Male Transsexualism in Mainland China

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Though there have been many studies about transsexualism in the West, as well as other parts of the world, nothing has been reported for mainland China. This is mainly because communication about any sexual phenomenon in China is heavily censored. However, the first author of this paper had either written or personal contact with seven transsexuals in China. This study summarizes general information available on the seven, reports in detail on two cases where there was considerable correspondence, and summarizes the one case of transsexual surgery known to have taken place in China in recent years. Since these cases have not been publicized in China, it is hoped that one result of publication of this information will be to open up a dialogue on the subject with the Chinese.

KEY WORDS: transsexuals, China; transsexual surgery; dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

Transsexualism emerged as a clinical diagnosis and sexual behavior in Western culture. The term was first used in 1949 (Cauldwell, 1949, 1950; Pauly and Edgerton, 1986) and Benjamin established the concept in the 1950s and 1960s (Benjamin, 1953, 1966). Though there have been historical and cross-cultural studies (Green, 1969; Bullough, 1975, 1987), so far there have been no reports of the existence of transsexuals in mainland China. The problem in getting sex information out of China is one of communication,

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since even within China information dissemination has not been very effective. Until the last 6 years there was hostility to information about sex appearing in any kind of media in China.

This problem of communication even within China was emphasized by a dispatch carried on the Reuters wire service on March 16, 1988, which reported the existence of the "first" case of transsexualism in China. In this instance, which occurred in Shanghai, a young man raised by his parents as a girl, requested that surgery by performed to change his sex to that of female. The physicians he consulted reportedly did not know how to deal with the case and the Shanghai Evening News emphasized that there was a need for physicians to discuss this problem (Centre Daily News, 1988).

Actually the first case of sex-change surgery known to the authors took place in 1983, in Beijing, and from other records available it seems that the young man in Shanghai was the tenth such person in China since 1983 to request a sex change. Since there might be other cases not known to us, this report is an effort to bring about further dialogue between researchers in China and interested Westerners on this topic.

INFORMATION SOURCES

From 1982 to 1985, the senior author of this paper, Ruan, wrote a column entitled "Psychological Advice or Counsel" in a widely read popular medical magazine (in Chinese), To Your Good Health, which was published in Nanjing. It was the first column of its kind in mainland China and like advice columns in the West it relied upon questions from its readers, a large percentage of which dealt with sexual issues. Although the column never included a discussion of transsexualism or transvestism, a number of readers raised questions on these topics. Ruan replied personally to some of the inquirers and on the basis of either the original letters or subsequent ones, seven individuals seemed to meet the standard criteria for classification as transsexual. Two of them engaged in regular correspondence with Ruan and sent their photographs (dressed as women). Additionally one of them was examined in detail by Ruan, and after determining that psychologically and chromosomally the subject was a male who had taken diethylstilbestrol, Ruan was able to arrange for surgery in Beijing. This was completed in January 1983.

ANALYSIS OF LETTERS

Two of the correspondents wrote anonymously and it was not possible to gain additional information of them. Five, however, used their real names