

Sex and Intimacy: A Three-Generational Portrait from China

In recent decades, a new generation of modernity theorists have posited the democratization and detraditionalization of intimate relationships in late modern times. China meanwhile has undergone rapid and dramatic changes as a result of its unique trajectory of political, social and economic development. Drawing upon 260 life history interviews with three generations of men and women in urban and rural China, this talk contests the extent to which intimate relationships become democratized as modernization proceeds. In particular, this talk will focus upon sexual practices – premarital sex, conjugal sex and extramarital affairs. The Chinese narrative reveals paradoxical changes and continuities across three generations of men and women. Despite a widening repertoire of sexual practices and increasing emphasis on ‘pleasure’ among members of the youngest generation, gender transcends both the urban-rural and generational divide. In pre-marital and conjugal sex, male privilege in sexual agency and discourse permeates activities behind closed doors, where consent can be manufactured and women are more likely to be pressured into having sex. Only extramarital affairs offer a momentary glimpse of the ‘pure relationship’ and ‘plastic sexuality’ described by new modernity writers.