

Abstract This article gives an overview of my experience as a researcher using visual ethnography and sex studies to probe hidden strands of Chinese sex culture. More specifically, it shows how sexually explicit materials and sex studies became influential to undergraduate students at City University of Hong Kong on my course, 'Gender Discourse', in 2008 as a result of a celebrity sex scandal. The article considers the production and circulation of DIY pornographies made by ordinary people and attributed to celebrities by journalists, emotive and politicized reactions to pornographic media and sex scandals, and the development of teaching which encourages students to carry out creative experiments as sexually active subjects in media environments.

Keywords Chinese media, DIY pornography, Gender Studies, Internet Studies, sex scandals

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Sex Scandal Science in Hong Kong

The Edison Chen sex scandal

When I arrived in Hong Kong in 2005, I soon found that its culture was characterized by a near-absence of sex talk amongst friends or colleagues. Hong Kong is a metropolis with a booming sex market offering services such as love hotels, online sex workers and dating services, but sex talk has not proliferated here as in the West. When attending parties or cultural events, people still shy away from divulging the state of their private sex affairs. As a *gweilo* or non-Chinese citizen and outsider to the Chinese culture, it was easy to be eccentric and different from the moral mainstream, yet I had to take a leap of faith when igniting dialogues about sexual arousal and pornography. When I interviewed people for my books and documentaries, they often explained that their reticence was 'essentially Chinese' or 'the traditional Chinese way'. It is widely believed that the Confucian doctrines discourage a revelation of sexual desires and a publicly shared exploration of sexual tastes, identities and technologies.

Hong Kong citizens feel pressured to dissociate from 'modern decadent' experiences and want to engage in sexual relations that are part of a socially responsible, subdued and private lifestyle. Many believe in the power of an age-old principle that steers their actions and differentiates them from the West. Of course this principle is also easily shattered in hidden pleasure zones and specially designated places such as gay saunas, love hotels, and online sex spaces.

This attitude complicates my forays into visual ethnography and internet sex studies. However, as this article will show, my call for a creative approach to sex and eroticism was adopted by Chinese undergraduate students on my course, 'Gender Discourse', at City University of Hong Kong. Their efforts were also facilitated by a six-week long national media scandal early in 2008 around the DIY pornography collection of celebrity entertainer, Edison Chen, dubbed the 'Nude Photos Incident' or 'Sex Photos Gate'.¹ Chen's photos were taken as part of his own private sex sessions with other Chinese celebrities and revealed a sexual intimacy that staggered local audiences, though they would be less shocking to anyone familiar with online sites where people document their sex acts. The scandal stimulated an enormous amount of discussion in Hong Kong. People could not refrain from public gossip, hot-headed outbursts about sexual behaviour, or the airing of long-held hopes and frustrations about celebrity culture and pornography. Hong Kong high school and university students, piqued by the photographs, were overcome by a peculiar urge to engage in sex talk.

Edison Chen is one of Hong Kong's 'aristocracy-system celebrities', the son of an investor in a powerful local entertainment corporation, and is known as a pop icon, a popular actor, and a producer of Hip-Hop CDs. The Nude Photos incident was triggered by hundreds of images, leaked by a computer technician who found them when he was fixing Chen's pink laptop. It was a fully-fledged media event to rival the American Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, and the photographs were reproduced in Chinese-language tabloid newspapers and circulated online by thousands of web users. There were frequent televised reports of police attempts to catch those who were uploading and downloading the images, and of the celebrities' formal apologies for their part in the incident.

Chen made two televised apologies in February 2008; the second of these showed him pale and flummoxed, apologizing to the female celebrities captured in the photos and their families, urging all Hong Kong citizens to destroy the images, and promising to leave the entertainment industry indefinitely and devote his life to charity.² The apology was delivered in front of 400 journalists and 200 police officers, 80 of whom formed a human chain around him as he left the building. Many of the journalists continued taking pictures minutes after he had walked off

stage, as if he had been some kind of demon-like apparition. Several surveys subsequently showed that a majority of adults believed that the incident had traumatized Hong Kong's teenagers, many of whom confessed that they had been checking out and circulating the photos.

An anti-Edison movement organized by feminists and evangelical Christian organizations portrayed him as a male sex criminal and his lovers as female 'victims'. There were very few alternative readings of the gender dynamic. The female celebrities in the images were seen as gullible and manipulated, both when they agreed to the sex photography sessions and also in their media appearances after the scandal. A feminist defence of their sexual behaviour or the DIY pornography seemed to be out of the question. Gillian Chung, a member of the Cantopop duo, The Twins, and one of Edison's partners in the photographs, was forced by Emperor Entertainment Group to issue a public apology, during which she tearfully confessed that she had been 'silly', 'naïve' and 'a victim'. Chung had made a similar apology in 2006 after an incident in which pictures taken by a concealed camera had revealed her taking off a blouse in a changing room.

The televised apologies revealed very clearly that Edison and Chung had been manipulated by the conservative-leaning entertainment industries. Why did the celebrities agree to this? Why could they not seize the opportunity to defend their sexual choices? As well as gossiping about the photographs, many citizens in Hong Kong began to question the celebrity system and its reactionary morals. Matthew Chew has argued that this questioning can be related to a decline in Hong Kong entertainment production since the mid-1990s (Chew, 2008). His monitoring of discussion forums on 'Uwants' and 'HKdiscuss' during the scandal found that Chen and other Hong Kong celebrities were criticized because they typified a new and inferior breed of entertainer. Companies were also accused of strategically planting sensational news stories about their celebrities' sex lives. In Chew's analysis, these online discussions reflected frustration amongst Hong Kong's fan communities because of a general disregard for the preferences of local audiences.

The Edison incident also burst a bubble of hypocrisy around Hong Kong citizens' growing involvement with pornography and internet sex. Even as conservative ideologues started a backlash against nascent netporn cultures, the incident produced counter-waves of media activism, in which media-savvy young adults and other web users began a series of debates about the impact of internet pornography in Chinese societies. Outraged by the police response to the circulation of the photographs, a group of internet users held a demonstration in Wanchai to demand the right to circulate porn images. To my knowledge this was the first public pro-internet pornography demonstration of its kind – the city of Hong Kong

had suddenly lost its 'pornographic virginity'. Confucian doctrines made way for a historical moment of turmoil, a shattering of mythologies and a peculiar kind of cathartic porn war.

Theory: The life of tiny arguments

The Edison Chen sex scandal was an important moment for all of us, but I had no idea that my 'Gender Discourse' class at City University of Hong Kong would be so thoroughly affected. I am usually cautious about showing pornographic materials in any undergraduate classrooms, but the sex scandal demanded a more forthcoming attitude. Students wanted to watch porn and other sexually explicit movies, and they also wanted to talk, so it became easier to investigate some of those traditionally hidden domains. Discussing the scandal led students gradually to reveal much about their life-styles and aspirations, including their investment in pornography.

It is important for teachers and students to be actively present when such moments of political chaos invade a culture. One positive example of proactive media activism in the Chinese context is the work of Professor Josephine Ho, director of the Centre for the Study of Sexualities at National Central University, Taiwan. Ho is a well-known scholar in Taiwan who makes appearances as an enlightened and 'feeling' public sex expert. She defended her right to access 'inappropriate' data when Christian organizations sued her over a hyperlink to illegal images of bestiality on her academic website. Unlike Chen, she managed to take control over her own tabloid sex scandal, showing that one can try to outmanoeuvre smear campaigns and that academics should not only investigate media discourses about sexuality but actively try to speak back to them.³

Ho's example was useful in deconstructing the deeply reactionary responses to the Edison Chen scandal in Hong Kong. Whether students were conservative-leaning or porn-tolerant, they agreed that people's use of media for sexual purposes such as DIY pornography typified a significant change in sexual relations within Hong Kong. Students felt encouraged to devote their final projects to this topic and I was happy to be able to use the material in my documentary, *What's Wrong With Your PrOn, Hong Kong?*⁴

Practice: Dissolving the spectacle

In my courses and workshops in digital media and sexuality, students are asked to compile an archive of websites, online conversations and images that have been important for their virtual lives and social values. At the

end of the semester, they present their work in a selection of screen shots, photographs, chats, and video images. The point of these presentations is to show that online sex cultures are different from the way they are (mis)represented in the mainstream, and also that they differ from representations of sex in the mainstream media. Students also share these materials in order to process their feelings towards participatory online sex cultures; they demonstrate how they might utilize different ‘selves’ in relationships with others and within specific domains and environments. They analyse existing images and carry out online experiments. Even though they are often deeply involved on a personal level in these experiments, they also stand back and write reflections that can be shared with their peers.

In this instance, students felt particularly motivated to carry out their projects and to share an ongoing analysis with friends and peers. It became much easier for my students to get energized about sexual topics after the ‘Chen effect’ – the photographs, the tears and apologies, the bureaucratic governmental warnings, and the wobbly Chinese moral code. My ‘Gender Discourse’ students eagerly compiled audio-visual records of their web-based and face-to-face encounters with interview subjects. Their work became an unusual opportunity for emotional engagement as the scandal was very close to the students’ own fears and hopes concerning sex and pornography. One of the students approached me in tears right after the scandal broke and admitted that she felt totally shattered. She was upset at the content of the photos and also confused because of what was being done to Chen by the authorities. She decided to work with other students in interviewing Chen fans, as well as secondary school students, university students, exchange students and local journalists. The interviews revealed that there was actually a lot of support for Chen and for porn culture. Some of the students stated that ‘porn has become very common today’, others defended Chen, because even though he was a sex monster, ‘he had taken the photos with the consent of the women’. The interviews also showed that Hong Kong’s young people saw Edison as a successful Chinese Don Juan and a positive role-model for a sex-craving and porn-friendlier generation.⁵

As the scandal went on, several surveys revealed that while most people felt able to forgive Edison Chen for his sex acts, high-school teachers clung to an authoritarian pedagogy that perceived Chen in negative terms. To give an alternative perspective, the ‘Gender Discourse’ students interviewed local female sex bloggers and members of DIY porn sharing sites such as ‘Sexywife Club’ (Sexy Wife Club, n.d.). Their interviews revealed an emerging generation of women whose online self-portraiture was at odds with Confucian morality in the sense that they openly revealed the strength of their desiring bodies. The students’ work developed a response

to and critique of the Edison Chen scandal, developing an educational zone for the sharing of sexual fantasies, theories and voices from Hong Kong's hidden sex zones.

Sex scandal science and its hazards

The Edison Chen scandal shows how web culture and tabloid media can inform critical pedagogy within the fields of media, sex and gender studies. Sex scandals generate hysterical outbursts and a backlash based on public indignation and jealousy. They also provoke underground counter-commentaries, which are more widely accessible in the age of the internet. Digital media scholars are becoming more versatile in amassing data that documents strands of critical populism, and conferences and publications on internet pornography increasingly include contributions from erotic/pornographic web producers outside academic media culture and discourses. For instance, several conferences on sexuality and media, such as *C'lick Me* (Amsterdam, 2005 and 2007), *Post-Porn Politics* (Berlin, 2006 and 2007), and *Arse Electronica* (San Francisco, 2007 and 2008) hosted presentations by alternative pornographers, sex bloggers, and queer online porn collectives. But it is still extremely difficult to present these kinds of 'grass roots' perspectives to academic authorities and conservative-leaning governments.

Most academic institutions in Hong Kong and in other countries are still wary of the creative presentation of sexually explicit materials as part of media pedagogy, even though several scholars have managed to teach courses or classes on pornography that involve screenings and a discussion of images and websites. The use of erotic/pornographic images as a tool for discussion seems acceptable to students themselves. But even though porn debates are applauded by students in Hong Kong and even in China these activities can be dangerous when they are associated with other types of political dissent. China in particular is a booming location for investigating sex entertainment, but any attempt at sex research that involves the 'dangerous passions of politics' or politically subversive topics is seen as socially corrosive (see Rofel, 2007). Scholars and students engaged in politically aware research into sexuality and the media would find it dangerous to publicize their work. Although Hong Kong is a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China, a 'one country, two systems' arrangement is supposed to guarantee political freedoms such as free speech. But China has great influence over constraints on the radical media in Hong Kong, and sex scholars are vulnerable to complaints to the Obscene Articles Tribunal about the possession of 'indecent' or 'obscene' articles, which carries steep fines and jail sentences.

My own nomadic outsider status allows me to be ‘outlandish’ and to stand outside the Chinese moral codes in ways that would perhaps be unthinkable for local scholars. My activities are protected because they are seen as irrelevant and coming from a non-Chinese perspective. But my pedagogy could lead to deep trouble if an authoritarian government interpreted my courses and interactions with students as political dissent. However, this political situation means that moments like the ‘Nude Photos Incident’ trigger political turmoil and healthy chaos, provoking unusual types of social and political thought that can only benefit sex media research.

Notes

1. For a full overview of tabloid media coverage and audience surveys of the Edison Chen sex scandal see the website zonaeuropa.com (n.d.)
2. The footage of these apologies can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIIwhbMRXe4&feature=related> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewAKWEc0IU> (accessed 10 November 2008)
3. Josephine Ho defended herself in court after being sued by an alliance of 14 Christian organizations and won her court case. For an overview of her work see sex.ncu.edu (n.d.)
4. The documentary was released on 28 June 2008 in Shanghai Street Art Space, Hong Kong. More information about the documentary can be found on katrienjacobs.com (n.d.)
5. The audience surveys were compiled by Apple Daily on 2 February 2008; by the Hong Kong Internet Research Association, 14–21 February 2008; by Sin Tao Daily on 18 February 2008; and by Ming Pao on 18 February 2008 in collaboration with The Hong Kong University Public Opinion Programme.

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Biographical Note

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