Exploring The Interaction Between The Culture of Sexual Modesty and Sex Education in China: Balancing Traditional Values With Modern Needs

Xiaoduo Wang*

Department of Psychology. University of California, Davis135 Young Hall One Shields Avenue Davis, CA 95616.

*Corresponding author: xiowang@ucdavis.edu

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of sexual modesty on sex education in China and to deeply study the shaping of sexual modesty on the content, method, and effect of sex education by analyzing the interaction between cultural tradition, social attitude, parental education, and educational practice. It is found that the concept of sexual modesty in Chinese society has influenced the content selection, teaching methods, and educational effect evaluation of sex education to some extent. Through theoretical analysis, literature review, and empirical research, this paper aims to provide in-depth insight and suggestions for developing sex education in China. The conservative underpinnings of Chinese culture have historically engendered a hesitancy to address sexual topics openly. Nonetheless, the evolving society necessitates a more comprehensive understanding of human sexuality. Balancing these two paradigms, the content of sex education can be expanded beyond traditional bounds, accommodating both enduring values and contemporary needs. Novel pedagogical methods, fostering interactive and participatory learning, could effectively transcend the restraint imposed by sexual modesty, enabling students to engage in informed discussions and develop healthy perspectives. Furthermore, evaluating the efficacy of sex education mandates a nuanced approach that amalgamates deeply ingrained beliefs with modern ideals. By harnessing theoretical analyses, comprehensive literature reviews, and empirical investigations, this study strives to furnish invaluable insights and pragmatic recommendations that can reshape the trajectory of sex education in China. This inclusive approach, informed by cultural wisdom and tailored to modern contexts, promises to cultivate well-rounded individuals capable of navigating their sexual journeys with knowledge and confidence.

Keywords: Sexual modesty, Chinese sex education, Cultural tradition, Social attitude, School education, Parenting, Educational practice.

1. Introduction

With the development of society and the improvement of people's living standards, the age of sexual and physiological development of adolescents is generally advanced. Still, sexual and psychological development is lagging, and the sexual knowledge held in the palm is far behind their growth needs. Globally, there is a worrying increase in teenage pregnancies and HIV diagnoses. According to the WHO, by the end of 2022, about 39 million people (with a range of 33.1 to 45.7 million) will be experiencing HIV infection. The prevalence of HIV among adults aged 15-49 years worldwide is estimated at 0.7 per cent (range 0.6 to 0.8 per cent). These issues have become the focus of public health and social concern in many areas [2]. At the same time, sex education plays a vital role in preventing sexual health problems such as teenage pregnancy and the transmission of HIV. However, there are complex factors in the implementation and impact of sex education. One notable phenomenon is that the delivery of sex education is often influenced by sexual modesty, which is particularly pronounced in specific social and cultural contexts, especially in China. Sexual modesty imperceptibly shapes the content and methods of sex education, which may lead to insufficient or distorted information, thus affecting the formation of adolescents' correct cognition of sexual health and healthy behaviors. Therefore, an in-depth study of how sexual modesty affects the delivery of sex education, especially in a cultural context such as China's, is of great significance for developing more effective sexual health education policies and practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1. China's Sex Education Dilemma

Internationally, CSE (Comprehensive Sexuality Education) is a widely advocated method of sex education. International organizations, government agencies, and civil society groups often see CSE as an effective way to provide comprehensive sexual health and sexuality education, covering multiple aspects, including physiological knowledge (providing scientific knowledge on reproductive physiology, sexuality, contraceptive methods, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and sexual health); Gender equality (combating gender discrimination and gender inequality and encouraging respect for everyone's gender identity); Respect for consent (educating individuals to respect and understand the importance of consent, emphasizing that sexual activity should only be consensual); Relationship skills (providing communication, decision making, and problem-solving skills to help individuals develop healthy sexual relationships); Sexual health services (information on how to access sexual health services and support, including contraception and STI testing) [3].

However, sex education in China may differ from a typical CSE in some ways. Some courses may focus on traditional cultural values, emphasizing sexual modesty and privacy rather than comprehensive messaging. Sexual modesty encompasses the societal, cultural, interpersonal, and psychological frameworks that, as outlined by the principles of Script Theory, govern how individuals express and encounter their sexuality within the confines of societal, legal, and interpersonal norms regarding what is considered acceptable or not, private or public, and personal or social. Virtually all facets of sexual expression and experience are influenced by the widespread standards of modesty, affecting how people communicate about sex, display their sexuality, engage in sexual relationships, and partake in sexual behaviors [4]. In addition, the content and emphasis of sex education can vary from region to region and school to school, which leads to the diversity of sex education practices within China. In general, sex education in Chinese schools can include some aspects of CSE, but the specific content and method will vary depending on various factors. In recent years, some regions and schools in China have begun to promote more comprehensive, science-oriented sex education to meet students' sexual health needs better. However, sex education still faces some challenges in China, including cultural and social pressures and the handling of controversial topics. The following part of the article will focus on the causes of China's sexual modesty culture and the impact of sexual modesty on Chinese sex education. And combined with some questionnaires to analyze the development of China's sex education and progress space.

2.2. Causes

2.2.1 Cultural Tradition and Sexual Modesty

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes modesty, temperance, and conservatism. The concept of sexual modesty is embodied in Chinese culture and influences individuals' attitudes and cognition towards sexual topics. This cultural tradition may influence the content selection of sex education courses, making some sex topics restricted in education.

2.2.1.1 Confucian Culture

Confucian culture is the main component of Chinese culture, which uses the core values to influence people's behavior and thus control the development of society. Then, through the play of Neo-Confucianism, the value of Confucian culture developed in a more rational direction and gradually approached the direction of asceticism. Under such norms, any sexual content is considered obscene. In Confucian culture, obscenity is considered the most serious of all evils. Therefore, under the influence of culture, people cannot have obscene behavior or a heart that wants to be obscene. Therefore, in such an environment, the Chinese sexual culture is significantly suppressed, and people show a conservative state toward sex or, to a great extent, avoid discussing or evaluating it [5].

2.2.1.2 China's Feudal Ethical System

China's feudal ethical system has also profoundly impacted the culture of sexual modesty in China. The feudal moral system emphasized the hierarchical system and was carried out according to the instruction of parents, teachers, and administrative officials to their children, students, and ordinary people. The feudal moral system also emphasized the privilege and dignity of the class's elders (parents, teachers, administrators). Among them, the dignity of the elders involves that the content they teach should be noble and in line with the orientation of moral values. Topics considered "evil," such as sex, are far beyond what values require and, therefore, do not appear in what is taught [5].

2.2.1.3 Feudal Social System and The Relationship Between Men and Women

China's long-term feudal social system also has an indelible impact on the culture of sexual modesty in China. This is mainly reflected in the fact that society will set strict boundaries between the sexes, significantly inhibiting the possibility of communication between boys and girls. For example, social norms say that boys and girls should not touch each other's hands when passing things to each other or that boys and girls should not sit down to eat together after age seven. These etiquette rules are often long sentences when translated into English, but in Chinese, they are short or four-word phrases, such as see no evil [5]. These concise sentences are catchy and often facilitate the spread of feudal etiquette norms. Although China's feudal society ended after the Opium War in 1840 [6], the cultural connotation of the feudal social system was extended and influenced the thoughts of thousands of generations in China. Even in today's China, people still use these concise phrases.

2.2.2 Social Attitudes and Notions of Sexual Modesty

Social attitudes have an essential impact on promoting and implementing sex education. The concept of sexual modesty may lead to resistance and neglect of sex education in Chinese society and limit the open discussion of sexual topics. Social expectations and attitudes towards sex education also shape the goals and methods of sex education to a certain extent.

2.2.2.1 Collective Unconscious

The collective unconscious is Jung's concept that the past experiences of individuals and races are linked to all the collective experiences accumulated by human ancestors. Even individuals unaware of these ancestral experiences will react the same way as their ancestors [7]. The collective subconscious is also a reflection of a particular nation. Even if the culture has disappeared, its members' responses to stimuli still bear traces of the collective unconscious. This statement can be carried over to the Chinese situation: even though feudal culture has disappeared, the Chinese people are still responding to the collective subconscious (rites, customs, norms) of Confucian culture [5].

2.2.3 Family Education and Sexual Modesty

Sexual modesty plays an important and subtle role in family sex education. In many social and cultural contexts, sexual modesty is a traditional concept emphasizing taboo and conservative attitudes toward sexual topics. This attitude can profoundly impact family sex education, which may have some challenges.

In contrast to the situation in China, sex education developed earlier in other countries outside China (such as Sweden, the United States, the Netherlands, etc.), which had established relatively complete knowledge systems and laws and regulations from the 1950s to the 1970s. However, China began to develop sex education formally in the 1990s, mainly influenced by our traditional thought [8]. The study titled "Assessment of Family Sex Education among Elementary and Middle School Students: Present State and Implications" carried out with the participation of 6,408 parents of primary and middle school students, demonstrates that around 80% of parents recognize the importance of family sex education. Nonetheless, merely 10% of parents have taken the step to deliver sexual education to their children, underscoring a notable disparity between their beliefs and actions[4]. It can be seen that although parents pay more attention to family sex education, the actual situation of family sex education is not optimistic due to various reasons. These reasons are attributed

to the four aspects of "parents' lack of educational awareness," "parents' lack of scientific knowledge and methods of sex education," "family atmosphere and parent-child relationship," and "parents' wrong cognition of sex education."

First, some parents, due to financial or work pressures, transfer the responsibility of caring for and teaching preschool children to their maternal grandparents. Some grandparents are deeply affected by the traditional Chinese modesty, and the low level of education has no awareness of sex education, which often leads to the lack of sex education for preschool children. Secondly, some parents have not received formal education courses during their children's growth, so they cannot carry out correct instruction. However, sex education for children is also challenging in families influenced by the traditional Chinese mindset of sexual modesty. Because traditional parents think that sex topics are exceptional, the parents who are supposed to maintain a dignified image of the mouth are undignified. Finally, some parents themselves have misunderstandings about the age of the subject of sex education. Many parents think the age to teach sex education to children in kindergarten. But the best time to teach sex education is preschool, that is, before kindergarten [8].

2.2.4 School Education and Sexual Modesty

The concept of sexual modesty directly impacts the practice of sex education. Educators may face the conflict between the concept of sexual modesty and the teaching content and need to find a balance in teaching. The concept of sexual modesty may also affect students' acceptance degree and attitude towards sex education and the evaluation of educational effect. In foreign countries, the advocacy of sex education is generally dominated by medical workers. In contrast, in the Republic of China, the development of sex education in China was spearheaded by educators and spread to the outside world based on schools. Schools naturally became significant in solving social venereal diseases [9].

For schools, the cultural attitude of sexual modesty greatly influences the teaching of holistic sexuality (CSE). Because of the conservative education model, some schools do not follow the framework of the comprehensive sex education curriculum. They teach by cutting out specific so-called sensitive topics. In addition, some schools have reduced the number and length of sex education classes, and unprofessional teachers have greatly affected the popularization and teaching of sex education [10].

2.2.4.1 TheInfluence of Sexual Modesty

The impact of sexual modesty on sex education can be complex, depending on the culture, social context, and practice of sex education. This part focuses on the impact of sexual modesty on the interpretation of personal character in teaching sexual modesty in schools.

Many people believe that sexual modesty is essential to stable social organization, just as in marriage, modesty is a virtue recognized by the state and religion. Sexual modesty as a virtue can build one's standing in the community [11]. However, overly associating virtue with sexual modesty would defeat this purpose. While modesty is essential, it can create problems when overemphasized or misunderstood. This perception can confuse people regarding sex education, as they may misunderstand the relationship between sexual knowledge and sexual morality. This belief that sex is a topic that should never be discussed can lead to feelings of shame, insecurity, and even resistance to accessing critical information about sexual health.

Sexual modesty is conceptually associated with sexual presentation. The school's student dress code reflects society's concern that teenagers' clothing can be seen as a form of sexual expression. For example, the St. B. Pearson High School in Toronto believes that students should dress in a way that is neither offensive nor distracting. The "non-distracting" requirement mainly focused on the girls' dress at the school. The school said girls should not wear provocative clothing. In addition, General Brooke High School in Niagara Region directly stipulates that girls should dress discreetly [12]. In addition, the adverse effects of targeting adolescent girls are reflected in self-objectification, stigmatization, and shame. And it all works through the effect of humility on sexual communication and behavior [13].

In China, the culture of sexual modesty has also impacted the educational expression in Chinese schools. Among them, they are mainly reflected in the school uniform. The school believes that uniform colors and styles of clothes can help students concentrate on their studies without wasting unnecessary time researching clothes or creating a comparison mentality. Moreover, the school believes this ambiguous clothing style will significantly reduce the probability of puppy love and improve the college enrollment rate. This non-self-expression style is consistent with the conservative, restrained ideas advocated by sexual modesty. Perhaps the unified management advocated by the school is well-intentioned. However, sexual modesty is sometimes too closely associated with personal virtue, with some schools arguing that "not wearing a uniform is an act of not loving the school and not having a sense of community honor, and such behavior is also synonymous with moral problems" [14].

3. Empirical Research

Through empirical research, this paper will deeply explore how the concept of sexual modesty affects the actual situation of sex education in China. Through questionnaire surveys, this paper reveals the influence of sexual modesty on the parental method and students' attitudes toward sex education.

As mentioned in the previous article, under the influence of the traditional Chinese culture of modesty, parents often imparted the meaning of sexual knowledge to children or thought that the imparted sexual knowledge was sometimes harmful to the dignity of elders [5]. This ambiguous attitude greatly restricts the implementation of early childhood education in China. In “Status and Countermeasures of Sex Education for Children at Home,” The authors selected 60 parents from a kindergarten in Qujing, China, and distributed questionnaires to each. The content mainly focuses on "parents' educational background and attitude towards early childhood sex education" and "Parents' cognition of the subject and age of implementing early childhood sex education." The results show that Chinese parents' cognition of sex education is somewhat biased. First, some parents think it is unnecessary to carry out sex education for children in early childhood. They also believe that they are not the primary providers of sex education and that schools should take on this responsibility.

Finally, parents also believe that children can learn and master sexual knowledge independently without being taught by anyone. In addition, in the "Parents' awareness of private parts survey," 170 parents were collected. Among them, 60 people believed that the pubic area and the chest were private parts; 54 people thought the buttocks were private, and 36 thought the thighs are private; 14 thought the abdomen was a private part; The six argued that other parts were also private. This survey reflects parents' lack of cognitive education on children's private parts, and they do not know the scope of their private parts. In the “Parents' Implementation of Children's Distress Education” investigation, 150 children were investigated. Among them, 54 children chose to ask passers-by for help; 50 people chose to call their parents for help; 26 children chose to shout for self-protection; 20 people chose to wait for help from others. Surveys have shown that young children think asking for help is the best way to deal with sexual harassment. But actually, Shouting is the fastest and most effective way. Therefore, based on the above survey data, Chinese parents have some cognitive biases in children's sex education. One of the reasons for this phenomenon comes from the traditional Chinese concept of modesty about sex, which considers talking about "sex" obscene and inappropriate to discuss with young children [15].

For students, sexual modesty also had a considerable impact. Because some teenagers do not know about sex or fear sex, they have a lot of trouble. What is even sadder is that some students made extreme reactions and brewed tragedies. In this section, this paper will introduce a questionnaire survey on teenagers and analyze the influence of sexual modesty combined with the survey results. The survey was conducted among 46 women in a middle school class in China to understand how teenagers react to changes in their bodies as they enter puberty. The survey results showed that among the 46 students in the class, girls who experienced menarche at 12 or 13 accounted for the majority

(84.4%). Still, the psychological and emotional development was not proportional to the physical development. One question asked: "How do you feel when your breasts develop and you start menstruating?" Most respondents (58.7%) said they felt afraid and shy. Some (19.6%) consider these secondary sexual characteristics unlucky and troublesome. The rest (10.9%) think it is normal and natural. A small percentage (8.7%) said they felt curious and mysterious. Based on the data, most of the girls in this class are panicked, fearful, and disgusted with the secondary sexual characteristics that come with puberty [16]. Therefore, adolescent sex education for middle school students is still an essential part of ideological education in schools, which is also the joint responsibility of parents, schools, and society.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Parents

First, Parents should establish a more scientific and correct concept of sex education based on respecting traditional values. And they should give their children sex education in advance: don't wait until puberty. Sex education should be a lifelong education. Dr. Mary Caldren, president of the American Council on Sexuality Information and Education, also states: "Sex education should be conducted as early as possible by parents or other relevant personnel. The most important and effective period of sex education is before the age of 14, especially before the age of 5, and the sexual training and education received during this period will determine the sexual aspects of the child and the subsequent life" [15].

4.2. Schools

In terms of teaching methods, schools can explore more open, patient, and interactive teaching models, encouraging students to ask questions and discuss to promote healthy sexual attitudes.

At the same time, during particular periods, for example, students masturbate. Teachers should enlighten students about sex and report students' condition and health to the school doctor. After that, the school doctor should discuss with the principal and relevant departments the appropriate measures for targeted education based on the report provided by the teacher. In addition, schools should strengthen the training of teachers. For example, scholar Zhou Shang put forward: "The biology of reproduction (the study of attitudes and scientific facts about sexual life), the physiology of sex (the study of the organization and function of the sexual organs), the psychology of sex (the study of sexual health and behavior), sexual hygiene (the study of how sexual life keeps individuals and societies healthy), genetics and eugenics (the study of how sexual behavior leads to improvement), and sexual health. The ethics and sociology of sexuality (the study of what constitutes normal sexual behavior) and the aesthetics of sexuality (the study of normal sexual attitudes)." The reason is that if the teacher does not understand or misunderstand the knowledge of sex education, the quality of teaching will be significantly reduced. Zhou Shang also pointed out that teacher training in sex education is more important than any other subject, and often untrained teachers can cause problems. In this case, the teacher's wrong ideas about sex education are more severe than the teacher's silence [9].

5. Conclusion

By conducting an in-depth examination of the impact of sexual modesty on sex education in China, the primary objective of this article is to offer a profound insight into the dynamics between traditional cultural values and contemporary sex education practices. The aim is to furnish sex education policymakers, educators, and the broader society with a more comprehensive comprehension of this complex interplay. This endeavor ultimately strives to foster a more diverse and adaptable evolution of sex education in the Chinese context.

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