

The Things Girls Shouldn't See: relocating the penis in sex education in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT *This article reports on how young women in Hong Kong relate to the penis. A total of nine focus group interviews were conducted at the University of Hong Kong to enable participants to reflect on and talk about their 'experience of the penis'. It is found that despite society's various attempts to restrict their access to the penis, it is very much present and available to the young women in Hong Kong. While most of the participants reported the normative response of disgust, which was expected as part of the 'proper femininity', positive experiences of the penis characterised by agency, mastery and fulfilment were also reported. Some of the things they do, such as watching an exhibitionist or actively consuming sexually explicit materials and pornography, subvert the discursive practice of positioning women as passive sexual objects. It is believed that with more open access to knowledge and experience, women will stand a better chance of achieving a more agentive relationship, not only with the penis as a potential transitional object in intimate relationships, but also with their own sexuality.*

Introduction

As a part of the male body, the penis is often regarded as unseemly, relegated to the realm of concealment. There is a code of silence regarding the penis which forbids women to talk about it in their everyday discourse. This socially reinforced practice of covering the penis, especially from the sight of women, is actually part of the dual politics of hiding and showing (Bordo, 1999). The penis, which is supposedly hidden, can be used as a powerful instrument of sexual intrusion and intimidation against women. In Hong Kong, women usually react with embarrassment, shock, or disgust when they encounter the penis or its representation. Adjectives like 'wut dut' (disgusting) or 'yuk suen' (ugly) are often used. This article is a record of how young women in Hong Kong experience the penis during their growing up process, and how they negotiate their sexual identities and sexual practices within a particular context of social regulation and control of their sexuality. Implications for sex education in Hong Kong are discussed.

Women's sexuality is generally conceived by feminists and others to be socially

constructed (Vance, 1984; Fine, 1988; McWhirter *et al.*, 1990; Smart, 1992; Evans, 1997). Working on the assumption that it is the social that conditions the personal, and that personal sexual beliefs and practice are conditioned by the mechanisms of social control (DeLamater, 1981; Weeks, 1986), local research tends to focus on the social construction of women's life (Salaff, 1995; Chan, 1996; Partridge, 1996) at the expense of the agentive and productive performances of the subjects. Not surprisingly, research methods employed by studies in Hong Kong do not favour direct articulation by the subjects of their sexual experience. Survey questionnaires, for example, with their superimposed structure of response, leave little room for personal authorship of narratives (e.g. Family Planning Association of Hong Kong [FPAHK], 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996; Breakthrough, 1994). Studies eliciting personal narratives, on the other hand, seldom allow for the open discussion of explicit sexual themes (e.g. Salaff, 1995; Chan, 1996; Partridge, 1996). Taken together, they constitute a discursive reality which systematically relegates sexuality to the marginal space of the unspoken, unnamed and unarticulated.

This study, by (re)presenting the subjects as agents, speakers, authors and creators of their sexual worlds, gives vent to the suppressed and hidden sexual articulations and narratives of women. While the focus of the study is on the sexual experience and practices of young Chinese women in Hong Kong, with special emphasis on their 'encounter' with the penis, the approach is informed by a feminist critique of contemporary social research. Bartky (1998), for example, criticises Foucault for treating the body 'as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life' (p. 27). Picking up on this theme, this study employs a subversive strategy in treating the penis as an extension of a phallogocentric agenda of social regulation.

In this article, 'young' and 'adolescent' are used interchangeably to describe the period of a woman's life that lies between puberty and the complete initiation into adult status marked by social events such as full-time employment, marriage, or living independently away from one's parents. This phase of life is of particular interest for this study because of the salience of sexuality during this phase, not just for the adolescents themselves, but for the adults who incessantly impose all sorts of disciplinary practices on them.

In Hong Kong, sexual practices have come under both traditional Chinese and Judeo-Christian influence (Tsang, 1987; Ng & Ma, 2001). It has been observed that both systems are characterised by patriarchy, which is an overarching discursive structure dominating the social life of women. According to Leung (1995), 'the explanation of women's continuing subordination lies in the persistence of the centripetal family system in industrial Hong Kong' (p. 41). His observation highlights the combined oppressive forces of patriarchy and capitalism. Dominant discourses on parenting and education are usually predicated on notions of female chastity; and young women are not supposed to have sex before they get married. Most forms of adolescent sexual expression, particularly those of women, are constructed as 'deviant' by the adult-driven discourse. They are usually associated with danger, moral problems, crime and psychological disorder (Wong, 2000; 'Under-aged guy ...', 1999). Empirical studies have, however, provided a much more complex picture. The territory-wide studies on adolescent sexuality, for example, found a variety of sexual activities among young women who were not married (FPAHK, 1986, 1991, 1998). The discrepancy between normalised expectation and actual sexual practice offers the opportunity to investigate the relationship between regulatory practices and resistance put up by subjects.

The present study shows that, despite society's various attempts to restrict their access to the penis, access is very much present and available in the lives of the young women in Hong Kong. Their encounter with the penis can take many forms. The penis can be denied representation, or systematically misrepresented and reproduced as a different social object. It can sometimes be a menacing object imposed on the visual field of young women (an example would be the harassing exposure of the exhibitionist), and at other times a sought-after object of the women's gaze (as in the case of voluntary consumption of pornographic material). It can be experienced as an intrusive instrument in unwanted sexual contacts or as an instrument of desire in an intimate relationship.

Method

The participants of this study were recruited from a course on human sexuality at the University of Hong Kong. Universities, unlike high schools, are given certain privileges in accessing topics which are out of bounds to high school students. Discourses on sexuality are under vigilant surveillance in high schools, even within the context of sex education courses. It has been observed that sex education in Hong Kong's high schools is just an attempt to control sexual expression (Ng, 1998; Wong, 2000). Universities, however, legitimise sexuality enquiry when it is construed as a medical, psychological or social problem. This study makes use of this 'legitimized' or tolerated space to initiate a critical interrogation of established discourses and practices.

Of the 87 social sciences students enrolled for the 'Human Sexuality' course, 65 were female and 22 male. Most students were in the 18–22 age group, with a few mature students in their late twenties and thirties. This brief demographic description is quite representative of the university student population in 1998. The result of a survey of the students admitted in the same year shows that 33.6% had their homes in public housing estates, 50.7% in private housing, while 13.5% lived in subsidised home ownership scheme flats. As for the educational attainment of parents, 49.1% had secondary education (Office of Student Affairs, 1998). These students were invited, on a voluntary basis, to participate in the focus group interviews to express how they felt about their own genitals and those of the others. A total of nine mixed-gender focus group interviews were conducted from March to June 2000 at the University of Hong Kong. Each lasted for 2–3 hours. The discussions were tape-recorded, with the students' knowledge and permission. The tapes were transcribed verbatim and translated from Chinese to English. Contents were analysed with special attention being paid to exploring how young women in Hong Kong think and feel about the male sex organ.

Conducting the interviews in a group format has obvious advantages—students are able to see how others live in ways different from their own, which should suggest that 'the stultifying aspects of ourselves that we had assumed to be universal and eternal might in fact be contingent features that could potentially be changed' (Hoy, 1999, p. 11). Thus, these focus group interviews are not only a research procedure, but an interactive process of authoring and re-authoring between the researcher and the participants. The very social occasion of the research engagement is itself a site of political action with subversive potential (Opie, 1992; Fine, 1992).

Results

As with the case of most narrative-based research, the results provide a rich pool of information and articulations, and afford multiple thematisation and analyses. Analytic

themes for the present report are selected with regard to the challenge they pose against the dominant views, and their heuristic value in terms of expanding our understanding of the sexual realities of these young women.

Seeing the Penis that is Not Supposed to be Seen—Illegitimate Channels

The penis is supposed to be hidden from the sight of women, and especially young women who are expected to be sexually inexperienced. The participants, however, told us that they had multiple access to viewing the penis: family members, neighbours, exhibitionists, pornography, and intimate partners. Only four out of the 87 participants had not seen a penis or a photograph of it before they enrolled in the human sexuality course.

For many of the participants, the first penis that they saw was their father's, and they used such expressions as 'strange', 'embarrassed', and 'afraid' to describe how they felt about it. This strong sense of taboo and uneasiness attests to the shared understanding that it is not proper for the penis to be seen. One respondent recounted an incident that happened when she was about 8 years old:

I used to sleep with my father in the same bed. My father was always in his boxers. He liked to raise his leg while he slept and so I saw it. I found it interesting and so I watched it all the time while he was asleep. One day, my mother discovered it and she asked my father to put on his pants at home.

In this case, the discipline was exercised by the mother, who was able to change the father's behaviour by referring to an implicitly shared code of proper conduct. That the penis was not to be seen by one's own daughter was an uncontested notion between the parents, and a strong statement was also sent to the daughter, who actually found the sight 'interesting'. As will be detailed later, the child's curiosity in the human body triggered the functioning of multiple mechanisms of social regulation. What is noteworthy is that, given such a powerful and widely shared code, young girls are still being exposed to the penis one way or the other.

To protect girls and young women from the potential damage, real or imagined, arising from the exposure to the sex organ of man, they are often confined to the 'safe' and 'proper' social spaces (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992; Niranjana, 1997). Their everyday social world, however, is full of examples that can be described as ruptures in this social regulation. In one of the examples, a participant who lived with other families under the same roof—which was not uncommon in Hong Kong due to the inadequate housing supply—described her first sighting of the penis:

We didn't have a TV and so I went to the living room to watch TV. Usually I sat on a stool outside our room and watched TV (when her mother was doing something else and not supervising her directly). I saw the landlord open the zip of his pants and something moving down there. I used to like deep fried beef bun and I wondered why the landlord would put the beef bun down there. Then I was studying in Kindergarten; I told my mother that the landlord squeezed his beef bun and from then on my mother wouldn't allow me to go out of our room.

Another participant described her experience with a boy in the neighbourhood:

We had known each other for more than 10 years and we used to play together. When I was in F. 2 or 3, I suddenly came to notice that he was always playing

with his 'little brother'. He always put his hand inside his pants and I found the gesture awful. I thought he was sick.

Examples like these always raise the question of possible sexual harassment or even abuse. The idea that the penis has to be covered and that it should not be revealed to women except under specifically sanctioned circumstances (e.g. within married couples) is widely held in many societies, including Hong Kong. A striking finding of this study is that almost all participants had some experience with the 'exhibitionist'. The typical response was to look away in disgust, and that was often associated with a sense of intrusion, offence, threat or danger. One participant reported:

I was in F. 2 when I first saw a real penis. It was lunchtime and there were a lot of truck vans outside the school. The door of one of the vans was opened. There stood a guy who was masturbating himself. He looked like an idiot. All the girls passing by saw it and ran away. I was scared.

The predominant plot of such narratives centers on unattractive strangers who impose themselves on the young girls as helpless victims. There are also stories of sexual harassment in a variety of social spaces, including the bus and the subway. These narratives reflect a commonly held view among women that a man's exposure of his penis is to be taken as an offensive act, even if the 'exposure' is not aimed at them in particular. One participant said; 'I saw an exhibitionist once. He lay at the construction site and I saw something erecting. It was disgusting'.

This idea of the exhibitionist, while functioning to regulate men's sexual expression and women's sexual exposure, also serves to perpetuate and strengthen the sexualisation of the penis and its meaning and significance in most social contexts. This duality of discourses and practices in the regulation of sexuality is similar to what Foucault describes in his rendering of the history of sexuality in the West (Foucault, 1976). Such discourses and practices have sexualised the penis to such an extent that its simple exposure can create a powerful social drama, as in the case of the 'exhibitionist'.

These rules regarding the concealment and revelation of specific body parts are, on the other hand, the very conditions that create a special space for tabooed desire and pleasure. Being able to break the rules and experience the forbidden has always been a source of excitement and fascination. The resulting ecstasy transports the subject outside the regulated, commonsensical world, providing transcendence to the quest of sexual pleasure (Bersani, 1988; Grosz, 1994). Sexual transgression is also a political act asserting the subject. The body, in a very real sense, refuses to be docile. Gay sexuality, for example, is not just a variety of human sexuality but a deliberate sexual movement with explicit political aims (Ho, 1997; Ho & Tsang, 2000a, 2000b). Many participants in this study also transgressed normative regulations and thus expanded their sexual world. In one example, a participant recalled being shown the film *'Crying Game'* (Jordon, 1992) in high school. There was a scene in which the 'female' protagonist, who is actually a man, exposed his/her penis to his/her lover. The participant recounted:

We screamed. It came as a shock. We requested the teacher to re-play that part in slow motion. We saw the close up of an actual penis of someone we thought a woman!

This incident illustrates the ability of a collective act in a socially regulated and surveillanced space—the school—to transgress into a tabooed domain. It also asserts the woman's gaze, which has received little attention in comparison with the man's gaze. In

this study, the woman's gaze has actually emerged as a prominent theme. The following quotation provides another illustration:

I think men are really disgusting. I saw it when I was studying for my A level exam (age 18–19). I was at a girls' school. There was a man who always masturbates before us girls. He stood facing our classroom. Usually, he would be there during lunch hours. Our teachers would close the curtains and ask us to stay away. But as soon as our teacher had left, we would open the curtain to find out what was going on.

Young women, as can be seen from this example, do not simply become docile bodies, but instead struggle to be authors. Indeed, as Foucault (1976, 1977, 1983), Cornell (1995), Butler (1997) and Bartky (1998) have argued, repressive practices can never be totally successful, and resistance can always be performed by the repressed subjects. The woman's gaze is practised in private as well, and the use of pornography is an ironic demonstration of this kind of resistance.

Pornography and the Woman's Gaze

Pornography is commonly imagined as the articulation of man's gaze. Some feminist authors have criticised pornography as an extension of patriarchal domination (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1993). However, the use of pornography can be an agentive act of the subject who seeks out the material with reference to his or her own desire (Cornell, 1995; Chou & Chiu, 1992). For the participants in this study, the active use of pornography can be seen as an attempt to gain knowledge and mastery of the sexual world.

I saw it the first time when I looked at my brother's porn video. My brother is 5 years older than me. I found the tapes in his drawer and I was curious. I don't have a penis and I was puzzled. I don't feel special. I don't hate it.

I didn't know where to find out things that I want to know about sex if not through pornography, which was perhaps the only channel for me to learn something and discuss it with others. It was fun.

We circulated [name of a popular teen magazine often carrying sexually explicit material] in class. There was a special section on sex that we all liked to read.

I used to read [name of a popular local daily, with sexually explicit content, both in text and pictures] every day. It was our family newspaper. I was intrigued by the photos of the half-naked women.

I was an F. 5 or F. 6 student [age 17–18] when I began to correspond with my classmate who had gone to Canada. We talked on ICQ. She sent me two pictures of naked men. She asked me which I found more attractive. It was the first time I saw men's naked bodies.

These examples demonstrate the important role pornographic materials play in these young women's quest for knowledge, self-situation and negotiation of their identity as women. These materials provide much-needed but generally unavailable information, reference for the self, and a marginalised but congenial narrative space shared with one's trusted peers, especially in a social context such as Hong Kong where sexual information is heavily regulated (Chou & Chiu, 1992).

For these young women, sexual knowledge is sought with much interest and curiosity before the penis becomes a material reality in their lives. The woman's gaze, driven by the woman's desire to know and to master, can thus be seen as an early step in the woman's attempt to build her own sexual identity and sexual life-world. Later in the process, the penis is perceived, given specific meanings, experienced, handled, and incorporated.

The Penis in the Woman's Sexual Experience—from Apprehension to Incorporation

Seeing the penis in personal encounters of an intimate relationship. The woman's gaze progresses with the expansion of her life-world. For many of the participants, personal encounter with the penis took place within the context of an intimate relationship:

In my first year at the university, I saw my boyfriend changing into a swimsuit. So I took the chance to find out what it was like. Well, I had a vague idea of what it was like from my biology class, but I had never seen it in the flesh. I had never imagined it to be so displeasing to look at—two lumps hanging there.

Another participant had a more active assertion of her gaze:

I asked him to show me what it was like and he did. Then I went on and asked him to show me what it was like when he had an erection. He said it would help if I touched him and I said no. I didn't want to. So he asked me to give him a few minutes to think. Then he managed to have an erection. That was magical.

This example throws light on the relatively unexplored space within which women exercise some form of control over the penis. When the woman feels safe, she will take more initiative to explore her desire. The penis is, however, not always an object under the direct influence or control of the woman. The following cases will show how, more often, it is located within a site of negotiation.

Touching the penis of a lover. The penis, the imagination of which has been regulated socially, is in theory not permitted into the life space of these young women. The 'properly' brought-up woman has her life scripted without exposure to the penis. It is interesting to observe that the participants could express fear and disgust of the penis as well as interest and desire. Again, how they felt about the penis depended often on what kind of relationship they had developed with the person to whom the penis belongs.

My boyfriend and I had known each other for a few years, so his penis became less scary. I could accept the idea of touching his penis. It all depends on how long you have known the person.

My first sex with my boyfriend went quite well. I was 15 or 16. I felt natural. If there is love, then it is natural. It is part of his body. I don't see why it is disgusting touching it.

The experience can be scary if the woman feels that she is totally out of control of the situation:

It was the first time I went out with a boy who is 3 years older than myself. I was in F. 3. He tried to push my head down. I have never done that and I was scared. I resisted it very much.

Not every participant responds to the penis in a clearly positive or negative manner.

Many women regard the penis with ambivalence. Some have a generally negative perception of the penis, but have learnt to accommodate it for the strong emotional relationship that they have developed with their boyfriends.

I wouldn't watch other men's penis. But he is my boyfriend, I can take a look or even study it.

The first penis that I saw was that of my boyfriend. I loved him so I felt it was okay. I thought it was interesting. It is something I don't have.

I still find it uncomfortable to look at a penis. Maybe it is because I had tried oral sex, I felt really bad about it. Maybe it was because I couldn't open up myself. I really didn't want to look at it. I couldn't treat it as if it was nothing.

Within the context of an intimate relationship, the penis is not only a distant object of the woman's gaze. It is a transitional object within the relationship, between the man and the woman; and the actual physical contact with the penis is in most cases a more intense experience than just seeing it. One participant said:

If I am married to that person, then I'll have no problem touching him. I can't bring myself to do it before marriage, even if it is covered by clothes.

The intensity of the experience varies with the modes of contact, and carries different personal meanings. The penis can be used intrusively or even abusively by the man, as in the case of unwanted oral sex as described earlier, but it can also be an object invested with reciprocal affection and desire.

If he really wants me to touch it, I may. But I would never take the initiative to do so.

If I have strong feelings for him, I would touch him.

I always want to hold my boyfriend. He is big and it feels good to hold him. Touching is part of the foreplay.

The penis, as these cases show, does not have a fixed personal or social meaning. The meaning of it varies with the relationship the woman has with the man who owns it.

Intercourse/penetration/incorporation. It can be argued that the most intimate contact a woman can have with the penis is to have it inside her body. The usual reference to intercourse as penetration is phallogentric, or male-centred in its connotation. The participants' accounts of their experience with intercourse as penetration are generally quite negative:

Penetration can be difficult to take. It depends on who is doing it. Sometimes I cried. I didn't really want it. It felt painful. He insisted. I pushed him away and cried. The first touch is the best. Then I lose my sensitivity very quickly. I don't feel much after the second thrust. I just want to get it over and done with. I would behave as if I really was excited about it.

The negative experience of being penetrated is sometimes offset by the feeling of intimacy or closeness:

I think there is no need to penetrate. It only spoils things. Having said that, I do feel close to him when we are in that position.

A classmate's mother said that intercourse was painful. I was in Primary Six

then. Ever since, I've been under the impression that it would be painful. If I have sex with a person, it will be an act of love.

Obviously, it is possible to think of sexual intercourse not just as penetration but also as incorporation of the penis by the strong muscles of the woman (Dworkin, 1987). Among the participants, there is some indication of preference for less phallogocentric articulations:

There are some really romantic terms in Chinese that describe the act well. It is 'water and milk fusing together'—a total immersion, or 'going up to Mountain Mao together' (a Chinese idiom referring to sexual ecstasy)—conveying a sense of togetherness. Putting it this way does not take men's initiative for granted. That's what I like about it.

Along a similar line, another participant articulated a more active role for women in attaining sexual pleasure:

If you are open enough and the relationship is intimate enough, you can allow yourself to find out where you want to go. You can also act more assertively to seek your pleasure. I think I often manage to have an orgasm.

Some women are even able to see the penis from a positive, aesthetic point of view:

Though I had seen my father's penis when I was small, I hadn't seen it very clearly. I had my first, good look at it from my boyfriend. At first, I didn't feel all right. It looked strange. But now I feel it is a work of art. I love him and I would treat his body as art.

Such articulation shifts the focus from a phallogocentric preoccupation with penetration to the woman's quest for pleasure. The woman is no longer an object, a passive recipient of male action, or a victim, but an active subject with control of her own body, her desire, and her own role in an intimate relationship. It is believed that with more open access to knowledge and experience, women stand a better chance of achieving a more agentive relationship not only with the penis as a potential transitional object in intimate relationships, but also with their own sexuality.

Discussion and Conclusion

The exclusion of the penis from the young woman's life-world is based on a desexualised script of the lives of the adolescents. Within the circumscribed spaces where their sexuality is allowed, they are usually constructed as the passive object of men's sexual aggression, ranging from the exhibitionist's 'exposure' to the lover's 'penetration'. They, therefore, must be 'protected' from being exposed to the penis. Its visual representation and verbal reference are only permitted in the contents of education programs scripted in the language of medical and biological sciences. Exposure to the actual penis is legitimised for grown-up women, and only within the socially regulated space of a stable, intimate heterosexual relationship or marriage. Moreover, regardless of their age, women must abide by a code of silence, and are not supposed to talk about the penis in their everyday life. This imposed silence on women reinforces their passivity and docility. Taken together, these various attempts to regulate women's exposure to the penis can be seen as a part of the agenda of 'proper femininity', or the socially scripted way of being a woman. Women are not only produced as docile bodies in the Foucauldian sense. Compared to men, their sexual being is constantly associated with danger, vulnerability, and by implication, inferiority (Vance, 1984; Dworkin, 1987;

Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992; Evans, 1997; Greer, 2000). Most women are expected to sacrifice pleasure for fear of being negatively evaluated; the good/bad girl dichotomy perpetuates the ideal of innocence as a component of femininity (Steedman, 1993, p. 312).

This investigation shows that the penis is present and available in different ways to the young women in Hong Kong despite the multiple disciplinary practices instituted to banish the penis from their sight, vocabulary and imagination. The respondents' narratives clearly demonstrated the ubiquity of the penis in their life space—the family, the school, the community, the media, and their interpersonal relationships. In the language of Bordo (1999), the penis is 'in hiding and on display' (p. 15). Repositioning women as subjects, the present research and analysis produces narratives on how these young women who are supposedly innocent and pure have actually sought out the penis or its visual representation. The 'research' situation, by putting women in mixed-gender groups, deliberately breaks the code of silence without ghettoising their talk to a closeted situation. Some of the things they do, such as watching an exhibitionist or actively consuming sexually explicit materials and pornography, subvert the discursive practice of positioning women as passive sexual objects. While many of the respondents displayed fear, revolt, and disgust, which was expected as part of 'proper femininity', positive experiences of the penis were also reported. The participants' narratives suggested a possibility of positive engagement with the penis, characterised by agency, mastery and fulfilment.

Implications for Sex Education in Hong Kong

Framed in the discourse of fertility control and contraception, public sex education in Hong Kong started, arguably, around the 1950s, predominantly with the work by the government-subsidised Family Planning Association of Hong Kong. In 1971, the Education Department issued a memorandum to all schools, advising them to include sex education topics in some formal subjects while a concise list of suggestions on what should be taught to secondary schools was also made. It took the Education Department 15 years to issue another advisory notice: the Guidelines on Sex Education in Secondary Schools was published in 1986 with more detailed recommendations on sex education topics, resources and references. The guidelines were revised again in 1997 but the recommendations, like the previous ones, showed a strong bias towards teaching young people socially accepted morality while aspects of human sexuality were largely confined by discourses on emotional well-being and human relationships. In fact, what junior secondary students are advised to receive is officially called 'life education', not sex education. As criticised by Ng (1998), the guidelines were:

heavily skewed toward moral indoctrination, emotion, self-images, interpersonal and family relationships. Sexual anatomy and physiology, sexual behaviour and psychology and sexual medicine were limited to very basic and there was nothing on controversial issues like sexual variation, prostitution and pornography. (p. 32)

Limited as these recommended topics were, the guidelines remained conveniently ignored by the education sector as schools were not required by the Government to take corresponding action. Such passivity was in turn fuelled by what Li (1998) referred to as 'the ambivalent attitude of the society towards sex education' (p. 36). Educating professionals' resistance to sex education was made possible, Li (1998) argues, by an

embedded thought that 'ignorance is beautiful because knowledge makes people rebellious' and that 'teaching sex education is just like awakening a dormant volcano' (p. 40). Li urges that comprehensive knowledge should be given to young people at an earlier age (the primary school level) to meet the psychosexual developmental needs of the new generation. There should also be more training to train competent educators who feel ill equipped to talk to their students about sex.

In line with Ng and Li's critique that an attitude of protection can do more harm than good to young people, the findings of this study have foregrounded, in particular, the inadequacy of the current mode of sex education to young women in Hong Kong. Not only do the school, the family and the community provide little opportunity for young women to talk about their evolving sexuality, female sexual agency and but sexual interests are effectively pushed into an unspeakable domain. The respondents in this study, however, demonstrate with their experience that protective efforts never form a successful shield against early exposure to what they are not supposed to talk about, not to mention witness. Thus informed, the goal of sex education should no longer be to protect young girls from sexual reality but to expand the possibilities for women's liberation—that is, for equalising the genders and enhancing women's opportunities for sex knowledge and pleasure. Sex education should aim at helping young girls and women negotiate meanings about what it means to be female. Putting women in a position of passivity and powerlessness—as embedded in sex education in Hong Kong so far—serves only to deny them the knowledge, and the associated power and mastery over their own sexual destiny.

More specifically, the findings of the present study suggest that the sexual socialisation of young women should aim at helping them to feel secure in seeing the penis, subject only to their growing sense of appropriateness about person, place and time. To wait until adolescence is too late; the child will already have gone somewhere for knowledge or be forced to face things that they do not understand. Relocating the penis in sex education (and in public discourse in general) in Hong Kong with the participation of women is likely to facilitate its reconstruction from a menacing instrument regarded with suspicion, fear, and disgust to a part of the human body that can become an effective transitional object in the intimate relationships between men and women.

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