Sex education in China dates back many centuries. In fact, the oldest existing books on sexuality were published in China, in around 200 B.C.1 Some books explicitly described human sexual response and sexual techniques, some provided information on how to prevent sexual dysfunction and others offered information on how to adjust one’s level of sexual activity to maintain longevity.2 Gradually, however, sexual attitudes began to change in the 12th century during the Song Dynasty.3 The government began to closely control people’s sexual lives and to restrict sexual expression; eventually, sexual conservatism became so pervasive that any communication about sexuality was considered taboo.4

This very conservative attitude toward sexuality began to change after the 1949 founding of the People’s Republic of China. In the 1950s, the government began to recognize the importance of sex education, and it published several books on sexuality targeted at the general public.5

Societal change, however, came slowly. Attitudes in the adult population remained conservative,6 but views and behaviors among youth began changing rapidly. After the government adopted the Reform and Open Policy of 1978, Western values and beliefs about sexuality flooded into China. With changes in social ideology and in the traditional extended family structure, reduced social control and an information boom, youth became increasingly interested in sexual expression and many became involved in high-risk sexual behaviors.7

In the late 1970s, in response to concerns related to the country’s large population and high birthrate, the government established its one-child policy, under which married couples typically were limited to a single child.8 Because the policy implicitly required couples to use effective birth control methods, it provided further rationale for supporting comprehensive sex education. Three additional factors supported implementing sex education for Chinese youth: a lack of knowledge about sexuality among youth;9 a documented desire of youth to receive sex education;10 and concern that youth were receiving mixed messages about sex, some of which might encourage risky sexual behavior and sex crimes.11