 42 seconds. It featured a cartoon baby in the form of a condom combating and finally driving away STD and AIDS viruses against a background of a newly-wedded couple entering a room. The subtitle read, “Avoid unexpected pregnancy. Condom frees you from worries.” A day later this

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advertisement was banned by the government because it “violated the advertising law.”

In 2000, a 360-square-meter-long advertising banner was hung on a mansion. This time the smiling messenger survived only 20 hours before it was “killed.” It was removed by order of the Bureau of Industry and Commerce.

On December 2, 2002, after the Durex Company had negotiated with various governmental departments for over half a year, including the Chinese Hygiene Department, the Pharmaceutical Supervision Bureau, and the Family Planning Committee, a public interest advertisement finally emerged on CCTV. Despite all the efforts, the Durex name never appeared on TV. The company had originally negotiated an agreement to show a public interest advertisement on November 25 for two consecutive weeks and include the Durex brand and Qingdao Latex manufacturer. However, on Nov. 21, the company received a notice from the CCTV stating that the Industrial and Commercial Bureau prohibited the display of the Durex brand on the screen. On Nov. 26, the company received a letter from the Bureau to the same effect. Instead of the ad appearing for two weeks before World AIDS Day, it was limited to one week after World AIDS Day, and the name Durex never appeared on the screen. The company thought that World AIDS Day was a chance for Durex to enter mass media, yet it failed.

On November 15-21, 2003, the CCTV broadcasted a public interest advertisement with the title: “Value Life, Prevent AIDS.” Although the CCTV had agreed to show the brand name Durex on TV, the effect of the advertisement was severely mitigated by having the sponsor’s name fly by so quickly that no one could catch it, thus violating the regulations requiring the sponsor’s name to remain for three to five seconds. This is the second time that the Durex Company encountered setbacks on CCTV.

Durex and other condom manufacturers also attempted to advertise in media such as newspapers and magazines, but the Industrial and Commercial Bureau declared such advertisements against the law (Jin 2002).

While in today’s Western world condom marketing is perceived as a centerpiece of AIDS education and prevention, in China, as we have seen, condom advertisements in the media have been outlawed, prohibited, and severely

regulated. As I will explain later in the article, sexual morality and state-building are inextricably linked to the state's stringent control of condom advertisements. While globally "AIDS communication programs have changed the way that condoms are perceived and promoted in many countries; this change has not yet occurred in China" (Wen 2002: 14).<sup>2</sup> The result is disconcerting: in China, according to a 2003 national survey, 17% of the population had never heard of HIV/AIDS and 77% did not know that condom use could prevent transmission (Hunter 2005: 91). Other surveys showed that only 18-21% of Beijing medical students thought condom use would protect them from HIV (Wang 2007).<sup>3</sup> Only 12% of men from Shandong province considered condoms protective against HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS 2003). In the most recent survey of sexual conduct, 26.1% reported having used condoms (14.3% in towns and 8.4% in countryside), and only 37.3% knew that curing other STDs could help prevent AIDS (Ling 2004). It is astonishing that such a high ratio of people did not know that they could use condoms to protect themselves.

In this paper, I will investigate the conflicting meanings of, and attitudes towards condoms by different agents driven by different interests, and the impact of the state's condom policy upon the local community and the local condom market. More specifically, the state family planning administration documents routinely refer to condoms as "*biyuntao*" (CHI 2) – literally, "contraception condoms" – emphasizing only the contraceptive use of condoms. The alliance of local condom companies, scholars, and health realists opposed this meaning and produced "*anquantao*" (CHI 3) – literally, "safe condoms" – to denote condoms as a tool for safe sex. The production of these two conflicting meanings of condoms is crystallized in the arguments between the state and the alliance of health activists, as explicated below.

This paper is based on a one-year intense ethnographic fieldwork with a wide array of field methods that include participant observation in condom companies,

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<sup>2</sup> Trainings on condom marketing to "high-risk" groups took place in a limited number of cities such as Xinjiang, Sichuan, and Yunnan, funded by the China/UK project (Lin 2002). The World Health Organization also started the pilot project of "100% condom use" model in Wuhan city and Jingjiang County in 2000. The Vice Premier and Minister of Health, Madam Wu Yi, remarked specifically on the promising results of the 100% CUP strategy: "The 100% CUP in Hubei and Hunan have proven to be measures that have significantly decreased the incidence of sexually transmitted infections and played an active role in prevention and control of HIV/AIDS, and are worthy of further expansion to other provinces" (Wang 2007).

<sup>3</sup> 76% of these students expressed confidence in the "one stable partner" strategy (Wang 2007).

archive research, and structured and unstructured interviews of government officials, managers of the local TV station, medical professionals, male and female consumers, managers of condom companies and adult health shops, and male clientele and female sex workers, who were my research subjects for my three-year ethnographic fieldwork. This paper will answer the following questions: What is the state's attitude towards condoms? What kind of impact does it have on the community and the local condom market? How does the alliance of local condom companies, scholars, and health realists respond to the state-disseminated hegemonic discourse about condoms? What are the underlying reasons that belie the consistent setbacks in the efforts to advertise condoms?

Through exploring the fervent condom debates by the state and the alliance of health realists and condom companies, this paper argues that unless the state takes a proactive stance on the marketing of condom use, the empowering and persuading effect that condom marketing was supposed to have upon the population cannot be reached. The impediment – in this case, the state's position and attitude towards condoms – can only thwart the progressive effect of HIV prevention.

Below, I will first review the literature on the marketing of condoms and then discuss the state's attitude towards condoms in the context of the 1989 state law on condom advertisements. I will then explore the repercussions of the state's definition of condoms on local communities and the condom market. I will follow this section with an account of the attitude towards condoms by the alliance of local condom companies, scholars, and health experts. Finally, I will investigate the attitudes towards sex in the Maoist and post-Mao state and unravel the underlying reasons behind the state's taboo on condom advertisements.

### **Marketing of Condoms**

The best means of preventing HIV is through education, which teaches the public to adjust their behaviors to reduce or eliminate HIV exposure. Since sexual transmission accounts for the majority of HIV infection in the developing world and condoms have been proven to be an effective physical barrier to HIV infection, condom use and reduction of the number of partners, next to abstinence, have been the mainstays of prevention of sexual transmission of HIV.

Health education involves imparting medical knowledge to the public in the hope of altering their behaviors. Earlier grassroots health educators followed Paulo Freire, David Werner, and others, and envisaged dissemination of medical knowledge as a source of empowerment (Freire 1970; Lane 1997: 166; Werner 1977). Indeed, providing the laymen with health information was believed to mitigate the level of ignorance and facilitate informed choices. Although many current agencies, such as the Ford Foundation, still operate under this mantra of health information as a form of empowerment, some researchers point out that it is difficult to measure the empowerment due to the lack of research conducted in this area (Lane 1997: 166).

Beginning in the 1970s, there was a shift from the goal of empowerment to the goal of persuasion (Lane 1997). Market advertising techniques have been appropriated to distribute and broadcast health information in an attempt to persuade people to alter their current behaviors. Since the late 1970s, a proliferation of mass media forms have been tapped into, including MTV, soap operas, and the internet, in order to transform health behaviors (Birkinshaw 1989; ICAF 1989; Lane 1997: 166; Rogers 1989; Singhal 1988). The theoretical underpinning of the social marketing of health information is the social learning theory that strives for behavioral change via entertainment, communication, and amusement (Bandura 1977). Entertaining programs for radio, TV, movies, or music have been employed as ideal channels throughout the world to reach the public about health messages and to change behaviors (Singhal 1999). One of the best examples was the campaign run by Population Communication Services at John Hopkins University (Coleman 1988; Lane 1997).

In the current global HIV/AIDS pandemic, a combination of empowerment and persuasion has been set as the strategic goal for marketing condoms. Paramount surveys have revealed that TV is the most common means through which people learn about HIV, followed by newspapers, radio programs, and journal and magazine articles. Indeed, forms of media, including newspaper, magazines, newsletters, television, and radio, have formed a vital front line in the global struggle against AIDS. It is believed that as long as the media puts forward AIDS as a major

concern in a society's consciousness, it is easier for public health professionals to disseminate preventive messages such as safe sex and condom use.

It is the recognition of the significant role of media that has made the marketing of condoms a dominant approach to health education. The World Health Organization Global Program on AIDS is committed to working with mass media to enhance public knowledge about AIDS, as the organization believes that it is an effective way to help implement the WHO's global strategies against the spread of HIV/AIDS. Many countries around the world have experimented with the marketing of safe sex, condom use, and the reduction of sexual partners. It has been reported that frequent references to condoms and certain condom brands via media have an enormous effect on people. In fact, one of the most frequently quoted reasons for condom use by the research subjects is condom advertising. People who have been exposed to condom advertising are radically more likely to use condoms than those who have not (Adetunji 2003; Agha 1997; Fajans 1995; Messersmith 2000).<sup>4</sup> In Tanzania, five annual surveys have revealed that radio soap operas have brought about a reduction in the number of sexual partners and increased condom implementation (Vaughan 2000). In Nigeria, Uganda, and Zaire, studies have demonstrated that media marketing of safe sex has led to a sharp increase of condom use, a reduction of the number of sexual partners, and more willingness and openness to discuss safe sex (Bankole 1999; Bankole 1996; Katende 2000; Keller 2002).

While the literature on condom marketing has demonstrated its efficacious effect in changing people's sexual behaviors, the role of the state and churches that clash with the marketing messages in the developing world has been either ignored or understudied. In his study of condom marketing in Mozambique, Pfeiffer

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<sup>4</sup> In Nigeria, for instance, the increasing acceptability of condoms is indicated by frequent references to condoms in the popular press and by vigorous social marketing campaigns for such brands of condoms as "Right Time," "Gold Circle," and others (Messersmith 2000). Zambia's committee has sponsored newspaper advertisements and comic books featuring a fanged yellow blob that says: "I am the AIDS virus. I am very small. I am very dangerous." More than 500 Zambian high schools now have an extracurricular activity called the anti-AIDS club, whose members sponsor lectures, visit AIDS patients, and publish poetry about viruses and monogamy. In Zambia, for instance, the reported incidence of sexually transmitted diseases has declined 15% each of the last three years. Condom sales are increasing throughout Africa, especially in countries with social-marketing programs (Tierney 1990).

delineates the contrasting messages between religious movements and condom marketers. He pinpoints the role of churches in mobilizing the community to blame condom marketing for endorsing promiscuous sexuality through images and slogans and for creating the problem of immoral sex and the HIV epidemic (Pfeiffer 2004). Pfeiffer's study alerts us not only to the existence of the counter-discourse to condom marketing, but also to its adverse and deleterious effect on condom marketing.

Along this analytical line of inquiry, below I will utilize a case study from China to explore the role of the state in condom marketing. I argue that unless we put the state back into the picture, condom marketing will not achieve its task of HIV prevention.

### **State Law against Condom Marketing**

The taboo against condom advertisements in China originated from the 1989 regulation titled, "About Prohibition of Advertisements of Sex-Life Related Products." This law stipulated that any medical equipment designed to cure sexual malfunction or aid sexual life, although legally produced, may not legally be advertised. This law became the root of a series of setbacks to condom advertising.

State regulation was based on the state's interest in monitoring and regulating the sexual morality of its citizens. It was argued that during the late 1980s, the government was concerned that the society was not ready for condom advertisements due to so-called "social ethics." Social ethics considers condoms a product related to sex and argues that condom advertisements will encourage prostitution and promiscuity, and exert a deleterious effect upon children and society. Therefore, efforts to promote condoms were stifled by the state. For instance, in 2000, the police used force to close a nightclub because the club had HIV prevention flyers and free condoms issued by the Jissbon Company (Li 2001). The police claimed that "anywhere there are condoms is surely not a good place," that is, existence of condoms in the nightclub indicated prostitution (Zhu 2002).

This regulation was challenged by health professionals in 2001 and 2002. After long appeals, the law was finally relaxed in 2003. Although the ban was lifted to encourage nonprofit condom advertisements, this change was not implemented in

local areas. During the time when I conducted my fieldwork in 2007, my interviews with local government officials, managers of local TV stations, and managers of local condom companies revealed that in 2007, despite the revised law of endorsement, condom advertisements on TV were still prohibited. It appeared that the 1989 regulation persisted until 2007, as though the 2003 revised law never existed.

During my interviews in 2007, managers of local TV stations proclaimed that they had government documents mandating them not to advertise condoms. When I mentioned the 2003 revised law that lifted the ban, the answer I received was still, "We have government documents that prohibit condom advertisements. After 11pm though, products that cure impotence and other sexual malfunctions are advertised, but not condoms." I asked a local government official why condom advertisements were still a taboo after the law was revised, and he said, "If we advertise condoms, we are issuing licenses for promiscuous sex and giving up on sexual morality. Abstinence is the best way to prevent AIDS." Other officials in the Industrial and Commercial Department contended that condom advertisements went against the socialist construction of "spiritual civilization." One official said, "China is different from the U.S. and other countries. Condom advertisements are not appropriate for China because our youth have far less sexual knowledge than their counterparts in foreign countries. The influence of condom advertisements in the media will lead them astray, away from the correct path."

This attitude is also seen in countries such as South Korea. The South Korean government strove to revive Korean values of purity and morality, and deemed condom and contraception education for the young as "an uncritical adoption of western-style sex promotion," hence, "culturally inappropriate for Asian youths" (Cheng 2005).

Religious groups around the world have voiced similar anxieties about condoms (Pfeiffer 2004; Smyth 1998). In Ireland, for instance, the Catholic Church believes that the wide availability of condoms serves to heighten the problem of HIV/AIDS (Smyth 1998). As a result, the Catholic teaching that sex must be confined to marriage has permeated the government's response to AIDS. Indeed, this message has been reinforced not only in the government's advertising



campaigns, but also in their educational and informative materials (Irvine 2004; Smyth 1998).<sup>5</sup>

My interviews in Dalian have revealed that the revised law was not operationalized in local communities due to the state's concern that condom promotion can increase immoral sexual activity and promiscuity. I argue that this concern arises from the government's interest in disciplining the sexual morality of its citizens, thus defining condoms as a contraceptive tool that should be utilized only within the bounds of marriage rather than to prevent venereal diseases. Indeed, despite the state's concern, studies conducted worldwide have consistently showed that encouraging condom use does not increase sexual activities. It simply makes sexual activities safer (Guttmacher 1997; Sellers 1994).<sup>6</sup>

### **The Impact of Condom Taboos on Local Communities and Universities**

The state's attitude towards and definition of condoms as a contraceptive tool has penetrated local communities, including universities to an extent. During my research, when I mentioned the program of free condom distribution by local NGOs to local people, they appeared alarmed, shocked, and confused. They responded to me, "Handing free condoms to everyone – how can our country allow them to do that? Doesn't that encourage and promote promiscuous sex? Giving people free condoms – doesn't that endorse illicit and random sex? Won't the society be in disorder with such immoral sex?"

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<sup>5</sup> Janice Irvine's (2004) book discusses the moral discourses that surround sex education debates in the U.S. There are many parallels to the morality discourse described in this article.

<sup>6</sup> Despite the assumption that the marketing of condom use and safe sex would encourage sexual activities, a plethora of studies conducted worldwide have concluded otherwise. For instance, based on years of research, the 1999 policy of American Medical Association concluded that promotion of safer sex is effective in delaying sex in teenagers, and abstinence-only programs have limited value (Stine 2007). In another 3-year and 10-month study in Switzerland, a public education campaign promoting condom use is found to be effective in increasing condom use, and does not raise the ratio of adolescents who are sexually active. The research reveals that condom use among 17-30 year-olds increased from 8% to 52%. By contrast, the ratio of adolescents age 16-19 who had sexual intercourse did not increase over that same period. Three other studies have drawn the same conclusion that promotion of condom use does not boost sexual activities. Deborah Sellers et al.'s (1994) study and Sally Guttmacher et al.'s (1997) research have concluded that the promotion and distribution of condoms did not increase sexual activity among adolescents. In another study that measured the number of condoms students took and the subsequent changes in sexual behavior, Kirby's (1998) research of 10 Seattle high schools also showed that making condoms available through vending machines and school clinics did not lead to increase in sexual activity.

Not only local communities, but also many key universities in the country are in line with the state in defining condoms as a contraceptive method employed within marriage. In 2004, despite the call from the Beijing and Hubei Hygiene Departments to prevent venereal diseases, no universities allowed them to install condom vending machines or distribute free condoms on campus (Jing 2004; Zhang 2006). During my research in two local universities, one of which was a medical university, local professors were very careful not to “corrupt” their students with discourses on sexuality. When I showed them my survey on HIV knowledge, they crossed out all the questions that contained the word “sex” before distributing the surveys to the students. As a result, half the survey was deleted. When I asked for the reason, the professors looked at me as if I came from another planet, saying: “We can’t expose the students to these sexual ideas. They are too young to know this stuff. Knowledge about sex can only arouse their curiosity and encourage them to try it out. It’s too dangerous for the students to know about this stuff.”

Some professors at the local universities rejected proposals from local NGOs to educate the students about condoms. They contended that the school was different from society and that condom distribution or education on campus was inappropriate because very few students engage in sexual activities, hence the program would only initiate and encourage their sexual practices. Professor Wang Wei from National Executive College spent ten years completing a book titled *Sex Ethics*, arguing that despite the importance of condoms, they are, after all, special merchandise that should be available for purchase, but not seen everywhere in the society (Rong 1999). Professors such as Wang Wei believed that using condoms to prevent AIDS had turned what should be a moral issue into a technical issue. They argued that sexual morality, rather than condom use, should be emphasized on TV.

At times, these university professors’ stance was co-opted and reinforced by foreign Christian groups who preached in Chinese universities on only abstinence.<sup>7</sup> For instance, three American “sex-education experts” arrived in Beijing on October 10, 2004 and spent a week delivering speeches on abstinence at middle schools, colleges, universities, and other community locations. They warned China not to

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<sup>7</sup> Irvine’s (2004) book addresses this issue of the effect of the U.S. religious right and conservative groups.

relieve the errors that the U.S. had committed for thirty years; that is, emphasizing condom use and not emphasizing abstinence as the sole safe choice. They stressed that “sex is only beautiful when it happens within a marriage” and that condom use is only applicable to prostitution (Li 2004).

The emphasis on the deleterious effect of condom use also appeared in some Chinese media. It was argued that condoms could harm a woman’s health because women would be deprived of the sperm which could reduce vaginal infections, fight ovarian cancer, boost female hormone production, and produce robust breasts and tender skin (An 2006).

Indeed, it was stipulated as early as 1990 in the Basic Requirements for Health Education formulated by the Chinese Education Ministry, that sexual morality and self-discipline should be taught to prevent HIV/AIDS and STDs (Chiang 2004). Moreover, the National Education Department deems any sexual conduct of students as severe transgressive behaviors, and students who engage in sexual behaviors are either expelled from universities or detained at school (Zhang 2006). As we have seen, university professors and local communities speak the state language in associating condom promotion with sexual promiscuity and prostitution, and defining condoms as a contraceptive method legitimate only within the bounds of marriage.

### **The Impact of Condom Taboo on the Condom Market**

The state’s attitude towards condoms and the taboo on condom advertisements have greatly impacted the society. During my research, when I asked the clients what kind and what brand of condoms they would purchase, clients looked confused and baffled, asking me: “What kinds of condoms are there? I don’t know anything about the kinds or brands of condoms. If you know about this, could you please tell me what kind and what brand of condoms are better?” Of course I did not expect this question at the beginning, but as my research went further, I realized that people were ignorant about condoms because it was a taboo topic in the media and in people’s conversations.

The taboo against condom advertisements has not only left people uninformed about condoms, but also generated embarrassment in purchasing condoms, even equating young female customers with sex workers. Clients in my

study told me that when they purchased condoms, they always dropped their heads, grabbed the condoms, and escaped swiftly out of the store as if they were prisoners at large. When I asked how they chose what condoms to buy, they told me that it was too embarrassing to have others see them purchasing condoms. They had no idea what condoms they bought and what price they were because they either took a random pack from the counter or asked the counter staff to hand them a pack, and left immediately after payment. As for women, during my research, some local young women told me that although they were married, because they looked young and unmarried, they encountered stigmatizing comments when purchasing condoms. A 28-year-old woman told me,

Although I am married, people always say that I look like I am 21. One day after work, I had time to stroll along the street and happened to step into a drug store. Dozens of colorful packages of condoms lying under the counter caught my eyes and aroused my curiosity. I thought I should get one and try it out. After studying them for a while, I still had no idea which one I should buy. So I turned to the shopping assistant, asking: "Could you please recommend one with good quality?" She looked me up and down, and then sneered at me, saying, "You don't know? You should go ask your clients!" I was dumbfounded. I was so angry with her words that I stood there and could not say a word. Tears rolled down my eyes. I left the store, crying the whole way home and swore that I would never buy condoms again.

In Dalian, it is mandatory that couples of a reproduction age bring their marriage and reproduction certificate and temporary resident card to get free contraceptives (Lao 2005).<sup>8</sup> The state's strict stipulations on condoms have reinforced local communities' attitudes towards condoms. As condoms are considered appropriate only for married couples, any non-married consumers are stigmatized as sexually promiscuous.

Local communities elsewhere in the country have also referenced the language used by the state. For instance, in 1998, when condom advertisements first appeared on buses in Guangzhou, many citizens called 110 (the emergency number) or sued the condom company, claiming that their advertisements corrupted the souls of the youth and harmed the morality of society (Rong 1999). In Suzhou, on World AIDS Day in 2001, a local woman called 110 and reported to the police that she saw people distributing free condoms on the street. In 2006, citizens of

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<sup>8</sup> Couples, upon marriage, are distributed a CD that contains knowledge on sexual activities, including sex postures, contraception, and how to initiate and conduct sex (Lao 2005).

Chongqing criticized the pilot program of 100% condom use in adult entertainment places, contending that the program approved of, and encouraged extramarital affairs and prostitution (Yin 2006).

The taboo against condom advertisements has not only penetrated the society with the state's hegemonic view about condoms, but also led to a lack of competition in the condom market, which fueled fake condom brands. Although family planning offices distribute free condoms, local people told me that those condoms were of such low quality that they had to revert to the market to hopefully purchase ones with better quality and richer in styles and colors (Dong 1999).

I visited several local adult health product shops and interviewed the owners about the products. One of the owners of an adult health product shop told me that she used to be the leader of the city's family planning office during the Maoist era. She told me many stories about condoms during that time. She said:

People at that time came to me complaining that condoms did not work because their wives continued having babies. So I asked the guys how they had used the condoms. The men put the condoms on their thumbs and said that was how they had used them, just the way it was demonstrated to them when condoms were distributed. Others used condoms as balloons rather than as a contraceptive tool... Tons of unused condoms were stored during the 1950s and 1960s. These include condoms from the family planning office, expired and saved from free distribution. After they expired, officials in the office privately sold them cheaply to individual vendors. Vendors then recycled and repackaged them in brand new and sexy boxes, and bribed managers of supermarkets and pharmacies to have the products sold in these stores, at a high price. They looked new, but indeed, they were not new at all. They were either expired condoms from the family planning office, or the old items stored for decades.

As stated by the store owner – a leader of the family planning office during the communist age – people were ignorant of how to use condoms and the cadre's demonstrations were vague and opaque. Apparently, even in the past, the condom was an embarrassing topic because of its relationship with sex. This points to a historical continuity until the post-Mao era, which I will elaborate on later in the paper.

The store owner also referred to the proliferation of expired, fake brands in the condom market, some of which were repackaged old products stored for decades. This story was confirmed by other store owners of adult health shops and drug stores. I talked to the manager of a local condom manufacturer about this story, and he said it was illegal for the family planning office to sell the expired

products saved from free distribution to individual vendors. Illegal as it was, those products were indeed on the market. Some of those products were not even repackaged. Window-shopping some adult health shops, I found it pretty easy to spot these un-repackaged, expired condoms for sale. Words reading "Not for sale" (*fei mai pin* CHI 4) were printed on the old packages. There was no information about the expiration date or the production place. It was obvious that they came from the family planning office. Other expired condoms were repackaged in boxes with images of naked white women.

Store owners told me that 70-80% of these condoms broke. They were very easily torn open due to the expiration and poor durability. They were sold at six *yuan* each box of ten condoms. According to the owners, people favored these condoms because of their relatively low price. As discussed earlier, some of my research subjects told me that they were too shy to inquire about the quality of condoms. Rather, they asked for a recommendation, purchased them, and left immediately. In recommending condoms, would the shopping assistant consider the well-being of the customers? My research shows that the managers and sales persons of the stores received bribes from the suppliers. They would only push the products of those from whom they had received the biggest bribes, and exhibit their products at the most highlighted place on the sales counter: at the center.

As mentioned above, the taboo against condom advertisements and the lack of competition have resulted in a market with poor-quality, expired condoms.<sup>9</sup> In 2001, a national survey conducted by the National Quality Control Bureau reported that a plethora of packaging businesses purchased obsolete or discarded condoms, wrapped them in colorful and pornographic packages, printed some international famous brands on them, and sold them in the market. This led to an inflation of brand names from ten at the beginning of the reform to over 1,000, including fake inland or foreign brands that packaged the same types of condoms. In 1998, more than 5 million fake condoms were discovered, confiscated, and burned in Futian and

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<sup>9</sup> According to China's State Quality Inspection Bureau, 30% of China-produced condoms failed to meet the industry standards: 15 of the 50 condom brands surveyed failed strength tests (Qu 2002). Researchers in China reported a condom slippage rate of 20% and a breakage rate of 13% among female sex workers, much higher than the respectively 2% and 1.9% in the U.S., and 0.8-1.9% and 0.8-4.7% in Mexico, the Philippines, and the Dominican Republic.

Shenzhen (Lin 1998). The market leaves consumers confused, without sufficient means to choose condoms intelligently.

### **Alliance of Condom Companies and Health Professionals**

In opposition to the state's definition of, and attitudes towards condoms, the alliance of condom companies, scholars, and health professionals defined condoms as a disease-control tool, a personal hygiene product, and a health product. In so doing, they de-sexualized condoms and pushed for endorsement of condom advertisements.

The 1989 law and the series of setbacks to condom advertising ushered in a lively debate initiated by health professionals, scholars, and condom companies (Lin 1998). The Deputy Secretary of the Sexology Committee Li Jihong considered it crucial to encourage condom companies to support the dissemination of HIV information by endorsing condom brands to appear in public interest advertisements (Jin 2002). The manager of the Jissbon Company stated that condom advertisements would be beneficial in establishing brand names, increasing sales of condoms, and helping to push "progressive ideas" (Yi 2001). The President of Wuhan Jissbon Company Xuehai Wang also expressed his determination to continue the advertising efforts so that, in the future, buying condoms would be no different from buying a shampoo; that is, there would be no embarrassment or humiliation involved in condom purchases (Chen 2002).

The alliance showed the urgency of the matter. One Chinese male uses no more than four condoms each year, and unprotected sex is still an important venue for HIV transmission (Yi 2001). Pre-marital sex has become prevalent in society, even in schools.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, China is facing an HIV epidemic, and only a few people know that condoms are an effective tool against STDs and HIV/AIDS (Li 2000a; Li 2001; Lin 1998).

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<sup>10</sup> Some university students point out that sexual behavior does exist on campus. They argue that it is normal for college students to engage in sex and they should not suppress their desires as long as the desires are released with certain restraints. To them, it is indispensable that condoms enter campus because it protects them from disease and pregnancy. Condom distribution will not only educate these students about risky behaviors, but also dissipate other students' curiosity about contraceptives and direct them to purchase the appropriate ones. These students consider it social progress and a sign of civilization to usher condoms into school because it promotes safe sex (Zhang 2006)

Condom advertisements could improve this pressing situation, as they contended. Health professionals and scholars believed that condom companies' financial support was indispensable in disseminating prevention education (Yi 2001). Indeed, as they pointed out, many companies had already issued prevention booklets and provided free condoms on the World AIDS Day. Because they lacked media support, they had to resort to the street to issue HIV flyers and free condoms, or they installed condom vending machines in communities and campuses (Liang 2003; Zhao 2004).

The alliance of condom advocates considered the ban on condom advertising adverse to social progress and civilization, and they criticized the state policy which avoided sex issues and demanded purity (Li 2000b). They compared their cause to that of cutting queues in the Qing dynasty, ending footbinding, and allowing girls to go to universities. To them, the debate was about the choice between life and ethics, but different from the other causes, the cost of this debate was life.<sup>11</sup>

The alliance was committed to having the 1989 law revised. In March 2002, Li Honggui, the Vice President of the Chinese Population Association, forwarded a plea to the National Congress for a lift of the ban on public interest condom advertisements under the condition that the ads were under government supervision. Li contended that defining condoms as sex equipment and banning condom advertisements prevented the consumers from obtaining information from normal channels, stymied the enhancement of condom quality, and hindered the establishment of superior condom brands (Anonymous 2002). The plea was signed and supported by more than 100 representatives of medical and other professions. In June, the Industrial and Commercial Bureau replied to the plea, agreeing to lift the ban and allowing condom advertisements "under special conditions and with limitations" (Fan 2002).

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<sup>11</sup> The advocates believed that condom advertisements should not be prohibited as long as we supervise the image and words and avoid obscene contents. The youth should be educated in both sexual morality and condom use because it is more pressing for youth to learn how to protect themselves from being harmed by diseases. Lifting the ban will usher in new ideas and promote social progress. Although they recognized that there is a conflict between moral education and practical education, they insist that condom use does not loosen moral education. Rather, both moral and practical education should be emphasized. While students receive education in morality at the school, youth outside of school are deprived of any sort of education, especially because condom advertisements are prohibited (Li 2004).



After long appeals for condom advertisements by health professionals and scholars, June 2003 witnessed a change in regulations whereby *limited* condom advertising was granted. In July 2004, a regulation titled "About Condom Use for HIV/AIDS prevention" was promulgated, encouraging public interest condom advertisements for disease prevention (Wang 2003).<sup>12</sup>

As mentioned earlier in the paper, although it was a victory for the alliance of condom companies, health professionals, and scholars to revamp the 1989 state law, my research in 2007 revealed that the taboo against condom advertisements persisted in local areas. Despite allowing condom advertisements "within limitations," social stigma continued, associating condoms with prostitution (Yu 2002).

### **Behind the Taboo against Condom Advertisements**

What has guided the state to prohibit condom advertisements? What are the reasons behind the taboo?

Chinese sociologist Li Yinhe explains that because the state construes sex as essentially bad, state officials are concerned that people might have fantasies about sex when watching condom advertisements. Such fantasies about sex are deemed criminal, debased, and indecent (Li 2002). Li asserts that dynasties before the Song regarded sex as natural and healthy, as it facilitated the coalescence of yin and yang as the principle of life. Sexual desire was only demonized and criticized as unnatural after the Song dynasty. Li points out that the dearth of sexual discourse during the Maoist era is still lingering in the present society. Once we change our ideas about sex, she argues, it will be easy to deal with the issue of condoms (Li 2002).

I agree with Li that the issue lurking behind the regulation is the state's worry about citizens' fantasies of sex. But what accounts for such a worry? Why does the state consider sex so dangerous? Why does the state monitor and regulate citizens' sexual morality?

To understand the post-Mao state's attitude towards sex, we have to recognize that the Maoist legacy persists until the current era. During the Maoist era,

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<sup>12</sup> This regulation was issued by six departments of the government, including the Hygiene Department, Family Planning Committee, Food and Medicine Supervision Bureau, Industrial and Commercial Bureau, Broadcast Bureau, and Quality Supervision Bureau (Wang, 2003).

sexual desire was demonized and criticized as capitalist love, which degraded love to animal instinct and reduced love to prostitution. In 1954, the journal *Women of China* published an article on Lenin's speech on sexual ethics (Ma 1954). The article quoted Lenin's talk which derided and criticized "a glass of water-ism" – the attitude of treating sex as like drinking a glass of water. According to Lenin, it is dangerous to favor sex because sex is a lowly, decadent, and corrupt thing. Sex is so pernicious that it robs people of happiness and strength.

Revolution, Lenin says, requires a focus of strength and an aggregate of energy, not intoxication and stimulation from sex or alcohol. It does not tolerate degenerate lewdness. Sex is incompatible with revolution, so there is no future for the people who favor sex. Lenin states that he would never trust those who enchant women or fall in love numerous times. He calls upon people not to weaken, waste, or destroy their strength through sex. Rather, energy should be reserved for revolution, and sexual desire should be sublimated for the revolution.

Lenin was cited during the Maoist era to emphasize that self-restraint and self-discipline should be exercised in sex because family is the basic cell of society and the state. For Lenin, marriage and love are not personal but social in nature, as they produce new lives and new responsibilities. It is said that marriage is such a serious institution that people who do not marry or produce children are not responsible for the future of humankind, and it is extremely important to choose a spouse who is patriotic and supports communist construction. Careless divorce and remarriage are not forgiven by the society because we need to guard social morality. Healthy love and a happy family can stimulate creative work for the communist state (Ma 1954).

The Maoist era exhibited a single, monolithic state voice that underscored the absolute conflict between sex and state. That is, sex saps, weakens, and debilitates people's energy that should be devoted to the state, and hence sexual desires should be sublimated to construct socialism and contribute to the state. In other words, sex is only legitimate when producing the next generation for society.

Limiting sex for the purpose of procreation resonates with Foucault's concept of "alliance" rather than "sexuality."<sup>13</sup> The Maoist era's emphasis upon "alliance" restricted sex for the purpose of reproduction as it benefited the society and helped build the state. Sexual pleasure was castigated as a feature of the decadent and degenerate capitalist lifestyle. Hence, it was important to police and discipline sexual activity that was considered not contributing to state-building.

While the Maoist era reviled sex as dangerous and antithetical to state construction, the post-Mao era witnesses a cacophony of conflict between the state and alliance of health professionals and condom companies. The post-Mao state inherited and perpetuated the Maoist state's stance that sex is only legitimate within marriage. Cohabitation is rejected and prostitution is outlawed. The government stages a series of "anti-vice" campaigns annually aiming to eradicate the "ugly phenomenon" of prostitution. Western sexual liberation is debunked and books that are deemed to reflect this theme are banned, such as *Shanghai Baobei* (CHI 9) (Shanghai Baby) and *Fei Du* (CHI 10) (A Decadent Capital). The ban on condom advertisements is one of the myriad examples of the state's denial of sex beyond the boundary of marriage.

However, different from the Maoist state that denies discussion of sexual pleasure, the post-Mao state recognizes the importance of sexual pleasure *within* marriage as it maintains marital harmony and thwarts extramarital affairs (Sigley

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault (1978), in his book *The History of Sexuality*, depicts two ways of governing – "alliance" and "sexuality." Alliance is "a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions." In the system of alliance, reproduction is the ultimate goal. The transformation of alliance to sexuality began in the last third of the eighteenth century in Europe when modern science recognized a fundamental, biological difference between the male and female sexes (Laqueur 1990).

<sup>13</sup> This naturalized and essentialized view of sexual difference with a biological basis led to the state's concern with "the sensations of the body, the quality of pleasures, the nature of impressions" in the system of "sexuality," and enabled the state to penetrate families and private bodies "in an increasingly detailed way". Rather than centering on reproduction, "sexuality" focused on "the exploitation of the body" that "produces and consumes" (Foucault 1978: 106-107). According to Foucault, in modern Europe, "sexuality" was superimposed on the old system of "alliance" and reduced its importance. In late-imperial China, it was social roles that gender was anchored upon, and women were defined by their roles as mother, daughter, and wife. Reproducing the lineage was the meaning and purpose of sexuality. The May Fourth Movement initiated a biological definition of male and female in 1919 (Gao 1919). The biological and unitary category of women - *nuxing* (CHI 5) (female sex) was created during this time in place of *nu* (CHI 6) (daughters), *fu* (CHI 7) (married wives) and *mu* (CHI 8) (mothers) (Barlow 1994). For the first time in Chinese history, there was a word meaning biological woman ( Yang 1999). The Maoist state suppressed and obliterated this biological difference between male and female and created an ostensibly androgynous gender model where men and women wore unisex clothing and femininity was rejected as bourgeois.

2001). A "socialist sexual morality" is emphasized to ensure a harmonious conjugal family, as it is critical to secure social stability and state control.

What also differentiates the post-Mao state from the Maoist state is the cacophony from the alliance of the condom companies and health professionals. As the condom debate reveals, while many of the local communities are influenced by the state and speak the state language in insisting on abstinence and sexual morality as the ultimate antidote for disease prevention, the alliance of condom companies and health professionals employ the discourse of "social progress" and "civilization" to promote condom advertisements. Some even rebel against the state's "repression of sex" by subscribing to the concept of "natural" sexual desire (Zheng 2006). Posing a direct challenge and menace to the state, illicit sexual pleasures are the main target of state control.

### **Conclusion**

The taboo against condom advertisements spanned over 15 years, only recently loosening up in 2004 after years of debates and appeals from hundreds of health professionals, scholars, and condom companies.

The condom debate crystallizes two opposed definitions of condoms that are driven by multiple-positioned interests. The state defines condoms as a contraceptive method associated with sex within the confines of marriage and believes that condom advertisements will encourage prostitution and promiscuity. The alliance of condom companies, health professionals, and scholars, however, defines condoms as a personal hygiene item, a health product, or a disease-control tool, and desexualizes condoms.

Medical professionals and scholars believed that condom companies could provide financial support necessary for HIV information and more prevalent condom use. Guided by their interest in ameliorating the pressing HIV issue in China, they appealed for an overhaul of the state law and supported condom advertisements as an emblematic sign of social progress and a civilized nation. Driven by commercial interests, condom companies allied with medical professionals and scholars in propelling the cause.

The state's stance towards condoms has impacted local communities and universities and fueled the sale of defective, expired condoms. Taboos on condom advertisements and social stigma associated with condoms, as shown in this paper, have contributed to popular ignorance about condoms and the prevalence of unsafe sex.

The post-Mao state has exercised many strategies to negate, silence, and police non-marital sex. These strategies include prohibiting condom advertisements, banning books with sexual content, and cracking down on prostitution with anti-vice campaigns. The state also propagates sexual morality, satisfaction of sexual desire within marriage to secure its stability (Sigley 2001), and laws and regulations stipulating permitted and forbidden sexual behaviors. As Foucault observes, "What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*" (Foucault 1978: 35). Like Freud, the Chinese state believes that the price of civilization is repression. The state's obsession with sex and with controlling it is seen as necessary to achieve what the state envisions as a harmonious society, one in which citizens are obedient and the state is in complete control. The state's prohibition against condom advertisements is one of the many interventions that are aimed at concealing and suppressing non-marital sex to ensure the stability and harmony of marriage and family, upon which the state establishes and maintains its power and control.

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