

By Jonathan DeHart

Sex toys and social change in Shanghai

GOOD VIBRATIONS

Anyone who thinks that China has a prudish streak has not been to Oh! Toys on Nanchang Road. Opulent chandeliers, tasseled drapes and gold mirrors lend a lavish air to this two-storey smorgasbord of all things adult, from kinky leather handcuffs and life-size sex dolls to cutesy Hello Kitty vibrators and edible "body butter." Lingerie, French maid costumes and school girl uniforms fill an extensive rack of role-play digs on the second floor to boot.

While this open embrace of pleasure would have been shocking by local standards a few decades ago, today the local market is merely meeting demand. "Most of our customers are white-collar workers between 20 and 50 years old," Li Dong, manager of Oh! Toys, told the Global Times, explaining that the customers are a healthy mix of male and female, both local and foreign. "Sex toys have become popular as wedding and birthday gifts," Li added.

Shanghai is not alone in this shift towards greater sexual openness. According to a recent survey on American sexual health and behavior undertaken by researchers at Indiana University's Center for Sexual Health Promotion, Americans have also come a long way since the last major US sex study was conducted 20 years ago. Within the same time frame, much of the world has followed suit.

"Ideological influences from the West clearly have been important in changing China," said James Farrer, PhD, an associate professor of sociology at Sophia University in Tokyo. According to Farrer, an expert on sex culture in Shanghai, this swing in China's sexual mores is much more than a passing trend. "Ideas of sexual liberation, sexual pleasure, and sexual diversity have come in since the 1980s," he said. "All of these are really global trends. China is not unique in seeing a rise in new types of relationships."

Riding this wave of global change, Shanghai is ground zero in China's ongoing sexual revolution, as seen in the recent profusion of high end adult shops and sex toy parties being frequented by a newly moneyed base of customers, both local and foreign. "The sex toy business in Shanghai has grown rapidly in recent years," Li said. "Compared with most of China, the industry is more accepted and professional."

Hands on the merchandise

Perhaps the best place to see the sex toy trade in action is at one of the many see-and-touch parties, complete with toys, which take place around town. At private invitation-only home parties and public events held in bars, a handful of discerning connoisseurs have been busy educating curious would-be buyers about what's what in the world of adult toys.

According to Kara Bierley, co-owner of Amy's Bedroom, a Shanghai-based adult shop, business is booming. "We've held some parties at a few nightclubs and had very good turnouts," Bierley told the Global Times. "One party took place at a bar during the early phase of the World Cup, but hardly anyone paid any attention to the game." Helen Chen, founder and co-owner of Amy's Bedroom, has observed a similar pattern at the private home parties

she has thrown in Shanghai, adding that women tend to be more open about introducing toys in the bedroom. "So far only women and their gay friends have attended the private parties," she said.

These get-togethers, which Bierley calls "passion parties," are aimed to create a friendly, casual atmosphere where guests can feel comfortable around the risqué merchandise. "I used a foot long black dildo for ring toss at one of the bar parties," Bierley laughed. "Although people are sometimes timid at first, this approach relaxes them and makes it fun."

While greater numbers attend the bar parties, Bierley explained that not many

people actually buy products on the spot, usually opting to drop by their store later. Chen added that the mostly female attendees at the private home parties are more likely to actually buy products, due to the more intimate atmosphere.

"All of my foreign friends thought it was a great idea," said an anonymous Shanghai-based American woman who threw a sex toy party on her birthday

with regard to some of the products," she added. "But overall the atmosphere was fun and relaxed. Several people bought stuff too, including me."

Market lubrication

The rise in parties that cater to such personal matters have come on the heels of a conscious effort on the part of sex toy companies to rebrand their products

as elegantly designed and packaged "pleasure objects." Indeed, some of the sleeker products at Oh! Toys are enshrined in display cases like works of art. At first blush, their purpose is not immediately clear.

"One of our company's principles is to avoid making our products look like body parts," said Steve Thomson, Global Marketing Manager at the Shanghai office of LELO, a global Swedish sex toy company. "But it goes beyond design and packaging." According to Thomson, the main thrust behind this effort is to market the products as luxury items associated with a classy, sophisticated lifestyle, not something sleazy. "We advertise in fashion and luxury magazines. This has a lot of currency in cities like Shanghai. We're pushing the idea of intimate luxury, of valuing yourself. It's not just about sex toys."

Although approximately 50 percent of LELO's sales occur in the US, Thomson said the potential in China is enormous. "This is why we based our global marketing division here," he said. "As you would expect, people in the bigger cities in eastern China are more frequent buyers. But people purchase our products online from all over the country." While precise figures are hard to pin down, Thomson explained that there is a gradual rise in

higher-end retailers that focus on goods like candles and massage oils. "These are the kinds of stores where we feel our products fit best," he said.

According to Thomson, those who purchase LELO's products in Shanghai are largely heterosexual couples from 25 to 40 years old who have the disposable income necessary for indulging in luxuries like sex toys. Some of the company's best selling products in Shanghai include a vibrator disguised as lip stick with a USB charge function and a Kegel muscle exerciser that helps women strengthen their vaginal muscles.

"Sex toys seem to be easily accepted in China," Farrer said. "There is a wide acceptance that sex is important in marriage, so sex toys can be easily marketed as aids for married people rather than unmarried youth."

Although couples represent a large share of consumers who purchase sex toys, "women seem more comfortable than men with this," Chen said. "I think it's because men are reluctant to ask other people anything about sex and prefer to search for information on the Internet instead." This being so, Amy's Bedroom, "is designed like a girl's bedroom," Chen said. "The atmosphere is comfortable. Customers can pick up the products and check them out. More women come in

than men, but men are also welcome." "I believe that this is a global trend, driven by women's rising education levels and what is still a gender gap in understanding about how women achieve sexual pleasure," Farrer said. "This is a trend we see in the latest data from the US. This is no different in China, where women also report that they are less likely to have an orgasm than a man when having sex."

Safety first

Just as knock-off iPhones proliferate in Shanghai, so do sex toys. However, unlike the relative harmlessness of a knock-off purse or gadget, fake sex toys can be hazardous to one's health. "A big issue in China's market is the number of low quality sex toys being sold," Thomson said. "One of the most common hazards that occur in these cheap imitations is in the charging function. There have even been cases where these parts of the toys have actually exploded."

Aside from the prospect of small explosions occurring in the nether regions, certain knock-off toys are made of dodgy materials and have been known to "break off when they're inside the body or get swallowed up once they get past a certain threshold," Thomson added. "But higher quality products are made of materials that won't break off and come equipped with safety rings that prevent accidents like these from happening."

Although these types of injuries may elicit a snicker, the list of dangers does not end there. Low-end sex toys are often known to contain phthalates, which are industrial compounds used to soften plastic. Known as "endocrine disrupters," phthalates have been shown to cause reproductive and neurological damage in some laboratory tests.

"Alongside the increased awareness and interest in sex toys in Shanghai, there's a growing understanding of the importance of safety when using these products," Thomson said. "This includes increased knowledge about the need to only buy phthalate-free products." To put customers at ease, staff in the better shops around town are well trained and give tutorials on the products before they are taken home for experimentation. Additionally, high-end products come with warranties that prove they are the genuine article, "Just as you'd get with a real Louis Vuitton bag," Thomson added.

Sex with Chinese characteristics

If there is any doubt about China's frank acceptance and permissiveness towards the free pursuit of sexual pleasure, a trip to the most mundane of establishments will suffice. "In Shanghai nearly

In the water town of Tongli, 80 kilometers outside Shanghai, there is a museum of peculiar renown. Founded by sexology pioneer Liu Dalin, PhD, a retired professor of sociology at Shanghai University, with help from Hu Hongxia, PhD, the Museum of Ancient Chinese Sexual Culture houses a collection of 4,000 artifacts representing 9,000 years of sexual and cultural history in China

The items on display range from artistic depictions of genitalia and fertility idols to humorous sex toys and displays of a serious tone that look into the past subjugation of women in Chinese culture. Some of the more explicit sex toys include ancient bronze dildos used by courtesans during the Han and Qin dynasties (221 BC to 220 AD) and a wooden dildo attached to a donkey saddle, which was used to punish adulterous women.

Today China produces 70 percent of the world's sex toys, according to a July 2010 report in the People's Daily. With more than 1,000 manufacturers in China, the industry made 6.3 billion yuan (\$940 million) in the first half of 2010.

every convenience store has condoms arrayed at the cash register where the chewing gum would be in the US," Farrer said.

To make matters even hairier for puritanical Western shoppers, vibrators often sit comfortably beside these contraceptives, as well. Shanghai's great libidinal leap forward is all the more mind-boggling when the fact is considered that as recently as the early 1990s officials viewed sex toys as "spiritual pollution." In one instance, a European businessman based in Shanghai during the early 1990s was deported when customs agents discovered a vibrator in a package sent from home.

"Societies that have very strict control over sexuality tend to have a monotheistic religion that enforces very particular and unambiguous rules," Farrer explained. "China has had quite strict controls on female sexuality, because Confucian morality was an ideology that stipulated that sexual order - proper relations between men and women - was one of the most important pillars of social order."

According to Farrer, this picture began to change in the early 20th Century when concepts like monogamy, romantic love in marriage, female equality, and sexual science began trickling in from the West. "Even the conservative elements in Chinese society have gotten used to seeing sex shops, sex manuals, contraceptive devices, and other sex related products

arrayed in every part of the city. In many ways China now is more open about sexual commerce than the US. If anything, Chinese are more live-and-let-live than Americans," Farrer said.



Vibrators, costumes and all matter of sexual paraphernalia available at Oh! Toys.



Shelves of sex toys on display at Oh! Toys, on Nanchang Road. Photos: Cai Xianmin



INA, a dual-action vibrator.