CHAPTER FOUR

COGNITION, BELIEF, AND PRACTICE:
SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN CHINA, A COURSE UNDER DEVELOPMENT

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The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD 1994) brought light to the fact that the reproductive health needs of adolescents and youth had, as a group, been largely ignored by reproductive health services. The numerous issues and complex needs involved with adolescents’ sexual and reproductive health (SRH) present a set of rigorous challenges to public health services; if ignored, adolescents face health risks that would potentially affect their entire lives. Adolescence and young adulthood, the periods between the respective ages of 10 to 19 years, and 20 to 24 years, present a transitional period of physical, psychological and behavioral development. In China, some of the reproductive health issues faced by adolescents and young adults (the term ‘young people’ will be used in this paper, to indicate these two groups) are shared by young people throughout the world; others, meanwhile, are specific to China’s unique demographics, economy and culture. During the last three decades, great changes have taken place in Chinese society. For China’s young people growing up in a society with such rapid development and tremendous innovation, the problems they encounter are far different from those of an earlier time. To successfully solve these new problems, young people must actively seek out help from society.

A widely accepted theory in the field of health education is that health behavior formation usually requires three stages: cognition, belief and practice or behavior (C-B-P/B). In recent years, young people’s reproductive health in China has made significant progress

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and achievements. Whether looking at young people themselves, or researchers and practitioners working in the field of young people’s SRH (both government and not), all have progressed in the C-B-P developmental process, moving to new, more advanced C-B-P cycles.

Part One: Social Background

Any discussion about the development of young people’s SRH in China during the last three decades, must first examine China’s cultural background and economic development within this time period. Although 30 years is a relatively short period of time given the span of Chinese history, the past 30 years have seen tremendous changes in China.

1. Far-Reaching Influences of Confucian Concepts on Sex and Marriage

China is the cradle of Confucianism and is deeply influenced by Confucian doctrine. Traditional Confucian concepts on sex and marriage include: marriage is decided by one’s parents; one should marry in compliance with one’s parents’ order and the pronouncement of matchmakers; girls’ chastity is of great importance and they should not lose their virginity before marriage; knowledge and topics related to sex should not be openly talked about, and sex can be learned without being explicitly taught; family life should be dominated by males; and females should not take initiative in sex. Some of these aforementioned Confucian concepts on sex and marriage have been diluted in the past five decades, and some remain only to a small degree; others, however, are inveterately embedded in people’s thinking and continue to be profoundly influential.

2. Rapid Development of China’s Economy

From 1978 to 2006, China’s gross domestic product (GDP) continuously increased by approximately 10 percent per year. The GDP in 2006 was 58 times that of 1978, and the rural annual per capita income in 2006 was 27 times that of 1978. This rapid economic development and increase in the standard of living accelerated adolescents’ physical development and brought improvements to their psychological development. During the 20-year period from 1985 to 2005, the