

TERMINATED PREGNANCIES

“Fast, painless procedure”; “New Generation method!”; or even “Minimum risk at minimum cost”: sparkling slogans for an insurance policy or a dentist’s surgery, but quite shocking when seen on leaflets being distributed outside almost every university in China. This is because they are advertising a new business, one which has flourished considerably in the last few years and which draws on an endless supply of young – and some are extremely young – female consumers. And who is promoting this business? The private clinics that specialise in abortions. **Society in China is changing and women are getting a first taste of independence, a few crumbs of sexual freedom, but what they don’t get is any proper sex education.** A recent survey carried out on over 8,000 women in ten hospitals in Beijing showed that 36% had had more than one abortion and that, especially in rural areas, contraception is still taboo, or, at best, considered insulting to one’s partner. If, in the past, it was married women who had abortions (in 1979 the government decreed a policy of one-child per nuclear family in urban areas), nowadays the majority are teenagers and unmarried women, of whom there has become an ever-increasing number in the post-*Sex & The City* era. According to the Chinese Ministry of Health, in 1990 the number of terminated pregnancies in traditional families reached a peak of 14 million; in 2005 it was 7 million – a drop occasioned by wider distribution of the contraceptive pill, which is used by 80% of married women – but, as well as ignoring the figures from private clinics, that percentage excludes a huge new section of the population:

unmarried women. “There’s a blind spot in girls’ sex education”, Xu Jing, the director of the first Marie Stopes clinic at Qingdao in the People’s Republic of China, told the “New York Times”, “and we are trying to fill this gap in the system”. Public hospitals, which are usually the first port of call for an abortion, are often over-crowded and impersonal, whereas the Marie Stopes clinics, which take their name from the Scottish woman who founded the first birth control clinic in Britain (1920), are private and, as well as performing abortions, they also provide sex education for their patients. Today this is more necessary than ever, given the increasingly widespread practice of pre-marital relations, especially in large cities. In Shanghai, 69% of women have sex before marriage and another seven surveys in China established percentages varying from 20% to 55% of young women who have had to terminate not one but many unwanted pregnancies. “A third of my patients are single”, says Doctor Jun Deng, chief obstetrician in Beijing’s second largest hospital, “and most of those are girls of around 20 or 22 who still think of abortion as a method of contraception”. What about the government? “We may still have a lot to do in the area of sex education, but we’re moving in the right direction”, claims Ru Xiaomei, deputy head of China’s National Family Planning Committee, **“because we are very worried about the growing number of pregnancies among unmarried women”.** **“Here in China it’s not so much a moral problem, but one of education”**, adds Doctor Deng: “We’re missing out on the basics, the ABC of sex education; and the government prefers to rely on slogans rather than taking action”. Is there any prospect of

“schooling” in sex matters? “The only hope can be if it comes from private clinics and aid organisations”. The Marie Stopes foundation, which only opened here in 2003, is teaching the way.

FANS TILL DEATH

So we Italians think we are the most passionate of all sports supporters, with the most skeletons in our stadiums? **In India there’s a ball game that creates even greater madness than our football. Because cricket is cricket.** Pride in the game was sparked off by the first match played on Indian soil (in 1721) and the creation of the first Oriental Cricket Club in Bombay (in 1848). Despite the mysterious death – or apparently murder – of Bob Woolmer, the Pakistani team’s coach, in April in Jamaica; despite the suicide of young Hindu farmer Mahadeb Sarkar who hanged himself because his favourite team lost – imitated by his wife for the same reason; despite the fatal heart attack that struck down a fan in Andhra Pradesh at the end of a losing match, in India the sport “of gentlemen” (which originated in England) is still by far the nation’s most popular game. Apart from being the sport with the most followers on the sub-continent, spurred on by those mega-societies, “Kiwis” from New Zealand or the “West Indies” Indians.

It’s a passion that involves women too, because Indian females of all ages often prove to be more fanatical and knowledgeable than the men when it comes to *innings*, *wicket-keepers*, and *supersubs*. According to the Max Network, 46% of the sports audience is women, a fact that convinced the TV chain to put the actress Mandira Bedi in charge of coverage of the



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world cup matches and to invite along guests – Bollywood stars – who would turn the host of *Biscardi* (a very popular Italian TV sports show) green with envy. “It’s a matter of patriotism too. Cricket can remind a generation of girls who often have very little to cheer about that Indians can achieve something in the world” was the comment of one young local female contributor to the “Times of India” blog. **Moreover, for years, cricket was the means used by the Commonwealth nations, from Australia to New Zealand, from India to Bangladesh to Zimbabwe, to take their revenge on the English overlords; then later, as time went by, it became the safety valve of unsatisfactory democracies and unresolved conflicts.** Today the old reasons for the game’s popularity are secondary to the scale of its popularity. Beckham, Ronaldo, Totti? In India these are nobodies compared with champions like Sachin Ramesh Tendulkar, Virender Sehwag or Anil Kumble, idolised by the crowds and fought over by sponsors all wanting their names on the latest contract. Unfortunately, just as is happening in the West (especially in Italy), with interests and investments worth billions at stake the business is getting dirty. Just look at the latest world cup (won by Australia) which, according to the “Daily Telegraph” has seen the start of “dark days” for cricket: “Days marked by errors, empty stadiums, shameful financial deals and the death of Bob Woolmer, which could bring ruin to the whole sport”. “Atrocious”, commented “The Times”: “The tickets were so expensive that the stadiums were left almost half-empty and the players

unenthusiastic. The only party responsible is the International Cricket Council”.

While waiting for the storm to pass, the Indians are taking their revenge via satellite, via the “tele-discovery” of soccer, that game so beloved of Westerners, that seems so entertaining, as well as still pure and unsullied, when seen on a TV screen.

SPACE BALLS

It’s at least 17 years since the Cold War between Russia and the United States seemed to have “thawed”, but now the freeze appears to be setting in again, this time in the great big ice-box in the sky. At least according to “Pravda”, which recently reported on the glacial argument between Roscosmos and NASA, respectively the space agencies of the two powers. What’s the reason for the dispute? A new international (but mainly “stars and stripes”) space station to be built at one of the moon’s poles and destined to become operational from 2024. “We would have liked to contribute with our technology, but the United States refused our suggestion of cooperation”, the Roscosmos director, Anatoly Perminov, told Interfax, “yet we know that NASA is still short of experts to put the programme in place”. On the other side of the world, the Americans deny the statement: “We haven’t refused any suggestion”, said Michael Braukus, the NASA spokesman in Washington: “It’s true that we received an offer from Roscosmos, but we haven’t yet decided whether or not to involve the international community”. **However, given the by no means ideal beginnings of joint Russian and American exploration of the moon (territory disputed ever since the 1960s), it would not be the first kind of mutual support in space: according to Perminov, Russia has already signed a billion dollar contract with NASA to provide supply trucks for the space stations over the next three years, “a**

definite, tangible sign of our competitiveness”, he added, “especially after the American Columbia disaster” (the shuttle which exploded during re-entry in December 2003). What’s the point of this new base on the moon? The Americans, “Pravda” writes, “have kept their lips sealed and been evasive about it”, but Russia has declared openly that its main objective is to extract helium3. Scorned by critics as the 21st century equivalent of medieval alchemy, a number of scientists however maintain that this could be a feasible and, most importantly, non-pollutant, answer to the world’s energy needs. A non-radioactive helium isotope, helium3 is a powerful fuel used in nuclear fusion, so enormously potent that 6 tons could meet Britain’s needs for a year and 40 tons could supply the United States for the same length of time. **Since helium3 is non-pollutant and effective in small quantities, many countries are giving it serious consideration.** Naturally, these include Russia, despite the fact that she is already the world’s second largest producer of oil and natural gas after Saudi Arabia; others are Germany, India and China. “Whoever occupies the moon first will be the first to get the benefits”, said Ouyang Ziyuan, the scientist heading the Chinese lunar exploration programme, which has plans through until 2017 for an exponential increase in missions intended to decide on areas and methods of extraction. So, while the Kremlin’s energy giant Gazprom is supporting Russian ambitions, the United States appears much more cautious – partly because scientists have not yet verified the real virtues of helium3. Who knows, while those two contestants are disputing the matter, perhaps it will be the third, the Asian tiger, which will actually get the benefit of the moon’s energy resources.