

Too young to date! The origins of *zaolian* (early love) as a social problem in 20th-century China

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Abstract

Zaolian (literally means “early love,” “zao” for “early”, “lian” for “love”) refers to courtship or dating among young people in elementary and secondary school systems. In today’s China, it is regarded as a serious social problem related to minors/adolescents. To safeguard their moral, hygiene and promising future, it is believed that zaolian should be prevented and controlled by school regulations, family pressures, and even state laws. This paper attempts to provide a historical explanation to origins of this specific juvenile delinquency in China’s long twentieth century. Firstly, it offers a critical discussion on current scholarships, which dismiss zaolian either as a Freudian sexual repression by the Chinese Communist regime since 1949 or as a product of this regime’s social control efforts in the early 1980s. Unconvinced by these explanations, it then presents a new approach to examine “moral, ideological and structural” origins of zaolian. The moral and ideological origins include traditional Confucian patriarchy and its sexual norms, a new regime of western medical sciences, and the sexual repressive regime of the Chinese Communist Party, and all of them could be traced at least in the early 20th century. Lastly, it turns to the more crucial structural origins, or the three institutional-buildings responding to globally circulating discourses since the early 20th century: modern marriage against zaohun (early marriage), family planning policy against zaoyu (early childbirth) and modern educational system. Zaolian as a social problem was fledged in the 1980s when the three institutions had been well-established in China.

Keywords

zaolian, modern medical sciences, modern China, juvenile delinquency

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