# Sexual Lives in Contemporary China: Young People Negotiating Changing Moral Standards

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## Abstract

There is a booming market in sex-related industries in China and sexual attitudes have changed since the ‘open door’ policy was instigated in 1978. Previous studies conducted in metropolitan cities like Beijing and Shanghai highlight increasingly liberal sexual attitudes among young adults. However, governmental regulations, including delivering limited sex education in schools under the ideal of a harmonious society, aim to cultivate civilised and self-restrained citizen-subjects. As a result, young adults face a conflict between ‘socialist morality’ and ‘a sexualised society’. To examine young adults’ opinions on premarital sex and changing moral standards in this context, I carried out semi-structured interviews with 20 unmarried young men and women aged between 21 and 28 in Houma, Linyi, and Chongqing. These three inland cities were selected because of their relatively slow economic development and because they have been less studied in existing academic work. I also conducted two focus groups with Chinese students in the UK to explore their perspectives on virginity. In addition to social and political pressures, these young adults, especially women, are facing many challenges in everyday social interactions, which are characterised by double standards of morality and differentiated gender roles. I argue that they adopt the strategy of the ‘culture of conformity’ (Huang and Pan, 2009) in order to cope with these tensions and display decent morality. I found little evidence among participants that premarital sex is delinked from marriage. In discussing these issues I critically interrogate Pan’s (2008) propositions on a Chinese sexual revolution and conclude, following Wang (2017), that sexual revolution in China is an unfinished project due to the persistence of sexual double standards. Moreover, these young Chinese adults still hold conservative views of their own sexual lives, although they are more ready to embrace liberal others than their parents’ generation.

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## Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*Xing* is the common Chinese translation of the English word *sex*, and it is also frequently used in the translation of other sex related forms and phrases, for expamle, *xing de* (*sexual*), *xing gan de* (*sexy*), and *xing jiaoyu* (*sex education*). Additionally, *xing* is sometimes employed in the translation of sexuality. It was not until the Reform era, people began to realise the need to separate the translation of *sexuality* from the translation of *sex* in Chinese. Though there is still ambiguity in the meaning of sexuality, according to *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Bennett et al., 2013) the word *sexuality* is "a basic quality or essence which underlay a range of activities and psychic dispensations" (p.319). Further in *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (Abercrombie et al., 2000) *sexuality* was defined as "the mode by which sexual interest and sexual preference are expressed" (p.313). When people are talking about sexuality, they are talking about all the desires, patterns, and behaviours that constructed their sexual identities, such as heterosexual and homosexual (Bennett et al., 2013). The absence of a proper Chinese translation of sexuality was first identified in the 1980s at Beijing Medical College. *Xing* or phrases of *xing* could not express precisely the meaning of sexuality in Chinese. For instance, translators have problem with translating Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Three different translations carry three different meanings: *Xing jingyan shi* (*History of Sexual Experience*); *Xing yishi shi* (*History of Sexual Awareness*); *Xing shi* (*History of Sex*), but none of these tiles captures the original meaning of Foucault's work in French (Zhang, 2011). To identify the differences between the English term *sex* and *sexuality* in their Chinese translation, scholars had a discussion during the 2005 Institute for Research on Gender and Sexuality conference. This translation issue was temporarily solved by putting quotation marks around *xing* when referring to *sexuality* and using

*xing* without quotation marks when referring to *sex* (Zhang, 2011).

Distinguishing between *sexuality* and *sex* in their Chinese translation marked a turning point in the history of Chinese sexuality. The meaning of this decision goes beyond linguistics, it suggested an "increasing self-consciousness among Chinese of the need to define properly the domain of Chinese sexuality" (Zhang, 2011, p.1). Zhang (2011) pointed out that this change is so fundamental and it might indicate that a sexual revolution has taken place in China. Moreover, Pan (2008) claimed that the sexual revolution in China is completed. In this context, people all concurred that China is "sexier" than it was thirty years ago. However, people's attitudes toward university students' photo-taking in Beijing might paint a different picture.

During the winter of 2013, very many comments, mainly criticisms, were posted on the internet about young women taking photos of their feminist standpoint at the Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU). On 4 November 2013, 17 female students were photographed holding up whiteboards with statements about their vaginas. For example: "My vagina says, I want freedom" or "My vagina says, first night is bullshit". These photographs taken by BFSU female students were a promotion for play adapted from *The Vagina Monologues* by the US playwright Eve Ensler which would be performed on their campus. The photographs quickly found their way onto many social media platforms and resulted in a great number of discussions online. As women's equal rights with men are advocated by the states, sex had been discussed on the internet for a long time, and with scholars' affirmative analysis of sexual revolution in China, I expected support or at least a calm discussion on this topic. However, surprisingly, these young women and their posters were largely disparaged by both laypeople and scholars alike. Many male netizens posted misogynistic comments on these young women's morality and judgements on their appearance: "After looking at their faces, I don't have any interest in listening to what their vaginas say", and "Can't they find some prettier ones to do this?" Concepts such as 'morality', 'shame', 'face' and

‘Chinese traditions’ were also frequently used and the students were also compared to prostitutes by many commentators, including such comments as: “Don’t they feel shame or guilt?”, “This is shameless. How could they have any face to live on?” An angry mother even wrote a letter to the president of BFSU censuring him for delivering an unsuitable education in Chinese traditions. She mentioned in her letter that she was being mocked by her friends and relatives who said things like: “I heard that your son goes to BFSU, don’t let him find you a daughter-in-law from BFSU”. Furthermore, she denounced the president for indulging these young women in their shameless behaviour. She considered them to be more unashamed than prostitutes, because “when caught doing something shameless, even prostitutes know to cover their faces”. She then criticised the unsuccessful moral education of the university and worried about the situation in which many students got rooms at the hotel near campus and was angry about the stress-free environment that BFSU created for homosexuals. Finally, she referred to the lack of teaching of Chinese traditions in the university and questioned the future of the country. She mentioned that man is symbolised as heaven, which governs earth, representing woman in traditional Chinese morality. Women’s morality she claimed is critical to the future of the nation and she thought that the university has turned these pure female students into sluts without self-respect. The letter from the angry mother and the mention of ‘face’ in other comments suggest that the traditional sexual scripts (see Chapter 2 for definition) of virginity and virginity loss may still characterise the framing of Chinese people’s interpretations of sexuality. Nevertheless, young people are widely exposed to various pornography and are facing a sexualised society. Thus, my first research question is how young people navigate through this changing sexual landscape. Although there is a variety of information about sex on the internet, I suspected that there may still be a lack of systematic sex education behind the gender discrimination. To fully understand young adults’ sexual attitude, I then want to research how young adults have acquired sexual knowledge and how this relates to their sexual attitude and expression.

Apart from laypeople like this angry mother or other netizens, a few scholars also criticised this photo-posting behaviour of BFSU students. Li Yinhe quoted one unnamed scholar in her blog, who wrote implicitly:

> *Actually, it's better to directly do whatever you believe rather than saying it in this way. If you can't do what you displayed, that means you still have a sense of shame. Then why would you shamelessly promote it? This further means that what you say is inappropriate and your words (I'm not going to quote them here) actually blaspheme the thing you are talking about. You actually did things in a false and pretentious way when you thought you were upholding justice for it.*

This scholar wrote "I'm not going to quote" in an ironic way and thus showed his disdain for the young women's feminist stand. In addition to this, I had seen many vulgar online comments about women who have premarital sex and how the posters thought that marrying non-virgins would destroy the genes of their offspring. Along with these online discussions about premarital sex, *chunv qingjie* which could be translated as female virginity complex is widely used on the internet. Female virginity complex shows men's desire for a virgin girlfriend and also a virgin bride (see Chapter 2). It seems that people hold a double standard on sexuality. Men's sexual desire has never been denied, whereas the expression of female sexual desire is either neglected or condemned in China. It was after reading all these online comments that I started to think about gender-role expectations in China. Along with this, I wanted to probe into how traditional gender ideology has shaped ideas about young adults' spousal choice and the pressure they feel to conform to this gender-role expectation. Furthermore, I hoped to investigate the extent to which the traditional Chinese background, such as Confucianism, still lingers when discussing sexuality with young adults in China today. However, according to Li Yinhe's blog[1], the rate of

[1] http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_473d53360102f91y.html

premarital sex is 71% in contemporary China. The conflict between this relatively high premarital rate and the online denunciations of premarital sex made me curious about young adults' attitudes towards premarital sex. Hence, my next research question is how young people view premarital sex and how their sexual activities are shaped by the socialist morality and the traditional gendered expectations. A further research question is whether the female virginity complex still exists. Finally, do the attitudes and behaviours of these young people fit with the idea of Chinese sexual revolution?

Many studies have explored young people's sexual lives in China, such as *Opening up: Youth sex culture and market reform in Shanghai* (Farrer, 2002), *Gender, dating and violence in urban China* (Wang, 2017), *Virginity and premarital sex in contemporary China* (Zhou, 1989) and *When are you going to get married?* (Zhang & Sun, 2014). They have investigated young adults' sexual attitudes and sex lives in China. However, all these works are either decades old or only focus on metropolitan cities like Beijing or Shanghai. Research on this topic has rarely paid attention to cities that are less economically developed than these metropolitan cities. Compared to works on metropolitan cities, I hope that my research can provide a greater understanding of the challenges young people face in everyday social interactions that are characterised by double standards of morality and traditional gender ideology.

My thesis is divided into seven chapters. Following this introduction chapter is the second chapter, in which I will review the literature on sexuality, the issue of virginity in China and the idea of China's sexual revolution. To fully understand those netizens' references to 'Chinese tradition' when commenting on the BFSU students, I will enquire into the origins of traditional Chinese sexual morality, and the development of morality on sex from the late Shang dynasty to the Qing dynasty. After this, I will explore sexuality after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 until the 21st century, as well as a comparison of sexuality between Western culture and the Chinese Mainland. The occurrence of

a double standard concerning past sexual experience and the concept of virginity will also be reviewed in the literature. To contextualise the issue of virginity, the meaning of virginity and virginity loss in China will be discussed.

In the third chapter, I will give an overview of the methodological approach that I applied for data collection in the three Chinese cities during the winter of 2014. I will give an explanation of the rationale for choosing my research method and illustrate the interview frame that I used during fieldwork. I will also discuss the benefits of using snowball sampling rather than self-selected sampling and the importance of *guanxi*[2] in these cities. I will explain the obstacles that I came across during data collection. Additionally, I will discuss the necessity of conducting focus groups in the UK to investigate young Chinese adults' definitions of virginity. On top of that, I will look into their views on virginity. At the same time, I will also review the limitations of my methodology.

Chapter 4 will examine the theme of sex education and morality in China today. Before probing into sex education in contemporary China, I will briefly re-evaluate its history since the Republican era. Following that, I will discuss the limited sex education that Chinese students receive at school and at home. I will then analyse other resources, including reading, peer groups and the internet, from which young adults gain information about sex. Meanwhile, I will explore the tensions encountered by young adults between socialist morality and the sexualised society. In addition to social pressures and governmental regulations, young adults are facing more challenges in everyday social interactions that are characterised by a double standard of morality and gender differences. Chapter 5 will inspect individual interpretations of morality. The sexual double standard on definitions of virginity and past sexual experience will be studied. Although it seems that young men face fewer moral regulations, this does not imply that they can perform the masculine ideal without effort or personal investment. In these

[2] *Guanxi* describes the basic dynamic in personalized networks of influence (which can be best described as the relationships individuals cultivate with other individuals) and is a central idea in Chinese society.

terms, I will also consider young adults' spousal choice, by which differentiated gender roles will be demonstrated. In these two chapters I will raise questions about failures to challenge the social morality, the existence of a sexual double standard, and the refashioning of patriarchy in spousal choice and consider what this tells us about the so-called sexual revolution in China.

In Chapter 6, I will probe into the effects of the culture of conformity (see Chapter 3 for definition) on people's sexual attitudes. I will introduce the relation between conformity, Confucianism and face. I will raise questions about the effect of the culture of conformity on young people and see what it did to young women's intimate lives. Through young adults' attitudes towards the sexual lives of the younger generation and their descriptions of love stories from their parents' generation, generational changes in sexuality will be illustrated. At the end of this chapter, the photo-taking at BFSU will be analysed as an exception to the culture of conformity. Additionally, I will explore young adults' attitudes towards those female students' promotion of a feminist standpoint as outsiders and I will also look into their reactions when becoming involved. In this way, I will discuss how young adults situate themselves in between the traditional self and modern and liberal others. The relationships between young people's conformity in their sexual lives and the idea of sexual revolution in China will also be explored in this chapter.

In the final chapter, I will present my contribution to the current discussion about attitudes towards sex and sexuality in urban China, which contrasts with studies conducted in metropolitan cities. I will come back to the debate about sexual revolution and see what has changed in small cities. I will also examine the conflict between 'liberal' and 'traditional' young adults' face and reflect upon the changes and continuities in sexuality in the reformed China. Meanwhile, I will review the limitations of my research and prospects for this topic.

# Chapter 2

## Sexuality and social changes in China – A sexual revolution?

With China's opening up, "a youth-led sexual revolution" (Jeffreys, 2015) is said to have been observed in China. There is growing tolerance of various sexual behaviours and attitudes, such as casual sex, commercial sex and homosexuality. Moreover, women's liberal actions including the performance of *The Vagina Monologues* are taking place. However, there is also resistance to the current 'sexual revolution', such as the angry mother who wrote a letter to the president of BFSU. In the meantime, gender differences still exist; for example, virginity is often a concern only for women in China as hymeneal blood serves as an indicator of a virgin while there are no indicators for male virginity. The high value placed on it causes Chinese women to fear social pressure after they lose their virginity, rather than spiritual guilt. Researchers like Farrer (2002) and Wang (2017)[3] have found a clearly expressed sexual double standard in their research. Farrer conducted his ethnographic study in Shanghai in the 1990s and he noticed a double standard of premarital sexual experience among his participants which he named as *Male Experience and Female Silence*. Sexually inexperienced male participants in his study expressed their fear of being laughed at, while most female participants seemed to agree with the idea that women do not need to have broad premarital experience or at least they need to remain silent about their experience. People were more tolerant of men with premarital sexual experience than women, and some women even preferred their future spouses to be sexually experienced. In addition, some men sought a virgin wife, but were eager to have sex with their girlfriend before marriage. All these sexual behaviours and attitudes may find their origins in sexual morality in China. Smith (1990) evaluated sexual revolution in America by reviewing survey data

[3] I finished my fieldwork in January 2015. Wang's book of *Gender, dating and violence in urban China* in 2017 comes after the date of my fieldwork. However she started data collecting in 2004 which is before my fieldwork.

between 1960 and 1990, and explained in his report that a revolutionary overthrow of traditional sexual morality is the fundamental indicator of sexual revolution. At the same time, changes in sexual attitudes and behaviours were always identified in sexual revolution. Thus, to discover the idea of sexual revolution in China and the origin of Chinese sexual morality, shifts in sexual morality over time as well as changes in sexual behaviours need to be investigated. Chinese people, especially the ethnic majority – Han – have developed their own sexual morality during China's long history. This morality is not only a means of governing Chinese sexual behaviours and attitudes, but is also central to the conflict between Chinese and Western cultures (Pan, 1995). In Chinese culture people strive to be 'normal' on sensitive topics such as sexuality, which is a reflection of the culture of conformity; and in the case of virginity, people tend to assume what others' response will be and respond in compliance with the mainstream (Yau, 2010). Hence, virginity in China needs to be understand in the context of sexuality and morality.

## The origins of traditional Chinese sexual morality and sexuality before 1949

**Table 1 Timeline of Chinese history**

| **Social formation** | **Dynasty** | | **Lifespan** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Primitive society | Five Emperors Era | | 2528 BCE – 2029 BCE |
| Slave society | Xia dynasty | | 2070 BCE – 1600 BCE |
| | **Shang dynasty** | | 1600 BCE – 1046 BCE |
| | Western Zhou dynasty | | 1046 BCE – 771 BCE |
| | Eastern Zhou dynasty | **Spring Autumn period** | 770 BCE – 476 BCE |
| Feudal society | | Warring States period | 475 BCE – 221 BCE |
| | Qin dynasty | | 221 BCE – 206 BCE |
| | Western Chu dynasty | | 206 BCE – 202 BCE |
| | **Western Han dynasty** | | 201 BCE – November 8 CE |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Xin dynasty | | December 8 CE – 23 CE |
| | **Eastern Han dynasty** | | 25 – 220 |
| | Three Kingdoms | | 220 – 280 |
| | Jin dynasty | Western Jin dynasty | 265 – 316 |
| | | Eastern Jin dynasty | 317 – 420 |
| | 16 Kingdoms | | 304 – 439 |
| | Southern and Northern dynasty | | 420 – 589 |
| | Sui dynasty | | 581 – 619 |
| | **Tang dynasty** | | 618 – 705 |
| | Five Dynasty and Ten Kingdoms | | 891 – 979 |
| | **Song dynasty** | Northern Song dynasty | 960 – 1127 |
| | | Southern song dynasty | 1127 – 1279 |
| | Liao dynasty | | 916 – 1218 |
| | Western Xia dynasty | | 1038 – 1227 |
| | Jin dynasty | | 1115 – 1234 |
| | Dali Kingdom | | 937 – 1253 |
| | Yuan dynasty | | 1206 – 1402 |
| | Ming dynasty | | 1368 – 1662 |
| Semi-colonial and semi-feudal society | Qing dynasty | | 1616 – 1912 |
| | Republic of China | | 1912 – 1949 |
| Socialism period | People's Republic of China | | 1949 -- |

Sex in the history of China chiefly underwent a period from being liberal and encouraged to being conservative and repressed between Shang dynasty and Qing dynasty. Moreover, sexual permissiveness had occupied a long span in the history of China and lasted from the early Primitive society to the Han and Tang dynasty (Liu & Hu, 2008). According to Pan (1995), sex was never a sin in China and asceticism was barely an issue before Tang dynasty. On the contrary, people held enlightened attitudes towards sex during that period and sex was treated as

the root of all things and the source of the universe in *Five Classics*[4]. Pan (1995) also explained that the earliest sexual morality in China took shape between the late Shang dynasty and the Spring and Autumn period, which marked the end of the slave society. People in the primitive and slave society considered physical and psychological satisfaction and enjoyment to be the primary meaning and value of sexual conduct. Enjoying sex at that time was not frowned upon, but neither was it commendable. When sexual morality was first developed, sexually permissive activities such as intercourse in carriages and in the field were recorded and praised in the *Classic of Poetry*[5]. Confucianism began to develop in the Spring and Autumn period, but unlike Neo-Confucianism which controlled sexual behaviours in the Song dynasty, Confucianism at that time uphold ideas such as *shi se xing ye* (*appetite for food and sex is nature*) and *yin shi nan nü* (*food and sex are basic human desires*)[6]. In the Warring States period, the Queen Dowager Xuan applied coitus positions when discussing tactics with her ministers (Liu & Hu, 2008). She explained that it hurts her more when the late emperor put his knee on her during the intercourse than when the late emperor laid his whole body on her. Thus the Queen Dowager Xuan further suggested mainly attacking one town to inflict her enemy rather than spreading the war all over the country.

Even when monogamy among average people and polygamy among the upper class had been established, the rules were not strict during the Han and Tang dynasties. Marriages were not changeless, and young adults were entitled to choose their future spouses to some extent. The status of women had not yet fallen to a subordinate position: divorce was not unusual and divorced women were not condemned by the public; widows had the right to remarry; servant girls had the right to resist sexual violence from theirs masters. In addition, the *Sexual*

[4] The *Five Classics* are five pre-Qin Chinese books that form part of the traditional Confucian canon.
[5] *Classic of Poetry* is also translated as the *Book of Songs*. It is the oldest collection of Chinese poetry and can be dated back to the 11th century BCE.
[6] Appetite for food and sex is nature and food and sex are basic human desires are lines by Gaozi (a disciple of the philosopher Mencius) and Confucius respectively. Both ideas are components of Confucianism.

*Practices* (*房中术*) raised by Taoism reached its peak between the Han dynasty and the Tang dynasty. Taoists believed that by performing these sexual practices one can stay in excellent physical condition and attain longevity. Longevity is the main goal of Taoism and scenes of being accompanied by beauties after one becomes a saint are described in classic Taoist texts. Sex is not only one of the objects of Taoism, but it is also a means to become immortal and a saint. This reflects a deep-rooted concept in China, which is that sex is not independent nor does it have its own object; rather, it has to serve a 'grand' goal (Pan, 1995). Although neither *Sexual Practices* nor beliefs in Taoism could help achieve immortality, they did help to improve the quality of sex and its demand for women to orgasm in order to get more *yin* unintentionally guaranteed women's rights in sex at that time. Moreover, erotic diagrams and literature were popular among both the upper and lower classes. Generally speaking, sexual morality in China was liberal and diversified before the Cheng–Zhu school (*程朱理学*)[7] came to occupy a dominant position in Song dynasty (Pan, 1995).

The control of sexual behaviour began to be strict during the Song Dynasty when the Cheng–Zhu school (*程朱理学*) came into being. Sexual attitudes in China became very conservative and any sex-related issue was seen taboo. From that time, China entered a two-hundred-year period of a 'sexless culture' (Pan, 1995). People's sexual activities, especially women's, were repressed under this system and Pan (1999) outlined five destinies for women in the patriarchal society of China: wife, concubine, servant girl, Buddhist nun, and prostitute. Women could not escape these five foreordinations, no matter what their talents or efforts might be. Fortunately, this sexual phenomenon and women's status began to change when the last feudal society – the Qing dynasty – ended. China experienced an unstable period, during which the war of aggression waged by Japan and the civil war took place.

[7] The Cheng–Zhu school (*程朱理学*), which is one of the major philosophical schools of Neo-Confucianism, based on the ideas of the Neo-Confucian philosophers Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, and Zhu Xi, promoted the Confucian value of "upholding justice, annihilating desire" (*存天理，灭人欲*) at that time.

The period between the fall of the last emperor and the founding of the People's Republic of China was called the Republican era. Massive political, economic, ideological and cultural shifts had been brought into China in the late Qing dynasty and the Republican period. New ideas, democracy and science were introduced to reconstruct the nation (Li, 2010). Sociology as a discipline was first introduced by modern elites from either West or Japan at that time. And urban intellectuals started to import the science of sexuality from the West in order to strengthen the race and the country. Women's rights and liberation were stimulated at the same time. For instance, women's foot-binding was formally abolished by Sun Yat-sen the founding father of the Republic of China in 1912. Besides, various types of women's costume including formal pants suits, sportswear and work clothes emerged. Among all the social transformations, the May Fourth movement stood out and gave rise to various social and political concerns. The May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist protest participated in by students in Beijing in 1919[8]. However, the term May Fourth Movement also generally refers to the New Culture Movement during 1915 to 1921. "Through the ideologically enlightening effect of the May Fourth movement, the concepts of "gender equality" and "equal rights" achieved a place in mainstream public discourse" (Li, 2010, p.21). These concepts encouraged a group of women to fight for equal rights and opportunities and to express their sexuality. Zhang Jingsheng who was called as 'Dr Sex', published a book named *The History of Sexuality* in 1926. *The History of Sexuality* was based on real sexual stories contributed by several female university students and Zhang Jingsheng's comments on their stories. It reflected women's struggle for gender equality and more liberal sexual attitudes among Republican intellectuals. Although there were introductions of sexology and movements for women's equal rights with men, they were either for the purpose of reinforcing the nation or only trends among urban intellectuals. It was not until the Maoist era when transformations on sexuality became a social phenomenon and had deeply changed women's

[8] Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_Fourth_Movement

status.

**Changes in sexuality in the Maoist era**

When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the equal status of men and women in both domestic and social life was guaranteed by law for the first time. People's attitudes toward sexuality has changed, since free choice in both love and marriage were encouraged at the beginning of Maoist era. Yan's (2003) book – *Private life under socialism* – explores love, intimacy, and family changes in a Chinese village between 1949 and 1999, and is an important clue of changes in sexuality since Maoist era. Yan carried out his research in Xiajia village, Heilongjiang province, north-eastern China, where he used to live as an ordinary farmer from the age of 17 until 24. He returned to the village as an anthropologist from Harvard University and carried out several periods of fieldwork there between 1989 and 1999.

The terms that local people used when they referred to spouse selection in Yan's (2003) research could reflect the changes in sexuality among different generations. Three local terms were applied instead of spouse selection – *shuo xifu*, *zhao pojia*, and *zhao duixiang*. The first term, *shuo xifu*, is used by males while the second, *zhao pojia*, is used by females. *Xifu* in the first term refers to either one's wife or the wife of one's son; and *shuo* is a verb which in this context means targeting a woman by negotiation between her parents and a matchmaker. Thus, the term *shuo xifu* describes marriage as a negotiation by parents for their son. *Pojia* in the second term means the home of a woman's future mother-in-law; and the term *zhao pojia* depicts the act of parents finding a suitable future home for their daughter. In both terms, it is the parents, rather than the couple themselves, who make the decisions and take the leading role in a marriage. However, during the 1990s, the third term, *zhao duixiang*, was more

popular than the first two. *Zhao duixiang* means looking for the beloved other; and the individual, rather than parents, is the subject in this term. Yan found that villagers used different terms in different contexts. Parents preferred the first two terms when asked about their children's marriages, while the third term was frequently used in young people's conversations about spouse selection.

Three types of spouse selection were mentioned by local villagers during Yan's research – free spouse selection, matches-by-introduction (which refers to finding a spouse through a friend, relative, or a matchmaker), and arranged marriage. Parents make all the major decisions in an arranged marriage. Yan surveyed the marriages of 484 male villagers, classified each case into one of the three marriage types, and found that over the previous five decades there was a clear shift towards free spouse selection. The proportion of free spouse selection was only 7% in 1960 but rose to 36% by the 1990s.

Before 1949, marriages were arranged by parents. A person might marry someone whom they had never met because they did not have any choice in their own marriage. After the founding of new China, the government encouraged young people to pursue love and decide their marriages for themselves. Petőfi Sándor's poem, *Love and Freedom*, was people's creed of love during the 1950s. Although they very much wanted free love and marriage, the typical mode during the 1950s was marriage first, then dating. Therefore, it was actually more or less a new type of marriage coercion, but in a different way. However, the date itself was still different from what people do today. Asking a girl for a date directly in the 1950s was almost equivalent to sexual harassment. The normal way to ask a girl for a date was to put a film ticket in a book that you returned or lent to a girl. If she refused, you could pretend that you were not doing this on purpose. If she kept it, this meant she wanted to date you. Yet, even when they were dating, they followed certain rules step by step. Body touching during the 1950s always began with the holding of little fingers. People began to date after they got married and they still began by holding hands, so it can be seen that

great value must have been placed on female virginity at that time.

Raising the status of women was part of the revolutionary project in the Maoist era. Moreover, to encourage women to join the labour force, actions were launched to improve women's position in marriage. Yan (2003) described how, beginning in 1946, the Land Reform Campaign brought great changes in the social life of Xiajia village. Implemented in 1951 to 1952, the new marriage law aimed to revolutionise Chinese marriage customs. Arranged marriage, concubinage, and purchased marriage were legally banned by the new marriage law. Nevertheless, the state-sponsored campaigns seemed to have limited impact on private life, including spouse selection. According to some informal interviews with elderly informants by Yan, parents still had absolute control over their adult children's marriages during the 1950s. Although some of the village youth were engaged in political activities, they did not show any great desire for marital autonomy. Moreover, for young activists, lacking romance during the Land Reform period seemed to be evidence of selflessness.

The major change in marriage during the 1950s was that parents began to consult with their children when making decisions regarding the search for marriage partners. However, parents would still try to convince their children when disagreements arose. Another change was that men and women were allowed to meet briefly with the presence of parents and matchmakers and then to express their impressions of each other. In this way, parents kept their power, with the consents of young people, in their children's marriage. As a result, matches-by-introduction emerged during the 1950s. In addition, both Uncle Lu and Aunt Gao in Yan's study agreed that, although women had played an important role in the Land Reform, their participation did not have any impact on young men in public life as men and women always worked separately. Working separately in public life seldom gave young men and women the chance to become acquainted; and this might be one factor influencing young people's desire for marital autonomy.

From 1966 to 1976, Mao started off the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution Movement, normally referred as the Cultural Revolution, on all of the nation. The Cultural Revolution was basically radical egalitarianism and led to economic disaster. During this full decade, schools were essentially cancelled and people were closely monitored by the Red Guard. Instead of love, the common revolutionary goal was the initial factor in a marriage, and when people got married they took their vows in front of the leader's portrait. With the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, it was political beliefs and political stands instead of love that became the main theme between men and women. Different political beliefs and stands between married couples led to a second peak in the divorce rate since 1949. During the Cultural Revolution, everything about love was considered a symbol of capitalism. Novels, films and theatre which had the theme of love were banned.

During the Cultural Revolution, a homogenized model of gender was established, women were masculinised, the distinction between men and women collapsed (Evan, 1997). Choices of the colour of raiment were generally limited to dark blue, grey, and black by both genders. It was indecent for couples to hold hands on the street, and young lovers walking on the street at night might be investigated by the Red Guard. Even if they had sufficient evidence to prove that both of them were the offspring of revolutionaries and were doing revolutionary work, they would still be judged as immoral and corrupt. Kissing in public was considered uncivilised. As the government was trying to bring the entire nation to arms, servicemen were preferred by most women. Though gender equality was advocated and gender distinctions was minimized during the Maoist era, differences in sexual attitudes between different genders were still considered 'natural' especially in their intimate lives. It was not until the implementation of the Economic Reform and Open Up policy in 1978 that China began to entirely open up to the world and Chinese people's intimate lives started to change deeply.

## Changes in sexuality since the Reform era and the debate of sexual revolution

The 1970s saw the end of Maoist era. Chairman Mao passed away in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping came into power in 1979. Deng brought radical changes to China including China's reform in economy and Open Door policy (Ho, et al., 2018). Dramatic changes happened in terms of economic developments, social environments and sexual scripts since the Reform era. The definition of sexual scripts employed here was developed by Jackson and Ho (2014) from Gagnon and Simon. Rather than biologically driven, sexual scripts were characterised by them as completely socially interactive. Jackson and Ho (2014) described sexual scripts as "sources of meaning and general guides for action" (p. 46). Sexual scripts facilitate us the power to interpret our "bodily feelings", enable us to analyse situations as "potentially sexual" and empower us to act accordingly in each situations (Jackson & Ho, 2014, p.46). As sexual scripts are based on social interaction, they are not fixed and "therefore can change over time and vary with context" (Jackson & Ho, 2014, p.46).

Changes in social attitudes towards sexuality are also reflected in Zhou's (1989) study. Compared to circumstances during the 1970s, it was more popular and socially acceptable for young people to display affection in public during the late 1980s. Although it was more popular and acceptable in urban areas, rural young people were also trying to pierce through the traditional sex-segregated culture. Engaged rural young couples during the late 1980s could have close interactions such as going to the movies or town together, which would have caused a scandal in the 1970s.

The most notable feature of the 1980s was the conflicts between various forms of political consciousness and different ideological trends. The co-existence of diverse concepts of love and marriage was also a distinctive feature during this period. A second Marriage Law was enacted in 1980, which was a major event in

Chinese marriage history. The second Marriage Law affirmed the freedom to divorce in a clear legal form. It led to the third peak in the divorce rate between 1980 and 1987. This marriage revolution broke the long stable situation of marriage and 'emotional feud' became the most common reason for divorce. Moreover, Engels' statement that "marriage without love is immoral" became the most frequently cited great quotation. In other words, the traditional Chinese concept of 'life-long marriage' was fundamentally shaken during this period.

Differing from the situation in urban areas, according to Yan's fieldwork in Xiajia village, as far as free spouse selection was concerned, it was springtime from 1963 to 1983. As a result of focusing on agriculture in a pragmatic manner, collective farming began to improve and villagers enjoyed relative peace and a stable life over the following two decades. A new type of public life emerged on the basis of the stable collective economy which offered village youth opportunities to socialise with the opposite sex. Movies and basketball games were the most popular public activities. Watching movies during the 1960s in Xiajia village was different from what we do today. Movies were shown in an open field and villagers either took their own chairs or stood to watch them. Some village youth would intentionally stand at the edge of the audience when the movies began and they paid more attention to each other than to the screen. Like the movies, the annual basketball tournament also provided opportunities for romantic encounters. Among all the public activities, labour in the fields offered the most frequent, long-lasting opportunities for village youth to talk and get acquainted with the opposite sex.

There were two major changes in spouse selection during Yan's study: firstly, no single case was found to lead to the breakdown of a parent-child relationship regarding marriage; furthermore, differently from the situation in the 1950s, in most cases when disagreement occurred regarding spouse selection, the young people eventually convinced their parents and won their approval. Actually, by the late 1960s, young people's autonomy in marriage had increased to the extent

that few parents would decide marriage partners for their children without their consent.

The fourth peak in the divorce rate, which occurred from 1988 to 1990, was entirely due to economic conditions. Many couples who claimed ‘emotional feud’ as grounds for divorce were actually sexually disharmonious and for the first time Chinese people publicly included sex in their quality of life. Furthermore, the impact of the economic tide was not only reflected in traditional Chinese family patterns but also in the fundamental shake-up of Chinese people’s concepts of marriage and love. The worship of money and money-oriented concepts has greatly changed people’s marriages and sexual attitudes; and extramarital sex began to spread. Due to the reducing emphasis on marriage, people tended to be random and varied when choosing their spouses. There was no mainstream or uniform standard in the choosing of spouses across the whole country. Besides, in Farrer’s (2002) studies of youth sexuality in Shanghai, he argues that the standard of physical purity in premarital relations of the Maoist era becomes indistinct and never absolute during the post-socialist era. Young Shanghai people who have engaged in sexual acts before marriage justify their behaviour on the grounds that sexual intercourse is a sublimation of their love and they will marry their partners. Thus, purity of the body is replaced by purity of purpose.

Both Yan’s interviews and a follow-up survey showed that the number of free spouse selections decreased during the early 1980s, but this dip was followed by a steady increase. The dismantling of the collectives might be one of the factors accounting for this change. The collectives had been officially dismantled by the end of 1983 and this reduced the opportunities for the sexes to work together. This situation changed quickly. Young people who did not benefit from the land distribution in 1983 became landless labourers and began to seek jobs in urban areas, which opened up new horizons of social life for them. Television, which revealed new lifestyles to villagers and aroused new aspirations among the

village youth, was another factor that changed the situation. According to Yan, love and romance in the Reform era seemed to be more passionate than ever.

By the 21st century, Chinese seem to be more sexually liberal and more open-minded on sexual related issues. According to Wang and Ho (2007), young women in Beijing have begun to acknowledge their bodily desires. The government's official position since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 has been that men and women are equal. However, equal from the government's perspective merely means that male and female are substantially the same (Liu, 1993; Meng, 1993). Chinese women's requirement for sameness between the two genders ignored their bodies. Thus, announcing that they do not care about their bodily desire became collective. During the 1980s, some female writers began to acknowledge and write about the bodily desire and sexuality of Chinese women. Wang and Ho's (2007) article on violence and desire in Beijing was based on an in-depth interview with a young Chinese woman Meng Xi, along with her 22 online diaries and subsequent emails and telephone call contacts. Meng Xi's response to father-daughter incest and her dating experience stands out from Wang and Ho's project on dating and violence, which includes 41 interviews conducted in Beijing. Though Wang and Ho's article did not analyse Chinese women' bodily desire in detail, their interview with Meng Xi showed that the she began to be aware of her body and this awareness is a reflection of the "awakening of the collective consciousness of Chinese women of their bodily desire" (Wang & Ho, 2007, p.1328). The seeking of individual desire was expressed by urban Chinese in the 21st century, but that does not mean that Chinese became highly sexually active especially among young adults. To discuss the sexuality of young Chinese, the sexual conducts of young adults need to be illustrated and compared to their counterparts in a liberal culture.

According to Brooks-Gun and Paikoff (1993), many adolescents have had experiences of sexual intercourse by the age of 17 in the USA, and most of them

(75% or more) have become sexually active by the age of 19. Much later than their American counterparts, only 16.9% of Chinese college students are found to have had sexual intercourse (Pan & Yang, 2004). Having sex at an early age in China is an experience worth showing off for a man, whereas it is a shameful experience undertaken only under pressure for most women.

NATSAL is the survey conducted national wide in the Britain on the topic of sexual attitudes and lifestyles. There has been Three NATSAL surveys from 1990 to 2012: NATSAL-1 from 1990 to 1991, NATSAL-2 from 1999 to 2001 and NATSAL-3 from 2010 to 2012. According to data collected by NATSAL-3, the average age at first heterosexual intercourse among the British is 17 and 24.4% of people have had heterosexual intercourse before age 16. It needs to be mentioned that, in the UK, the age of consent is set at 16 while it is 14 in mainland China. Like the UK, Hong Kong sets the age of consent at 16. From NATSAL-3, the number of sexual partners of the opposite sex generally varied by sex and age. In general, 94.5% of men and 95.8% of women in the age group 16–74 reported having had at least one sexual partner at the time of the survey. Moreover, 82.1% of men and 77.7% of women documented having one or more sexual partners during the year before the survey.

Also, 60.7% of all contributors recorded having had vaginal-penile intercourse during the previous four weeks. This percentage dropped rapidly after the age of 55 for both genders, as did the percentage recording oral sex between different genders during the previous year. It is worthy of notice that people in the age group 16–24 were most likely to be recorded as having had more than one sexual partner and one or more new sexual partners during the previous year.

The Youth Sexuality Study (YSS) is a territory-wide survey which has been conducted since 1981 and was carried out by the Family Planning Association of Hong Kong. The study investigates the tendencies among teenagers and young adults in the areas of sexual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour. The seventh

YSS was conducted among 5,000 young people in 2011 and was split into three sections. The first and second sections were composed of surveys among schools students in Forms 1–2 (age 12–13) and Forms 3–7 (age 14–17) respectively. The third section was a survey conducted among young adults aged between 18 and 27. Sexual knowledge, sex education, dating experience and sexual intercourse experience were investigated in all three sections. As my study focuses on young adults, the third section which explored people aged from 18 to 27 will mainly be reviewed.

The current age of consent is set at 16 and reported data from the YSS showed that 20% of women and 30% of men agree with this, while 50% of women and 43% of men believed that it should be 18. 23% of women and 15% of men were reported to believe that the age of consent should be set at age 20 or above. The survey conducted among young men and women aged between 18 and 27 shows that 46% of participants had had sexual intercourse before, while 54% of participants had never had sexual intercourse. The proportions of women and men who had had sexual intercourse were 42% and 50% respectively. 13% of women and 20% of men aged 18–19 years were reported to have had sexual intercourse before; these figures were 65% for women and 73% for men aged 26–27 years. There were 2.2% of women and 4.6% of men who reported having first sexual intercourse at age 15 or younger. Overall, 78% of women and 76% of men reported at least one sexual partner.

In 2004, Pan and Yang published a ten-year longitudinal nationwide random study about Chinese college students on the aspects of sexual activity, knowledge and attitudes. Pan conducted two surveys of college students' sexual attitudes and behaviour in Beijing, in 1991 and 1995. Another two nationwide studies were conducted in 1997 and 2001. All participants were college students and were investigated by means of mailing. In the 2001 survey, 2006 students aged between 18 and 23 years were contacted and 961 of them responded to the mail. It is possible that those who were more sexually liberal and more sexually active

were more likely to respond than those who were not. There were 546 men and 415 women among the participants and their average ages were 20.64 and 20.52 respectively.

52.6% of all participants reported having had at least one date partner and 45.7% reported having kissed. 16.9% of all the students surveyed reported having had sexual intercourse; 20% of men and 12.8% of women. 5.1% of men and 4.8% of women had had the experience of cohabiting. 7.9% of men and 4.6% of women reported having had sexual intercourse before entering college. Overall, 6.5% of all interviewees reported having had sex experience before entering college; and the common ages for entering college were 17 or 18. Pan led another national survey of sexual attitudes and behaviour among people aged 20–64 years in 1999–2000. According to the data on unmarried participants, 50% of all participants reported having had sexual intercourse.

In Pan's 2001 survey, 16.9% of college students reported having had heterosexual intercourse by the time of the survey and 15.2% of them provided their ages at first heterosexual intercourse. Of these, the average age at first heterosexual intercourse was 19; 19.202 and 18.952 for men and women, respectively. 17.3% of women and 18.1% of men among those who had had sexual intercourse reported having had heterosexual intercourse before age 18.

Pan also investigated parents' attitudes towards respondents' sexual behaviour and their effect on it. Parents' attitudes were divided into three groups – against, noncommittal, and supportive of dating life. Before entering college, in the 'against' group, 47.2% of respondents had never dated anyone before, 30.1% had dating and kissing experience, and 22.7% had had sexual intercourse. It is noteworthy that only 9.4% of participants reported having had sexual intercourse in the 'support' group. Parents' attitudes towards participants' sexual activities before entering college still had an effect on their sexual behaviour afterwards. 38.7%, 26.7%, and 23.8% of participants reported having had the experience of

sexual intercourse or cohabiting respectively in the ‘against’, ‘noncommittal’, and ‘support’ group. This showed that young adults are more likely to have had sex if their parents are against it. Data collected also showed that 55.3% of parents currently support participants’ opposite-sex interactions, 14.8% of parents stay noncommittal while 30% are against any opposite-sex interaction.

According to the comparison of data collected in the USA, UK, Hong Kong and on the Chinese Mainland, we can see that young people in the USA were the most sexually active among their peers in these countries and area. Meanwhile, 24.4% of UK teenagers had had sexual intercourse by the age of 16 and 46% of participants between the age of 18 and 27 in Hong Kong reported having had sexual intercourse. At the same time, a survey conducted among Chinese Mainland university students showed that only 16.9% of them were sexually experienced. The survey in Hong Kong covered more age groups than the other studies. The age of Chinese Mainland students is normally around 18–22 and most young women are expected to be married by the age of 27. The age difference might be a subtle factor which leads to the higher rate of sexual experience among young adults in Hong Kong. Although, young adults on the Chinese Mainland were not as sexually active as their counterparts in other countries and regions, they were indeed more active than older generations in China.

In addition to sexual conducts carried among Chinese young adults, Wong (2016) researched sexual behaviour in a broad context. Wong (2016) investigated the role of sexology in constructing “sexual subjects in China” (p.70). According to Wong (2016), sexology in twenty-first century in China pays attention to marriage harmony and the making of the desiring subject. The idea that “sex life is the bridge between the couple; sexual techniques are the foundation of sex life; orgasm is the core of sex life” (Shi, 2007, p.13) was disseminated by sociologists. Sexual disharmony was associated with ignorance about the significance of sexual techniques. People who considered sexual satisfaction not to be so

important were labelled as conservative. Willingness to regularly change coital position was regarded as an indicator of progressive attitudes. Moreover, Wong (2016) found that, among this unprecedented interest in sexual harmony and desire, women with knowledge about sexual pleasure, the clitoris, and the G-spot were believed to be 'confident'; "otherwise they were 'ignorant women'" (p.74). In addition, frequency of having sex and the rate of sexless couples became a measurement of the success of sex education. Another study of Wong (2015) investigated asexuality in the era of sexual revolution in China through analysis of "narratives and experiences of asexual website users" (p.3). Wong's (2015) research showed that people who lack sexual desire or have performance problems expressed shame and guilt. And this increased the focus on sexual pleasure and harmony corresponded with a booming sex industry. Love-making chairs were promoted at sex culture festivals, sex shops opened all over the country, and sex clinics were frequently visited by people with sexual problems. "In the past, marital partners vowed to provide each other with *xing fu* (*happiness* *幸福*). Now, they are obliged to provide *xing fu* (sexual happiness *性福*)" (Wong, 2016, p.75). Though both *xing fu* (happiness *幸福*) and *xing fu* (sexual happiness *性福*) share the same pronunciation in Chinese, they are in different written forms and have totally different meanings. However, Wong (2016) argued that it would be a mistake to conclude that all such changes in China increased the sexual pleasure of individuals. Also Pan and Huang (2007) explained that *fu* (happiness) in the Chinese context does not only refer to pleasure, but also means to have *fu* or bliss, which is more like "a state of contentment that can be associated with fortune, harmony, spiritual abundance, and relief from anxiety" (Wong, 2016, p.77). Hence, under this notion of *xing fu*, people do not need to eagerly pursue sexual happiness. Correspondingly, new ways of interpreting sexless couples have arisen, which argue that people can "experience *xing fu* in the absence of sex" (Wong, 2016, p.78). Meanwhile, the Chinese term *zuo ai* (making love *做爱*) offered new ways of discussing sex in China. According to Pan and Huang (2007), in the new century, "sex is no longer merely about sex,

but making and expressing love, and this new understanding of sex marks the progress of Chinese civilization" (Wong, 2016, p.78).

While Wong explored asexuality in the era of sex revolution, Zhang (2011) argued that the current sexual revolution in China should not be simply equated to the sexual revolution recorded in the Western history it should be understand as China's sexual revolution. She further developed her argument by pointing out that China's sexual revolution had different driving forces, took different paths and generated different impacts when compared with sexual revolution in the Western context. Zhang (2011) explained that the one-child policy serving as a crucial factor in separating sex from reproduction demonstrated one of the differences between China's and Western sexual revolution. Similar to Zhang (2011), Pan also underlined the importance of understanding the sexual revolution in the Chinese context. However, Pan was inconsistent in his discussion of sexual revolution. Pan (2006) explored the origins and nature of China's sexual revolution and his article primarily relies on the result of a national sexual behaviour survey which was conducted by Renmin University of China with 3,824 participants from both rural and urban China. By analysing the survey results, Pan (2006) suggested that China has gone through a transformation from 'sex for reproduction' to 'sex for pleasure'. Based on this shift, he argued that the sexual revolution in China is almost successfully completed. On top of that, Pan published a book named *zhongguo xinggeming chenggong de shizheng* (*The evidence of the success of China's sexual revolution*) in 2008 by comparing data collected among adults in 2000 and 2006. Nonetheless, Pan published a journal article with the title of *1980 niandai yilai zhongguode "xing"geming* (*China's sexual revolution since 1980s*) in December 2008. Sexual revolution in China was described by Pan as was still in process in that article. However, in his book published in 2013, Pan rethought this and described how sexual revolution in China was relying heavily on the policy of government and party. Thus, he concluded sexual revolution from that point of

view was not completed. In spite of his inconsistency in claims about the completion of China's sexual revolution, Pan consistently regarded sexual revolution as a revolution against the sexless culture since the Cultural Revolution. Pan (2013) summarised five aspects of China's sexual revolution: the revolution of sexual philosophy, the revolution of sexual presentation, the revolution of sexual behaviour, the revolution of sexual relationship, and the sexual revolution of women.

Intimate lives in China have massively changed since the Reform era. The number of free spouse selections dramatically increased; Chinese people began to include sex in their quality of life; the purity of body was replaced by the purity of purpose in the discourse of premarital sex; all these phenomena indicated a more liberal China than ever before. However, do these developments imply that the sexual revolution in China has reached its objective and thus formally completed? Wang (2017) holds a different view from Pan, arguing that the sexual revolution in China is an 'unfinished scheme', "because the revolution in sexual behavior is not equal to a real sexual revolution based on human rights, sexual autonomy, and gender equality" (p.165). Although there are new sexual scripts emerging, there are still traditional sexual scripts such as the virginity complex and the sexual double standard which should also be involved in the analysis of sexual revolution.

**The issue of virginity in China and the virginity complex**

Blank (2008) argues that virginity is an abstract quality, which cannot be seen, smelled or felt, the standards for deciding what a virgin is or is not can be arbitrary. Although female virginity is always associated with the hymen, the hymen does not necessarily serve as the standard for deciding one's virginity. While some people believe that virginity is basically a physical matter, others

feel that it is psychological. Blank (2008) advocates that virginity might be defined as an amalgamation of both physical and psychological elements. Moreover, from another perspective, the concept of virginity can be explained by the idea of virginity loss.

Carpenter (2001) studied the ambiguity of 'having sex' in the United States and found various definitions of virginity loss. Carpenter's study can to some extent represent the western idea of losing virginity. Carpenter collected data from in-depth case studies of 61 women and men. Among all the female participants, 67% of them were self-identified as heterosexual, 21% as lesbian and 12% as bisexual. Of all the male participants, 61% of them identified themselves as heterosexual, 32% as gay and 7% as bisexual. The age of respondents varied from 18 to 35 and the average age was around 25. It was believed by every participant that first sexual behaviours which contain vaginal-penile intercourse would lead to virginity loss. Besides, one third of participants considered sexual behaviours including oral sex and anal sex with both same sex and opposite sex partners can all lead to virginity loss. Moreover, non-consensual experiences of sex were also discussed and believed by most participants not to lead to virginity loss. The study of Carpenter pictured sexual attitudes, especially the way people define virginity loss in a Western context, but the way young Chinese adults define virginity loss and the situation in China needs to be explored.

The continuing traditional nature of Chinese society and the new idea of romantic love present a dilemma for Chinese young people, especially Chinese young women. On the one hand, many Chinese still have a 'female virginity complex' which places high value on female purity and condemns premarital sex especially for women. On the other hand, many people have become more tolerant in sexual matters, which gives young people a chance to explore love and sex.

Zhou's (1989) study of virginity and premarital sex in 1980s China was based on

surveys and informal interviews[9] conducted respectively in between 1978 and 1985. She explored traditional Chinese views on female virginity and the tactics men apply to persuade women to have premarital sex. The surveys she conducted among male university students between 1978 and 1985 showed that 51 out of 56 respondents claimed that they did not want to marry a non-virgin. Moreover, Zhou informally interviewed peasants in Tongxi village, Hubei Province in 1985. The results indicated that all 24 male and 18 out of 21 female peasants considered women's virginity to be the most important condition in a relationship. Furthermore, losing her virginity could cause dishonour to the bride's family in their community and a sharp drop in the wedding costs assumed by the groom's family. In a relationship, a woman's power resource primarily comes from her virginity, but this kind of power is only suitable for women under the age of 30. Women who remain unmarried after 30 begin to lose their marketable assets even when they are still virgins. Additionally, women could control financial decisions in their future marriage only on the condition that they retained their virginity. The moment a woman loses her virginity she will lose her position of power. The disadvantages caused by premarital sex exist not only before marriage but also after it. Women stated in Zhou's study that premarital sex is frequently used against them by their husband and mother-in-law, especially in domestic quarrels. Mothers-in-law often use premarital sex to control a woman and abuse her with derogatory words. As can be seen from the discussions in Zhou's study, a woman can hold onto her power in courtship only by resisting premarital sex.

Marriage for men means that they gain a free housekeeper and caretaker in urban areas; and for men in rural areas, in addition to these assets, marriage means a free labourer on the family farm (Zhou, 1989). Marriage can bring so many advantages to men, whereas it means disadvantages for women. Therefore, men

[9] The research method Zhou (1989) applied was vague. She claimed that her paper was based on informal interviews conducted between 1978 and 1985, and her personal observations. However, she used both the terms 'interview' and 'survey' in her paper. According to my personal understanding, Zhou might first carried out surveys among male university students between 1978 and 1985, and then conducted informal interviews with peasants in 1985.

use various strategies to persuade women to have premarital sex in order to gain a free labourer with a lower wedding cost while women resist premarital sex and early marriage. Zhou stated that the newly developed term 'mother's lock' is an illustration of the phenomenon that a man's parents encourage their son to have sex with his girlfriend before marriage in order to reduce the wedding costs and ensure the marriage. Mother's lock refers to the practice that when a woman comes to her boyfriend's house, his mother would leave and lock the young couple in the bedroom. Zhou's study revealed that mother's lock is an effective tactic in helping their sons to have sex before marriage. 46 out of 100 urban women in Zhou's sample had lost their virginity inside the mother's lock.

Although Zhou's study was conducted between 1978 and 1985, 'soft' techniques are still commonly used by young men to obtain sex. Wang (2017) carried 43 in-depth interviews and three focus group in 2004 and studied virginity loss, sexual coercion, and dating violence in urban China and found that various methods, including 'indirect persuasion', 'immediate intimidation', 'emotional blackmail', and 'persistent harassment' (p. 148) are employed by young men to gain a dominant role in sexual encounters. At the same time, young women adopted their own tactics to play the role of a 'gatekeeper'[10]. To be a traditional woman and avoid engaging in premarital sex, thinking of good excuses to postpone sex, negotiating a date or place for their first sexual experience, and indirect sexual behaviours are applied by women. Interviewees in Wang's study described using masturbation or oral sex as a way of keeping their virginity and postponing 'real' sex. By only engaging in indirect sexual behaviours, such as masturbation and oral sex, women in Wang's research kept their label of 'traditional girl', fulfilled their physical needs and maintained a 'modern' image. Wang explained that representing oneself as 'traditional' can be a flexible tactic for different purposes; in this situation women performed the 'traditional' role in order to resist premarital sex.

[10] According to Baumeister (2004), women who are pressured by their partners to have sex and resist by making all kinds of excuses to protect their virginity are acting in the role of a gatekeeper.

Although it seems that Chinese society is becoming more tolerant of premarital sex, the female virginity complex is still popular among both men and women. According to Wang (2017), for men, this complex means that they still focus on female purity and virginity, and even regard virginity as an important criterion for both dating and marriage; but at the same time they are longing for sex with their virgin girlfriends. There are dual meanings of complexity to women: on the one hand, they feel responsible for preserving their virginity due to the pressure of men preferring a virgin partner; on the other hand, they try to avoid premarital sex despite the stress of pressure from their boyfriend and their own desire. While men's loss of virginity is experienced as empowering, women's first experience of sex is more complicated. Among all the factors, sexual coercion seems to be the core element which complicates women's experience of losing their virginity. During her interviews with young women, Wang (2017) noticed that many of them had lost their virginity through a coercive first experience. By paying attention to sexual coercion in participants' first sexual experience, Wang (2017) found that the 'female virginity complex' is used by young women as a convenient expression to describe their disappointment at, frustration about, or resistance to their first sexual experience. Losing their virginity does not only mean losing chastity for women, Wang explained that women, especially those who lost their virginity at a young age, feel guilty and even inferior to others. According to Wang (2017), "feeling that they are not being respected" is the main reason why women feel frustrated in their first experience of intercourse (p.145). Wang further explained that women's demand for respect in this situation is not only about bodily integrity, but also a "respect for their autonomy to decide when to 'give' the valuable asset of their virginity (according to the normative gender ideals), and to do so in a way that is to their benefit and not only in response to the coercive demands of their partners" (p. 170). Moreover, Zhou (1989) argues that, for women, losing their virginity means losing position and power in their relationship. Besides, when dated back to imperial times, scholars linked women's bodies to social morality by preaching the idea that

"losing chastity is even worse than dying of starvation (*e si shi xiao, shi jie shi da*)" (Wang, 2017, p. 146).

In addition to those virginity issues, a clear sexual double standard was articulated in Wang's interview with a young man, in which he expected his girlfriend and future spouse to be a virgin, but at the same time he had sex with his virgin ex-girlfriend. This young man defined female virginity both as a criterion for date selection and a symbol of women's value, and justified his criterion by applying love and being traditional. The appearance of this sexual double standard will be explored in the part that follow.

**Appearance of a 'double standard' in past sexual experience**

Farrer (2002), in his 1990s' fieldwork in Shanghai, discovered that Shanghai youth were more tolerant towards premarital sex than their counterparts in many other parts of China and also that sexually experienced youth became more accepting of sexual intercourse than those with no sexual experience. Although the Shanghai youth in Farrer's study were relatively sexually open, female participants seemed reluctant to admit or talk about their past sexual experience and women in the focus group tended to be ambiguous in their support of premarital sex. Meanwhile, men tended to be straightforward about premarital sex and showed their enthusiasm at the same time. Moreover, women and men assessed one another's sexual experience in different ways. Young women even saw previous sexual experience as a preferable trait in men while men preferred a virgin bride, even though virginity was not a requirement for women in marriage at the time. Sexually inexperienced men feared that they might be laughed at as poor lovers by others. Women tended to expect their lovers to have such experience as 'women are more passive in this kind of relationship' (Farrer, 2002, p.240). In contrast to the positive attitude towards men's past sexual experience,

women with sexual experience, especially broad experience, might run the risk of being labelled as gullible, cheap, or frivolous. Women were expected to be silent about past sexual experience or even enjoined not to talk about it with their lovers, or even with anyone else. Both men and women valued men's past sexual experience positively, but both sides said that there is little or no need for women to have broad sexual experience. The image of women remained emotionally sensitive and sexually naive.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have traced the origins of traditional Chinese sexual morality. I have illustrated both the loose control over sexuality before the Song dynasty and the sexual repression since the Song dynasty in Chinese history. In order to gain a better understanding of young adults' intimate lives today, I have also explored changes in sexuality from the Maoist era and since the Reform era. Based on the dramatic changes in sexuality and the highlighting of individual desire since the Reform era, scholars such as Pan (2006, 2008, and 2013), Wang (2017) and Zhang (2001) proposed the idea of China's undergoing sexual revolution. Pan (2006 and 208) even considered the sexual revolution in China to be finished. Nonetheless, the existence of the virginity complex, the sexual double standard and the refashioning of old sexual scripts (see chapter 5) challenged the completion of China's sexual revolution. If sexual revolution is in process in China, do the sexual behaviours and attitudes of young Chinese fit with the idea of sexual revolution? How do young people navigate this contested terrain between new and old sexual scripts? Moreover, both Chinese men and women tended to show a submissive attitude to the mainstream, especially when sensitive topics like virginity are involved. The culture of conformity affected interviewees' attitudes toward female virginity and sometimes inconsistent opinions were given. Do the attitudes and practices of these young people fit with

the idea of Chinese sexual revolution? Table 2 blow shows themes developed from the literature I reviewed.

**Table 2 Research questions developed from reviewed themes**

| Reviewed themes | Research questions |
|---|---|
| Changes in sexuality since the Reform era and the debate of sexual revolution in China | How do young people navigate through this changing sexual landscape? |
| Comparison of sexual attitudes, behaviours among the USA, UK, Hong Kong and Chinese Mainland | How have they acquired sexual knowledge & how does this relate to their sexual attitude and experience? |
| The issue of virginity in China | How do they view premarital sex & how is their premarital sexual activity shaped by socialist morality and traditional gender role expectation? |
| The virginity complex | Is there still a 'female virginity complex'? |
| The contradiction between China's sexual revolution and the existence of virginity complex and sexual double standard | Do the attitudes and practices of these young people fit with the idea of Chinese sexual revolution? |

# Chapter 3

## Researching young adults' intimate lives: methodological issues

As Silverman (2013) suggested, "a methodology refers to the principles of reasoning we use in making choices about research design. Such choices involves consideration of appropriate models, case to study, methods of data gathering, forms of data analysis, etc., in planning and executing a research study" (p.138). Accordingly, in this chapter, I present and reflect on the methodological issues I met during my fieldwork. I detail the rationale of choosing my research methods and discuss challenges and difficulties I encountered in the field. As Riessman (2011) emphasized that local contexts and utterances of interviewees need to be studied in the broader environment of discourse, I therefore reflect on what it to engage with young Chinese in a Confucianism culture, which is fundamental to knowledge production. This is followed by the reason why I later decided to include focus groups in addition to face-to-face interviews.

### Research design

The objective of my research is to investigate the sexual attitudes of young men and women who live in Chinese provincial cities. My focus is on their own experiences and feelings about premarital sex and their judgement of others' sexual attitudes and lives. Feminist approaches with the emphasis on the specific experience of individuals rather than on an objective truth would be appropriate for my research (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). With the aim of exploring individual stories, a qualitative approach centres on individual lives and promotes an understanding of a specific subject (Oakley, 2000; Dabbs, 1982; Berg & Lune, 2004), qualitative methods are frequently considered as being compatible with feminist approaches. The presence and behaviours of researched

subjects rather than the topic itself is more important in qualitative studies (Bryman, 1989; Maynard, 1994). Qualitative techniques have more breadth compared with quantitative methods, which are limited to a small number of variables in their analyses (Miller, 2000). Data generation in qualitative research can be more exploratory as new topics and areas can be opened up with no strict limitations on variables. Thus, more flexibility can be achieved by employing a qualitative method. My research focuses on individual lives and subjects' judgement of others' sexual attitudes; thus, qualitative methods are more appropriate.

Although new and innovative research methods have emerged, the face-to-face interview continues to exist as one of the most frequently used data collection methods, and is applied by around 70–90% of social studies (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002; Platt, 2002). Kvale (1996) states that the face-to-face interview allows interviewers to study in detail into individual lives with respect. My research aims to investigate the sexual attitudes of young men and women. The nature of my research consists of learning about individual life experience on a relatively sensitive topic. Semi-structured in-depth interviews allow me to probe into sensitive issues gradually and respectfully. I also considered employing focus groups to enable participants to share their viewpoints and experiences and to stimulate discussions among different opinions. However, most of the issues I researched were based on sensitive topics, and focus groups may not work in protecting participants' confidentiality or ensuring the credibility of the data collected.

In qualitative research it is normal to have an interview guide rather than fixed questions. A semi-structured interview is usually guided by a series of themes and divided into several sections (Lupton, 1996; Beardsworth and Keil, 1992). As the interview process develops, interviewees may raise more and complementary questions and these questions constitute the research findings as a crucial element. That is to say, instead of being based on a series of relatively

strictly pre-decided interview questions, the interview is built on an iterative process of refinement, and ideas recognised by earlier interviewees can then be presented to later interviewees. Unlike the notion of a specific structured interview schedule, an interview guide can be used to indicate a short list of memory cues for topics or areas to be covered in an interview (Bryman, 2012). To begin preparing an interview guide, John and Lofland (1995, p.78) proposed to ask yourself "Just what about this thing is puzzling me?" What puzzles me most in my research is whether there has been a sexual revolution in China and how this has reflected on young adults' attitudes on premarital activities, especially those living in provincial cities. The young Chinese in my study refers specifically to unmarried and educated people living in Chinese provincial towns and cities. The question "What do I need to know in order to answer each of the research questions I'm interested in?" (Bryman, 2012, p.473) is the second step in designing an interview guide. In order to gradually explore young adults' views on premarital issues, I developed the themes of love experience, views on early relationships, attitudes towards the BFSU students' photo campaign, views on virginity issues and sex education. Young adults' views on the BFSU students' photo campaign were examined during the in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted in China by explaining what *the Vagina Monologues* are and what the BFSU student did to promote their play and showing them pictures of BFSU students' statements of their vaginas. I thought that the BFSU students' photo-taking for the advertising of their play could be employed to reveal young adults' stance when they were facing liberal sexual behaviours and it would also facilitate clarifying my research question of how do young people navigate through the changing sexual landscape? I did more research on the BFSU students' photo campaign to prepare for the interviews and to explore interviewees' attitudes to it. Moreover, the theme of the 'double standard' was generated to analyse gender differences in sexuality. These themes were also based on my acquaintance with young Chinese. Talking about premarital sex at the beginning of a conversation especially with a stranger is too sensitive for

most Chinese and may lead to a concealment of their sexual attitudes. Besides, general questions or background questions are basic elements in an interview because such information is useful for contextualising interviewees' answers as well as warming up the interview. Hence, a set of background questions was designed, including educational background, occupation, number of years employed, parents' background, etc. However, an interview guide is designed to be flexible, and altering the sequence of questions during the actual interview in the field is normal. My interview guide was designed to lead interviewees to talk about subjects that began with less sensitive topics and then moved on to more sensitive ones, from the experience of first love to their attitude towards premarital sex. Questions were designed to be as open-ended as possible, such as "tell me your feelings about your boyfriend". Table 3 shows the general interview structure.

**Table 3 Interview guide**

| Themes | Sub-topics |
|---|---|
| Background information | Interviewees' university background. How long have they been working since graduation? Their occupations. Their family background (their parents' occupations and educational background. Are their parents from an urban or rural area?). What do they think about their parents' marriage? Their parents' views on future spouse. |
| Love experience | How many relationships have they had in the past? Their memories of their first relationship. What are their expectations of marriage? |

| | |
|---|---|
| | |
| Views on early relationships | What age do they think would be appropriate to have an early relationship? What sort of intimacy would they consider appropriate in an early relationship? |
| Attitude towards the BFSU students' vagina monologues | Do they know about these vagina monologues? (show them some comments from both sides) How do they judge it?<br><br>Would they take photos with their statements' of their vaginas like those women in the BFSU? |
| Views on virginity issues | Do they currently have someone they are dating? Do they have marriage plans? (show them some interview paragraphs from the negotiation of young women's sexuality in Hong Kong) Would their mother allow their dates to sleep over at home? Their parents' attitudes on premarital sex and their attitudes? Where do their attitudes come from? |
| Sex education | How do they access information about sex? Do they have school based sex education? Do their parents teach them any sex knowledge? |
| 'Double standard' issues | Do they have different expectations of male and female virginity before marriage? Where do their attitudes come from? If their future spouse hasn't |

| | |
|---|---|
| | had any love experience, will they consider this an advantage or disadvantage? Do female participants insist on male virginity and do they have a male virginity complex at their early age? What is the broad social context in their opinion? |

Themes of sex education was designed to answer the question of how they have acquired sexual knowledge, how this relates to their sexual attitude and expression, and how current sex education promote or impede the idea of Chinese sexual revolution. Interview questions on views on virginity issues and early relationships were designed to address the research question of how young Chinese understand premarital sex and how their premarital sexual activities were influenced by socialist morality and traditional gender role expectation. The theme of double standard issues in China is explored to examine whether there is still a female virginity complex or not. At the same time, the theme of double standard issues together with the theme of attitude towards the BFSU students' vagina monologues were proposed to resolve the research question of do the attitudes and practices of these young people fit with the idea of Chinese sexual revolution. All the themes contribute to discerning the extent of which sexual revolution is happening in China.

Settings of the research cities and rationale for choosing them

Most previous studies focus on big cities, and metropolitan cites tend to be at the face front of social changes, which may not be happening in other cities. Hence, I decided to use provincial cities to explore young people's sexual attitudes beyond metropolitan cities. I chose three provincial cities to do the fieldwork—Houma, Shanxi province; Linyi, Shandong province; and Chongqing (Figure 1 shows the location of each city). Houma with a population of 297,000 is 220 square km in

size and is located in the southwest of Shanxi province. It is a county-level city and also my home city. Shanxi is an inland province and located in the North China region. Linyi is a prefecture-level city with a population of more than 11 million in the southeast of Shandong province. Linyi is the largest prefecture-level city in Shandong, both by area and population. Linyi's economical income is centred on its wholesale markets and Linyi's wholesale market is ranked third place among its category in China with an annual trade volume of around US $ 5 billion. Shandong is a coastal province and belongs to the East China region. Chongqing is the only inland direct-controlled municipality and is geographically located in southwest China. According to the 2010 census, Chongqing ranks the Chinese municipality with most population of 30 million and it is also a centre of manufacturing and a focal point of transportation.

**Figure 1 Map of research cities (three red spots are research cities):**

**Table 4 Administrative divisions in China**

| **Structural hierarchy of the administrative divisions of the People's Republic of China** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Provincial level** **(Chongqing)** | **Prefectural level** **(Linyi)** | **County level** **(Houma)** | **Township level** | **Village level (informal)** |

**Adapted from:**

**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administrative_divisions_of_China**

Table 4 shows that the three research cities cover the first three administrative divisions; this allows me to explore female virginity with people from various administrative levels. The administrative divisions in China are a comprehensive result of area, economy and population. Thus, economically, Chongqing is the best developed among these three cities, while Houma is the least developed.

"The Huai River–Qin Mountains line" "approximates the 0°C January isotherm and 800 millimetres isohyet"[11] in China and is used as the geographical dividing line between northern and southern China[12]. It is normally and widely believed by Chinese that there is difference between North and South China. While southern China is mostly influenced by Laozi[13] and his Taoism, northern China is the birthplace of Confucianism[14]. As Western science and culture was introduced into China through the southeast coast, southern China gained a relatively stronger economic position in the economy than northern China.

[11] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_and_southern_China

[12] Yangtze River is normally perceived by Chinese as the approximate line and an easier marker between North and South China when cultural diversity is discussed.

[13] Laozi was a philosopher and poet of ancient China. He is best known as the reputed author of the *Tao Te Ching* and the founder of the philosophy of Taoism. *无为而治* (to govern by doing nothing than going with nature/let it be) is the basis of Taoism.

[14] Confucianism emphasises personal and governmental morality, the correctness of social relationships, justice and sincerity.

According to the data from Bureau of Statistics in 2014 in each province, the Real GDP per capita of southern provinces was 50,518 Yuan, which is slightly higher than 50,461 Yuan of the northern provinces. Moreover, employment patterns differ in North and South China. With many township and village enterprises and foreign-capital enterprises, southern China focuses on the economy while northern China emphasises politics. This economic and political diversity could also be reflected in residents' choice of occupation. From personal experience and online discussion, I have found that people in northern China tend to choose to work as civil servants or in state-owned enterprises, which offer long term job stability, while people in southern China prefer to work in privately held companies or foreign-capital enterprises which offer high salaries. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (Table 5), state-owned enterprises account for 29% and 48% of urban employment in Shandong (Linyi) and Shanxi (Houma) respectively. These two percentages are higher than the 24% in Chongqing (the southern city). Textbooks of compulsory education used in most parts of northern China are published by the People's Education Press while many southern provinces use their own textbooks. In addition, these differences in employment patterns were also identified in Cao's (2018) study of young men. Cao researched the masculinity of young men in the city of Shanghai and Shenyang, with Shanghai in the South and Shenyang in the North. Cao met most of her Shenyang interviewees in the daytime at their workplace as most of her Shenyang interviewees worked as civil servants or worked in public institutions. Hence, interviewees from Shenyang in Cao's study had less stress and more flexible time during the day compared to her Shanghai participants. To include and reflect these cultural differences, I chose cities from both northern and southern China (Houma and Linyi in the North and Chongqing in the South).

**Table 5 SOE employment by urban area, levels and shares, 2009**

| | Employees of state-owned units<br>*Thousands* | SOE share of urban employment<br>*Percent* |
|---|---|---|
| Shandong | 4,281 | 29% |
| Guangdong | 3,892 | 17% |
| Heilongjiang | 3,344 | 47% |
| Liaoning | 2,817 | 28% |
| Shanxi | 2,467 | 48% |
| Beijing | 1,857 | 20% |
| Shanghai | 1,418 | 20% |
| Chongqing | 1,198 | 24% |

**Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China**

Both Houma and Chongqing are inland cities, so to make it geographically balanced I also chose Linyi from a coastal province. Another reason for choosing Linyi is that people in Shandong (the province Linyi belongs to) are thought to look up to men and down on women and are relatively conservative, especially in rural areas. Women are not allowed to sit at the same table with men while having meals, women lose domestic status after giving birth to a baby girl and girls usually receive less lucky money than boys during Chinese New Year in many parts of Shandong. These phenomena are still common, even in developed cities in Shandong.

I also decided upon my research cities on the basis of ease of recruitment.

Houma is my home city, which I thought would make it easy for me to find participants and arrange interviews. My husband's home city is Linyi and I have a good friend in Chongqing. Respondents were contacted through snowball sampling from initial contacts, and personal networks in both Linyi and Chongqing made snowball sampling applicable.

Recruitment of participants

I conducted my study in the three cities between December 2014 and late January 2015. Both Linyi and Chongqing have a population of more than ten million, while Houma has only around 200,000 citizens. Accordingly, Houma can be called a small city whilst Linyi and Chongqing are big cities. The situation may be different between small cities and big cities in China in respect of making appointments, transportation, consumption, employment and so on. Making an appointment takes a shorter time in small cities than in big cities. For instance, if you want to have dinner with someone in a big city you need to make an appointment with him/her at least one day in advance, but you can call someone to have dinner with you even after you have ordered the dishes in a small city. All appointments were made at least one day before the interview date in Linyi, dates for each interviewee were all confirmed before I arrived in Chongqing, while two of the interviewees in Houma were only informed on the interview day. City size is the key element in affecting appointment-making and transportation. In small cities, people use bicycles and motorcycles while people in big cities rely on cars and public transport. Small city size and a smaller population make appointments easy in a small city. The smaller the city, the greater the importance of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* is almost everywhere in small cities, one needs *guanxi* to enter a good primary school, to find a decent job and also to recruit fieldwork participants. I recruited participants in a relatively short time in Houma by using *guanxi*. *Guanxi* or personal networks serve as crucial elements in researching in Confucianism based culture. Park and Lunt (2015) acknowledged the benefit of

employing of personal network in sampling in Confucianism-informed South Korea. They argue that "it perhaps fitted somewhat more naturally with Confucian mores and expectations rather than attempting to recruit unknown individuals who lie outside networks" (Park and Lunt, 2015, p.6). Liu (2007) also admitted the difficulty of recruiting participants in qualitative research in other ways than using her own personal network. She had to abandon official routes and made use of her informal personal network to find potential participants.

In my study, respondents in Linyi, Houma, and Chongqing came mainly from the contacts of my husband, my mother and my friend Albee respectively. Potential respondents were contacted before I left for fieldwork and some of them promised to ask their friends to help me with my research. However, contacts from the interviewees themselves were not very reliable compared to the direct contacts. For instance, both a friend of my mother's contact and the step-sister of my husband's contact cancelled the interview. I should have contacted more potential participants than I needed.

However, *guanxi* in small cities can also be a negative factor in conducting interviews, because interviewees were either a friend of a friend or a relative of a relative and we have a strong probability of meeting again. Considering this potential risk, interviewees from small cities might have reservations about their participation. Another distinct difference between small and big cities is consumption levels. Conducting interviews in small cities, which are not as economically developed as big cities, is less expensive. Interviewing in a private restaurant room cost around 40 *yuan* whilst conducting an interview in a private coffee shop in Linyi cost 120 *yuan*. There are fewer employment opportunities in small cities than in big ones and this means many graduates choose not to work in small cites like Houma. Therefore, I had to wait until the potential participants were on their holiday and returned to Houma.

It was also suggested that I might advertise in local universities to recruit

samples. However, samples drawn through advertisements or other gathering occasions can be highly self-selected (Burgess, 1984, p.57, cited in Dunne, 1997, p.27), and this method is not very effective in China. Respondents were recruited through both snowball sampling from previous interviewees and intermediaries, and the only three participants recruited through snowball sampling were from two different cities[15]. Two participants came from a contact of a contact. I was able to be better prepared for participants who came to me through intermediaries, as this friend would provide me with some basic information about them. Lingjun Yang was recruited from intermediary Hao and I was told that Lingjun was the ex-girlfriend of Hao's friend and that they had broken up very unpleasantly. Hence, I did not discuss detailed past love experience in the interview with Lingjun. I did not directly contact participants before the interviews, because, instead of email, other communication tools such as Wechat and QQ are much more frequently used amongst young Chinese people, and to become friends with them in such applications would mean becoming involved in their personal lives, which was not my intention. To recruit participants, I sent a short description of my study to intermediaries and asked them to pass it on to potential participants who met my requirements. Qualitative researchers often do not want to inform participants too fully beforehand because of the possible influence on data generation. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) gave an instance of researching men in the position of controlling women; they agreed that fully informing the researched would inhibit participants from discussing the power play between men and women. The theme of female virginity might give participants an impression that I wanted detailed descriptions of sexual life, which is a very sensitive topic in mainland China, and I did not want to frighten off potential participants. Therefore, I purposely sent a very short description to intermediaries, and left both intermediaries and potential participants with the idea that my study was about young people's attitudes towards love and marriage. This would reduce the possibility of interviewees coming prepared with fake

[15] Figure 2 shows the links between the researcher, intermediaries and participants.

sexual experiences. I prepared information sheets and consent forms, and received ethical clearance before entering the field. The purpose of my research and the general interview outline was explained to the participants in detail at the beginning of the interview, when all information sheets were also used, and they could withdraw if they were not comfortable with the topic.

As the participants I needed were not restricted to one specific area, there was not much difficulty in finding participants. I recruited 20 participants in total, half male and half female.[16] Two of them were engaged, six were single, and 12 were in a relationship. There were two couples amongst the participants and I assured them that interview data would be kept strictly confidential and their stories about past love experiences would not be shared with their partners. One member of one of those couples said they were okay even if his/her story was shared with his/her partner, as they had discussed all virginity-related issues. I still kept their confidences even though they did not mind them being shared.

I intended to recruit individuals with a university education, who were likely to have been influenced by social changes. People with a university background would generally be considered to have a stability of self-identity and a mental maturity. Moreover, I would like to explore the sexual attitude and viewpoint towards *The Vagina Monologue* of young adults who have similar education background with young women in BFSU. However, the set recruitment requirement changed slightly as the research progressed. Of all the interviewees, 16 either had BA degrees or were in their last undergraduate year; one had received her MA in the UK and another two were still undertaking their postgraduate studies; one had obtained her degree from Junior college. Meirong Ma was recruited through my mother's contact and I did not know that her degree was from a college for professional training[17] (junior college education) until we started the background interview, and I just accepted this fact and 'went

[16] Table 3 shows the general information about each interviewee.

[17] Usually, only those who could not get a high enough score to enter university in The National College Entrance Examination would go to a college for professional training in China.

with the flow'. I had asked my mother to help me find participants with a university (which we call '*da xue*' in Chinese) education and Meirong's mother claimed that Meirong had already graduated from '*da xue*'. When she told me her college name I immediately knew it was a college for professional training. I realised that almost no one would say things like 'when I was in college for professional training', instead they will just say 'when I was in *da xue*'.

**Ethical issues**

I received ethical approval from the university's ethical committee before I conducted the fieldwork. So that I could properly react to any participant who had experienced rape or any other coercive sex and recalled those unpleasant experiences during the interview, my supervisor arranged a meeting with a rape crisis counsellor who offered some key pointers for reacting to people who have experienced coercive sex. Modern western social research is expected to be carried out within the structure of research ethics and is underpinned by the notion of 'do no harm'. Ethical reviews, especially the role of institutionalised ethical review procedures, are seen as essential to good research (Lunt & Fouché, 2010). Without the full agreement of the researched and the protection of their agreement, the research should not be conducted. Respect, beneficence as well as fairness are the fundamental beliefs of internationally accepted research ethics. Gaining ethics approval from a university-based ethics committee is fundamental in order to comply with these ethical principles. In Anglo-American social research practice, ethics has long been a universalised norm but the situation turns out to be different in Chinese-based fieldwork.

Chinese academic discussion around social research mainly focuses on various research methods and the specific techniques employed by different studies. However, there is no in-depth analysis of the importance of ethics in social

research, and especially no awareness of how to respect and protect the researched. Moreover, there has been no detailed discussion of the effect of ethics on research quality (Huang & Pan, 2009). Global concern about ethics in social research started in the mid-twentieth century with the crucial event of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study[18]. Discussions about research ethics in China are mainly localised around AIDS-related science, public health and reproductive health. There are other types of research conducted with ethical review, but many of these reviews are perfunctory and due to international pressure or take place within international cooperation projects. Although ethics is an independent discipline in the area of social science in China, ethics in social research has not attracted enough attention or discussion. Basically, all the discussions on ethics are primarily on morality rather than in the field of social research methodology. Huang and Pan (2009) mention that the social survey process of interaction could be affected by many factors, including Chinese national character and interviewees' individual character. They further illustrate that, as Chinese people are not good at denial and are influenced by the culture of conformity, it is possible for researchers to encounter a situation of high response, but low data quality. The culture of conformity mainly refers to Chinese people's submissive attitude towards mainstream culture on public occasions. This kind of submission only demonstrates an attitude of obedience, and has nothing to do with their actual behaviour. It is not only the respondent's self-protective behaviour based on the potential risk of participating in social surveys, but also a collective unconscious behaviour which has been socially shaped over the long term (Huang & Pan, 2009). Consequently, in social research in China, the very first question respondents consider is "what if my (true) response does not comply with the mainstream? Will this have any influence? Do I need to take any responsibility with a true response?" These influences could lead to respondents

[18] Tuskegee Syphilis Study -- From 1932 onwards, the US government sponsored Tuskegee syphilis experiments in a continuous research project that lasted for 40 years, and used black people for syphilis testing and inspection. However, treatment was not given to those tested. This experiment made the US government notorious, and this also became a negative example in the history of medical ethics. After that, international research started to pay attention to ethics.

being classified as ‘reactionary’ (such as in politically sensitive topics), being questioned about their financial situation (too much grey income, tax evasion, etc.) or being labelled as having personal moral issues (such as in sex-related topics). For Chinese people, talking in public space (even if there are only two people) is a burden of responsibility. In situations that Chinese participants consider to carry potential risk, there is a high probability that they will make statements according to the culture of conformity, and give an answer which the mainstream expects. All these behaviours are designed to reduce the risk of exposure and the burden of responsibility. Therefore, Huang and Pan (2009be) suggested that, the researcher should understand respondents’ worries, consider the major risk respondents faced, and reduce participants’ burden of responsibility and risk assessment by informing them of the measures being used to protect data confidentiality and other ethical measures. Although Huang and Pan’s (2009) discussion of ethics mainly focuses on social surveys, it could also be applied to interview situations. However, gaining consent, and especially a signature, is not easy in a Chinese social fieldwork context because, from the perspective of culture, the Chinese are cautious about signing documents. For instance, when asked to sign the consent form, instead of signing his real name, one of my interviewees, Wei Zhao, signed with his pseudonym. Another notable feature in my research is that very few interviewees would take the information sheet I gave them in my interviews, even when they were told that they could contact me using the information provided.

1. Although conversations which concern virginity and premarital sex could sometimes be sensitive and embarrassing in China, I stressed that, unlike a public interview, an academic interview will not reveal any personal information about the interviewee, which could reduce their anxiety. I told respondents my interview procedure beforehand and that I would not make any judgements of them. I also shared with them some emergent findings from earlier studies for them to comment upon. Informants were

told that if they felt distressed they could withdraw at any time during the interview. All these ethical preparations seemed to make my participants trust my interviews as part of formal academic research and believe that the interview between us had a high reliability and confidence level. For instance, one of my husband's friend Wei Zhao asked him what my interview questions were before the interview. My husband said that I treated my research seriously and kept the interviews confidential. Thus he did not know anything about my interview. This further assured confidence in the interview. With all the ethical arrangements and the relaxed beginning of general and less sensitive questions, most of my participants found the interview acceptable and answered premarital sex related questions in an easy way. Xiaoxiao Wan and Ping Lu mentioned in their interviews that it was not as sensitive as what they assumed. However, there were other interviewees such as Meirong Ma who responded to the interview with nervousness especially when intimate questions were asked. Thus, I spent more time around less sensitive questions and sharing my own experiences to comfort and ease their sensitivity. I also planned that if they recalled any unpleasant experiences, such as if they had lost their virginity by rape or coercive sex, I would stop the tape immediately and talk to those participants with coercive sex experience and help them to make contact with a support group if they wished. There is a support group for women called The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre in Beijing. I could help them contact this group if they wished, but it proved unnecessary.

Participants were informed that the transcript of their interviews would be sent to them to confirm details. I said that I would discuss the transcript with interviewees and delete or amend information that they did not want to be included. Pseudonyms were employed to ensure data confidentiality. Participants were given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym; if they did not, I chose one

for them. The original copy of both voice recordings and transcripts were kept under encryption, locked securely and the voice recordings will be destroyed at the end of the research.

**Conducting interviews**

Interviews are interactive processes between participants, researcher and the context. Thus, rather than settled questions, interview guide was applied. The interview guide was designed before I went back to China, and a pilot interview was conducted with a friend. As a result of the pilot interview, issues like 'parents' expectations of future spouses were added to the interview questions. I was continuously adding and deleting questions in the guide during the entire fieldwork period. As soon as I interviewed the second participant, Lavender, in Linyi I found that the question "what are your expectations of marriage?" was not a good one. When this question was designed, I intended to make it a general question to allow informants to talk freely about marriage, but it turned out to be too vague for participants. This further proved the flexibility of qualitative methods. It was interesting that my friend who helped me do the pilot interview was the only participant who described when and how she had experienced her first sexual interaction.

In-depth interviews were conducted with unmarried individuals aged 21–28 from a variety of family backgrounds. The 2010 National Census in China showed that the average age at marriage was 24.98; being 26.41 and 23.71 for men and women respectively. Thus, these unmarried young participants in my study were at the crucial point for getting married. Xuepiaoguo, aged 27 (see Table 6), was the only male participant who exceeded the average male age at marriage. However, eight women exceeded the average female age and only one of them (Lingjun Yang) was engaged. However, the average age at marriage is higher for

people with university education. The 2010 National Census in Beijing showed that 22% of male and 18% of female aged between 30 to 34 among people who had at least bachelor degrees were unmarried which were higher than 17% of male and 12% of female aged between 30 to 34 among the whole population.

I had been researching issues of female virginity for a while and felt that it was not a sensitive topic for me, especially in the English context in a foreign language. However, when I piloted the interview with my friend in Chinese I still felt embarrassed saying words like 'vagina', 'virgin', and 'hymen' in Chinese. To ease respondents' anxiety and embarrassment on issues of female virginity, I practised the pronunciations of these sensitive words in Chinese before the interviews and acted as though it was not a sensitive topic to me. As long as I acted in this way, participants felt comfortable about those topics and one of my respondents, Ping Lu, even said it was not sensitive at all. Moreover, showing agreement or sharing similar experiences really encouraged interviewees to talk. Meirong (one of my interviewees) displayed great anxiety about the research topic before the interview, so I spent almost 15 minutes in casual chat, like how to wear makeup and parents' issues. I knew she was really nervous about relationship and virginity issues and felt that having several past relationships was shameful, so when we brought up topics on her past relationships, I said "I also have more than one ex-boyfriend and many of the other interviewees have several past relationships. It's not a big deal." Sharing similar experiences encouraged Meirong to relax and talk more about her experience of lovers.

Taking notes during the interview was one point that I found worked really well. As I learnt about sexuality in English, noting down what rushed into my head in English was a good way of helping me to organise the interview as well as keeping interviewees focused. However, Pai (2013) noticed that people would become uncomfortable if the interviewer was writing while interviewing and she did not make any notes during interviews. When I had to take notes, I wrote down key points quickly in English, tried to keep my eyes focused on their face

and closed the notebook immediately. When interviewees kept their eyes on the notebook and slowed down, I would let them know the key points I had noted and tell them that I was just noting down the ideas rushing into my head and that they did not need to worry about that. The reason for me to note down key words, including 'homosexual', 'angry youth' and 'male virginity' in English instead of Chinese was probably that I learnt them in English and writing down these sensitive words in Chinese would make me embarrassed. Although most of the notes I took were in English, there were a few in Chinese. For instance, when interviewing Rongrong, who admitted having had intercourse before, we brought up a discussion on women's attitudes to female virginity before and after their virgin night. As this interview was conducted in Chinese, I noted down *women's attitudes to female virginity before and after their virgin night* in Chinese as a new interview question. Three interviewees admitted that they had had sexual intercourse, yet Rongrong was the only woman with whom I discussed the issue of attitudes before and after having intercourse. My supervisor suggested that I should keep a fieldwork diary, which was really beneficial. I always noted in this diary anything that happened during interviews which could not be recorded by the recorder, like how I found participants (were interviewees talkative, nervous?), where the interviews took place (were interview settings busy, quiet?) and what changes needed to be made for the next interview.

Chen (2003) explained her idea that interviews conducted in a public place like a coffee shop might easily be overheard by other customers. Most of my interviews were conducted either in a private room in a coffee shop or in interviewees' homes without any other people present, in which case there was no or little external sound that might influence the condition of the recording. At the beginning of the fieldwork, I asked participants to choose interview places and one of my participants, Meirong, chose a public café and said we could do the interview in the corner of a coffee shop and no one would even notice us. After this, I started to offer participants options: a private room, their homes or my

home, to avoid them choosing a public place. Recording and transcribing interviews is an important part of qualitative research, so getting hold of a good-quality recording machine and microphone is crucial (Bryman, 2012). The original digital recorder stopped working the day before I began to conduct fieldwork and I lost confidence in traditional electronic devices. Interviews were recorded on both a digital recorder and a mobile phone and voice records were copied to my personal computer as soon as the interviews were completed.

I let my interviewees know that the privacy of the interview and their confidentiality would be protected and an informed consent form was signed. I started the interviews with less sensitive questions about their education and occupations and made sure participants were comfortable with sensitive issues. Although I planned to stop my interview and turn off the recorder immediately if any of my participants recalled any unpleasant experiences or felt distressed, this situation did not occur during any of the interviews.

**Table 6 General information about interviewees**

LY is short for Linyi. HM is short for Houma. CQ is short for Chongqing.

| Pseudonym | City | Age | Sex | Relationship status | Education level | Employme-nt status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jiuzhe Li | LY | 26 | male | engaged | undergraduate | employed |
| Lavender | LY | 26 | female | In a relationship | undergraduate | employed |
| Wei Zhao | LY | 25 | male | In a relationship | undergraduate | employed |
| Ping Lu | LY | 24 | female | In a relationship | undergraduate | employed |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Xiaoxiao Wan | LY | 24 | female | In a relationship | undergraduate | employed |
| Xiaoyu Liu | LY | 24 | male | In a relationship | undergraduate | employed |
| Peng Guo | LY | 26 | male | In a relationship | undergraduate | employed |
| Lingjun Yang | LY | 27 | female | engaged | undergraduate | self-employed |
| Ruirui | HM | 24 | female | single | postgraduate | student |
| Xiaomeng | HM | 25 | female | single | undergraduate | employed |
| Qing Jia | HM | 23 | male | single | undergraduate | student |
| Xuepiaogu o | HM | 27 | male | In a relationship | undergraduate | employed |
| Meirong Ma | HM | 23 | female | single | college | employed |
| Wenwu Feng | HM | 23 | male | single | undergraduate | student |
| Rong Rong | HM | 22 | female | In a relationship | undergraduate | student |
| Xiaosong Liu | HM | 22 | male | single | undergraduate | student |
| Jing Kou | CQ | 25 | female | In a | undergraduate | employed |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | relationship | | |
| Yoshiko | CQ | 24 | female | In a relationship | postgraduate | employed |
| Xiaolü | CQ | 25 | female | In a relationship | postgraduate | employed |
| M | CQ | 25 | male | In a relationship | undergraduate | employed |

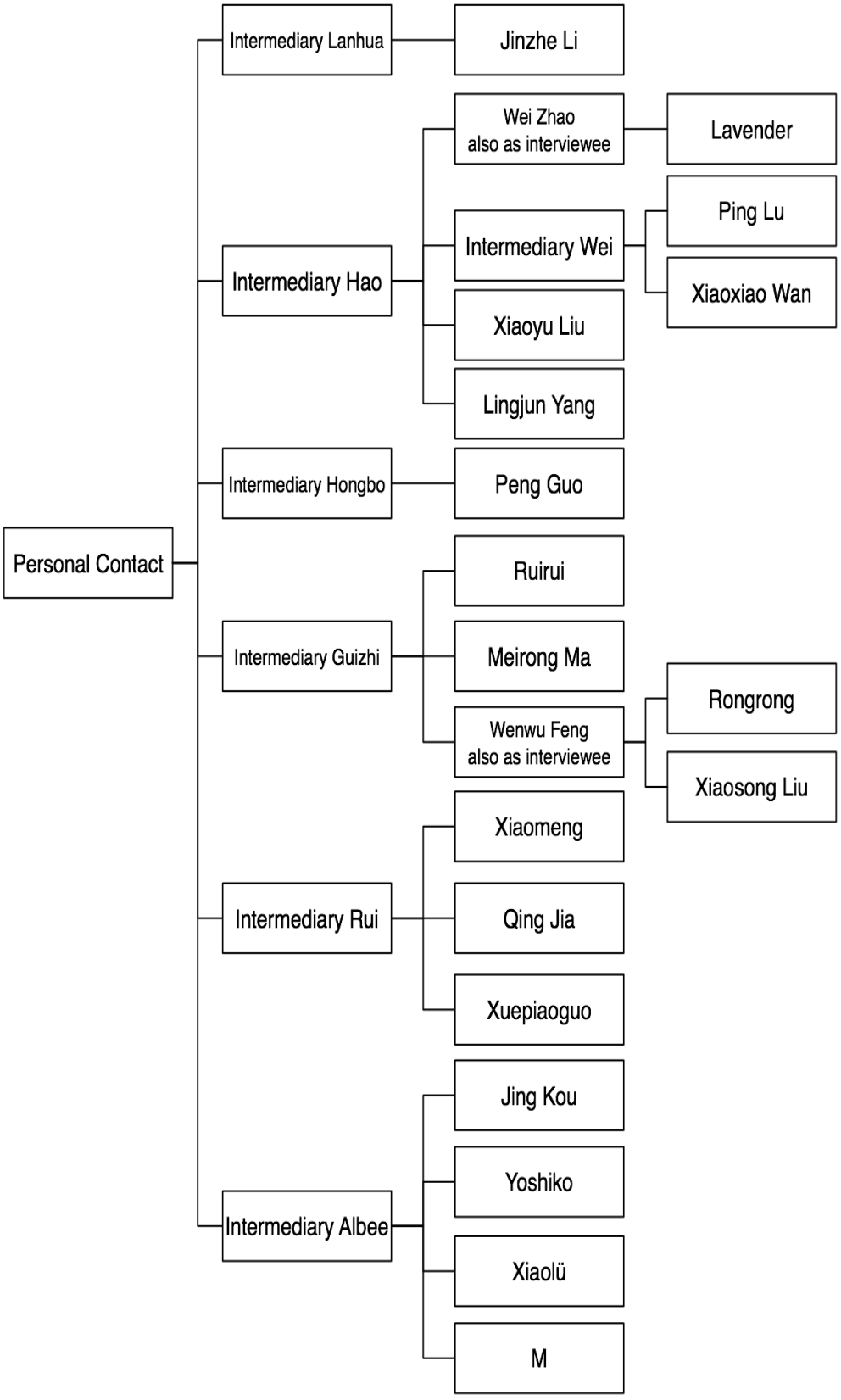
**Limitations of conducting interviews**

After I came back from the field and discussed my project with others, I found there were some limitations to my fieldwork. One of them is conducting interviews as a female interviewer. Carol Smart regards the interview as 'intrinsically female' (1984, p.155), because of the socially perceived 'fact' that "women do tend not to interrupt but rather to encourage and help the flow of men's talk" (p.155). Women are always culturally assumed to be better listeners and enhancers of men's speech. All these factors suggest that women are better suited than men to the practice of interviewing. However, Grenz (2000) mentioned that male interviewees might hesitate to talk with a female interviewer, especially on topics of sexuality. Grenz (2000), in her interview with heterosexual clients of sex workers, mentioned that as sexuality is highly gendered, people can assume that a heterosexual man might tell stories in a different way from a gay man, a heterosexual woman or a lesbian woman. Moreover, people may make a further assumption that a man might respond differently depending on the gender of the listener. In Michael Schwalbe and Michelle Wolkomir's (2001) research on men's behaviour in interview settings, they found that for men an interview is both an opportunity for showing off their

masculinity and “a peculiar type of encounter in which masculinity is threatened” (p.92). Grenz (2000) also concluded that interviewing men can be interpreted as a challenge to the dominant perception of masculinity. As commonly constructed, the ‘looker’ is always a male role, being ‘looked-at’ or being investigated in an interview could make a man feel uncomfortable and perceive himself as outside the norm. Grenz’s interviews on male clients of prostitutes subverted the whole male ‘looker’ and female ‘looked-at’ situation, as well as notions of active and passive, by investigating men’s sexuality as a female interviewer. She guessed that this subversion might be a reason for her participants’ hesitation in talking and not giving information in any depth. Grenz further concluded that interviewees tend to tell stories differently in relation to what they imagine interviewers would like or can bear to hear. Being similar to Grenz’s situation, one part of my study is to investigate men’s sexuality. Before conducting fieldwork, I encountered many irritated young men engaging in fierce arguments about female virginity on the internet and I was prepared to encounter these young men in the field but, surprisingly, none of my male participants acted according to my expectations. I think Grenz’s explanation could be one of the reasons why my male participants were not irritated about the topic and not willing to discuss it in any great depth. Similar to Grenz, Gerheim (2007) also studied the heterosexual clients of prostitutes. However, sometimes, even though they obtained similar logics, the statements showed significant differences. For example, in one interview passage, a man talked about being lonely and having sexual desire. Both Grenz and Gerheim obtained this logic, but the statements were different. Participants in Grenz’s study regularly explained things to her as somebody with a different sexuality, while Gerheim was told: “I believe it is like that for everybody, including you” (2007, p.152). Hence, participants addressed Gerheim as a peer and someone who understands and shares their feelings and desires. One of my male interviewees, Xuepiaoguo, used metaphors to explain his female virginity complex to me as someone with different sexuality: “female virginity complex for men is like if you are going to buy a cup, you do hope the

cup will be brand new and you won't buy a cup with a crack on it." I also found that the male participants in my study tended to think in quantitative terms. Two of my male participants asked me how my research could be generalised if I was only interviewing 20 participants and they suggested that I do questionnaires or surveys with a larger group of people. This also happened to Siyang, one of my colleagues, when she was conducting a pilot interview with a male interviewee.

**Figure 2 Links among research, intermediaries and participant**



**Researching Chinese in the UK**

Before one of my TAP members, Ann, asked me about my participants' definition of virginity I did not realise that I have taken for granted the definition of virginity when I carried interviews in China. To remedy the overlooking of definitions of both (hetero)sex and losing female virginity during my fieldwork in China, I conducted two focus groups in the UK, in late June and early July 2016. Focus groups together with interviewees I conducted in China could help me understand the idea of sexual revolution in China. I applied again for ethical approval from the university's ethics committee, and received approval before conducting the focus groups. There were two factors influencing me to choose the UK over China to conduct the focus groups: one being that it is not always easy to go back to China and gather employees for a focus group, and the other was that it enabled me to compare sexual opinions between young Chinese who are living in China and young Chinese who are living in the UK. As my contacts are mainly in York, both focus groups took place in a seminar room at the University of York. I intended to recruit unmarried Chinese with a university education who had been living in the UK for more than three years. Since York is not a metropolitan city with a lot of job opportunities, most unmarried Chinese here are students rather than employees. Participants came from the contacts of my friends and my husband. One of my contacts is a postgraduate in social science who knows many Chinese students in York while another one is my senior colleague at the Centre for Women's Studies, so most of their female contacts were from social science or similar areas. Unlike the interviews I carried out in China which could involve personal experiences or stories in sexual matters, focus groups I conducted in the UK aimed at participants' understandings and definitions of virginity. Participants in the focus group could easily avoid sensitive personal experiences and only share their attitudes when they consider any topics as sensitive. Compared to the participants in China, people were more reliable in the UK; none of them cancelled the focus group.

However, Wu was fifteen minutes late for the group discussion. We started the focus group before he arrived and introduced him to the topic when he got there. Paul was employed and could only participate in the focus group after work, so the first group was arranged for 6:30 pm, which is dinner time for most Chinese. I prepared food like sandwiches and mini sausages. I also took some cider, as Iris mentioned that cider would help her relax. During the two focus groups, I wanted them to do more self-discussion rather than conducting a discussion led by me, so my colleague Echo pretended to be one of the interviewees and helped them to discuss more among themselves. The 'planting of a colleague' helped to open a relaxed discussion and ease potential anxious of participants facing strangers. Yet, my colleague had the possibility of leading the direction of focus group discussion if she presented strong views. To prevent this circumstance, my colleague only helped start the conversation.

I chose mixed sex participants for the two focus groups to investigate interchanges among participants and elements of interpersonal scripting. The effect of the culture of conformity could also be examined when sexual issues were discussed between different sexes. Table 9 shows a general topic guide for focus group discussion. Without asking structured questions, I asked them to discuss both the definition of virginity and sex. They also discussed whether virginity should be defined by the existence of a hymen. To compare it with data collected in China, I asked female participants to discuss whether they have male virginity complex or not and the whole group to define male virginity. I also prepared a video[19], which explains the physical structure of the vagina and corrects some false ideas about what the hymen is. I showed it to them after their discussion of the hymen and asked them to rethink female virginity. I intended to explore definitions of virginity by different genders and the potential existence of a sexual double standard by investigating their definitions of virginity and their attitudes toward virginity complex. The focus groups contributed to answering

[19] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qFojO8WkpA

one of my main research question, which is – do the attitudes and behaviours of young adults fit with the idea of Chinese sexual revolution?

Also after I finished data collecting in China and in the UK and began to analyse sex education in China, I found that there was ambiguity in M's (interviewee in Chongqing) narrative of his sex education experiences. M affirmed that he had received formal sex education at school and mentioned a booklet called *花季心语 (hua ji xin yu)*[20]. However, the name the booklet seemed to indicate content of puberty education rather than sex education. To explore more about the sex education material used in M's school, I carried out a further interview with M via the Internet. I obtained M's Wechat account through my friend Albee with M's consent. A short interview, around fifteen minutes, with M was conducted by text-based chatting in July 2017.

**Table 7 General information about participants (focus group 1)**

| **pseudonym** | **age** | **sex** | **education level** | **faculty** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Iris | 25 | female | postgraduate | Social science |
| Chad | 30 | male | postgraduate | science |
| Paul | 29 | male | postgraduate | unknown |
| Tina | 30 | female | postgraduate | Social science |
| Yo Duck | 29 | male | postgraduate | science |
| Echo | 26 | female | postgraduate | Social |

[20]花季 (hua ji) literally means the flower season. Traditionally, this refers to the age of 16 when there might be small annoyances, but all the big troubles in life have not yet emerged. It is called flower season, because of its pure and beautiful nature. Thus, 花季心语 (hua ji xin yu) means words from the heart in the flower season.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | science |

**Table 8 General information about participants (focus group 2)**

| **pseudonym** | **age** | **sex** | **education level** | **faculty** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Zoe | 28 | female | postgraduate | Social science |
| Fion | 26 | female | postgraduate | Social science |
| Emily | 27 | female | postgraduate | Social science |
| Hugo | 26 | male | postgraduate | science |
| Hugo1 | 25 | male | postgraduate | science |
| Echo | 26 | female | postgraduate | Social science |
| Wu | 25 | male | postgraduate | science |

**Table 9 Topic guides for focus group**

| |
|---|
| Define virginity |
| Define sex |
| Should virginity be defined by the existence of hymen |
| Does female participants have male virginity complex |
| Define male virginity |

**Post-field: transcription, translation and data analysis**

I started to transcribe in late January 2015 while I was still in the field, but completed the process over several months. I then had to go through all the transcripts again to relive the memories in my mind and drag me back into their stories. As all the data were gathered in China and interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, I transcribed the data in Chinese to keep the original colour of the data and allow me to focus on interviewees' stories word by word. Standing (1998) and Edwards and Ribbens (1998) noted that many researchers sometimes deliberately ignore small details and correct interviewees' grammar mistakes when transcribing in order to tidy up transcripts and make them understandable. However, probably because I have a background in linguistics and have worked on speech analysis, I focused a lot on details like emotional changes, overlapping and direct/indirect speech. I used brackets to record emotions like laughing and embarrassment as well as my own thoughts. For instance, when I was asking some background questions with Jiuzhe Li, I started a casual chat with him about his birthday in the lunar calendar, which is irrelevant to the subject, and I wrote in brackets that "actually, I forgot the next question, so I just started a casual chat". If I had not noted down my thought in the bracket, I would not know why I asked this question when I looked at this transcript six months after transcribing it.

Concentrating on detailed information and speech patterns might help to keep the original flavour of interviewees' stories when transcribing, yet too much focus on the speech rather than the information given by interviewees during the data analysis could lead the analysis in an unfruitful direction. When analysing the data, I spontaneously investigated participants' speech patterns because of my previous profession and stuck to finding a balance between what they are telling and how they are telling it. For example, from a linguistics perspective I found that Wei Zhao tended to answer in a brief way, ignoring the underlying meaning of the interview questions and expecting direct questions compared with other

interviewees. In response to the question “how many relationships have you had in the past?”, Wei Zhao simply answered ‘three’ and then fell silent. Actually, this was considered an indirect question by most interviewees and they answered more than the question itself. Unlike Wei Zhao, other interviewees told me more about when each relationship happened, with whom and how they ended.

In order to understand the data better and reduce my workload, I only translated selected quotes into English after the analysis. Conducting interviews in my mother tongue allowed me to gain a good understanding of their dialogues, but at the same time it made translations problematic. I have to fully perceive their underlying meaning and translate it into appropriate English. Wei (2011) avoided translating her interviewees’ stories into formal English to keep individuality of each interviewee. Although I kept the original colour of interviewees’ stories, including their laughter and grammatical mistakes in Chinese, I struggled while translating. Sometimes participants’ expressions were composed of many meaningless fragments, but those fragments as a whole would make sense in Chinese. If I translated them word by word into English, the sentence would not read smoothly. Hence, to make quotations understandable in English, I would tidy them up slightly while translating. In addition, the researcher’s emotional involvement also has an impact on translation outcomes (Vulliamy, 1990). It is unavoidable for translators to strengthen or lessen the effect of certain words or impose their own feelings through translations. A specific instance arose when Jiuzhe Li was expressing his attitude towards early relationships; he used the term 看不中 (*kan bu zhong*), which is a term in the dialect of Shandong. *Kan bu zhong* could be showing disagreement, dislike or scorn. I attempted to translate it as “I’m scornful of this behaviour (intimacy in early relationships)”, but realised this might produce bias. Thus, I translated it as “I don’t agree with their behaviour and would not do this myself”. Footnotes were used to explain complicated Chinese words or terms.

I employed critical thematic analysis to make sense of my data. When it came to

analysing data, selecting themes, and organising chapters of the thesis I drafted and redrafted several times. Some of the themes were directly related to interview questions, others emerged from the data. Initially, I was more focused on young people's attitudes on virginity and spousal choice rather than considered them as an entirety and as a reflection of sexual revolution in China.

**Summary**

Methodological issues including my data collecting experience in China and in the UK have been detailed in this chapter. I have explained the reasons behind designing my interview themes and selecting young adults with university educations as well as the rationale of choosing the three research cities (Chongqing, Linyi, and Houma). In addition, the motivation and process of conducting focus groups in the UK were also illustrated. On top of that problems and challenges I encountered before, during, and after the field were presented. According to the data collected in the field, themes pertinent to my research question including sexual morality, different gender role expectations in intimate lives, and the culture of conformity were generated. In the following chapter, I will explore the sex education young people received in China and its relationship with pornography and the idea of sexual revolution. Based on the discussion of pornography, sexual morality and socialist morality as shaped by the Chinese government will also be probed. Nonetheless, as has been observed by many researchers (Pan, 1999; Wang; 2017), China has experienced dramatic changes in sexual attitude and practice and people-especially young adults-are enjoying more freedom in sexuality than their parents' generation. Thus, conflict between socialist morality and a sexualised society appears.

# Chapter 4

## Sex education and morality

Education plays a key role in change in attitudes. How individuals learn about sexuality has consequences for their sexual lives. Also tolerance of non-conformity and non-marital sex is believed to be connected with education (Smith, 1994). Based on young Chinese interviewees' narratives, five out of twenty young Chinese expressed that they had school-based sex education when asked. On the basis of that, what type of sex education did they receive at school will be discussed. Chapter 4 explores the following questions: How does sex education prepare young people for their sexual lives? To what extent does current sex education promote or impede China's supposed 'sexual revolution'? In this chapter, I focus on sex education in order to identify the role sex education plays in contemporary China and understand young people's sexual conduct. Sex education dates back many centuries in China, but it remained very conservative or was even banned for a long time. The academic attentiveness to sexuality only began in the Republican period when urban elites started to engage in translating western scientific works (Ho, et al., 2018). Although school-based sex education has been conducted since the founding of the People's Republic of China, it only focuses on knowledge about puberty, and topics such as contraception or sexual desire are hardly touched upon. Young people gain sexual information mainly from the Internet, especially pornographic websites. Also, concern with sexual pleasure or tips on coitus positions are promoted on social media like *Weibo*. In addition, government officials or rich men escorting beautiful young women or keeping mistresses are continually commented on by the Chinese media. This illustrates the conflict between a sexualised society and the party-state promotion of socialist morality and stability with which young people are confronted.

**History of sex education in China**

The oldest current existing works on sexuality in China were written in around 200 BCE (Ruan, 2013). Some of those works introduced techniques of sex, some described details on the way to overcome sex related problems, and others presented knowledge on how to achieve longevity by modifying different levels of sexual conducts (Ge, 2001). Although sexual knowledge was first formally recorded in China and there was a historical period before the Tang dynasty when sex was not strictly controlled and even encouraged, sex started to become a topic of taboo and sexual attitudes became conservative in around 1200 CE during the Song Dynasty. The Cheng–Zhu school (*程朱理学*) is one of the main philosophical Neo-Confucianism schools, and is founded on the theory of some Neo-Confucian philosophers including Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, and Zhu Xi. The Cheng–Zhu school promoted the Confucian value of "upholding justice, annihilating desire" (*存天理，灭人欲*) (Liang, et al., 2017, p.2) during that period. From the late Song Dynasty until the end of the Qing Dynasty, dominated by Cheng–Zhu school ideology, sexual conservatism took shape and any communication about sexuality was considered taboo. During the early Republican period, when the last feudal dynasty, the Qing, was overthrown, elites in urban China sought to build a strong nation and liberate their people from semi-colonialism by advocating western ideology.

> *To strengthen the country, one should first strengthen the race; to strengthen the race, one should first improve sex education.* (Wang, 1939, n.p.)

In around 1920 during the early Republican era, modernising elites, often with an overseas educational background or educated in western ideas, constructed conceptual links between modernisation and the subjects of sex, liberation of women and the topics of eugenics. According to Aresu (2009), strengthening the Chinese race was considered a main element in the process of Chinese modernisation; sex education, including reproduction, sexual hygiene, and sexual

desire, was believed to be an essential requirement to enhance population quality at that time. During the early Republican period, sex education was regarded as one crucial feature of the modernising discourse and was not included in the school curriculum. Aresu (2009) also noted that Zhang Jingsheng, who is normally respected as the innovator of contemporary Chinese sex education, published the first scientific work, *Sex Histories*. The *Sex Histories* was written on the basis of participants' past sexual experience which was collected in 1926, and introduced suggestions on sexual hygiene, approaches of various sexual conduct, and also advices on sex education teaching (Zhang, 1967).

'Imperatives' was the key word in sex education during the early Republican period. The most important issue among those 'imperatives', which were designed to regulate sexual activity, "was to keep sexual relations within the monogamous marital couple" (Aresu, 2009, p. 533). The control of premarital and extra-marital sex was one of the main points of regulated sexual lives. "Extra-marital relations have consistently been constructed as one of the most dangerous threats to marital and family stability" (McMillan, 2006, p. 67).

Sex education strongly discouraged premarital sex during the early Republican period. People were taught that a wife will lose her husband's affection if he finds out that she has been taken by another man before marriage. However, 'imperatives' in sex education during the early Republican period were not first proposed in China. In the early twentieth century, William Jennings Bryan discussed "morals for men and women" and his discussion included "a legislative enactment of the sacredness of the home" (Wood, 1923, p. 68). According to Wood (1923), Bryan urged that "married men's and women's love lives are to be confined to an after-marriage relationship exclusively with the wedded mate; the unwed are to have no sexual relationships" (Wood, 1923, p. 68).

Besides premarital and extra-marital sex, these ‘imperatives’ in sex education in the 1920s were also directed at the conjugal couple and regulated their formation. For instance, eugenic criteria in the selection of a future spouse were constantly promoted during the early Republican period. If it is critical to avoid premarital pregnancy, it is just as imperative to ensure pregnancy does occur soon after marriage. Childbirth is important in Chinese culture as it allows the family line to continue, and this is normally carried out by a son (McMillan, 2006). With the embracing of a strong population and quality people during the early part of the twentieth century, just having a child is not enough, what matters is having a ‘superior’ child. Hence, the language of eugenics occupied a notable place in government goals. Free-choice marriage was considered by theorists like Lin Zhaoyin as fundamental to social evolution and to strengthening the population quality because they believe “children conceived in free-choice marriages are smarter and more capable than children from forced marriages” (Aresu, 2009, p.533). Moreover, it is believed by the marital eugenics criteria that sexual pleasure could be brought to both spouses by moderate sexual lives and at the same time, the quality of their offspring and the steadiness of marriage could both be improved.

According to Chiang (2010), as well as focusing on the eugenics agenda of western sexology during the early Republican period, modernising Chinese elites also introduced western sexological idea of same-sex relations to strengthen the nation. Kang (2009), in his study of Chinese male same-sex relations during the early twentieth century, pointed out that sexology in Republican China was influenced by the increasingly dominant understanding of same-sex relations across Europe and North America since the late nineteenth century. At that time, homosexuality was considered to be a social problem which modernising intellectuals thought could be ‘fixed’ by eugenics. The need of sex education among young adults increased according to the 1920s discourse. Moreover, the main source of sex related information, including sexual hygiene, reproduction,

eugenics, and sexual morality, to young people was suggested to be parents (Guan, 2004). During the 1920s, it was also advised that the knowledge of sex should be taught among family and sex education at school should only be seen as a complement to it (Liang, 2000). Furthermore, mothers were particularly advised to be the main actors in sex education, because children or young people tend to ask their mothers rather than their fathers where they come from. Among those people who first advocated these ideas, Lu Xun made his first effort by introducing a curriculum on sexual hygiene in Hangzhou. Later on, Zhang Jingsheng who was educated and also received his PhD in sociology in France, started sex education at a middle school in Guangzhou. He also suggested that school based sex education should begin in junior high school and young people should be informed about sexual information including knowledge on reproduction, sexual desire, and other puberty knowledge. Moreover, he also recommended to inform young adults about 'inappropriate sexual behaviour', such as masturbation and prostitution (Guan, 2004). However, their approach to sex education remained a fantasy at that time, even for urban elites, but it laid the foundations for school sex education after the foundation of the People's Republic of China.

The very conservative attitudes towards sex and sex education through the early Republican period began to change after 1949, with the founding of the People's Republic of China. The connection between sexuality, health and modernisation was not denied by the new government. In addition, the PRC also took some crucial sexual formations over from the Republican period, and emphasised discipline and restraint. Eugenics even gained great popularity during the late twentieth century when measures to restrict the population, such as the one-child policy, were introduced. These measures increased people's need for a quality child and intensified eugenic restrictions on marriage. However, the key word 'imperative' in sex education in the early Republican period also found its place in the new China and retained its impact until very recent times. The 1950

Marriage Law made monogamy the only legal form of marriage. Although the Marriage Law did not make specific reference to sexual fidelity, a single sexual partner was required by some legal commentators.

In the 1950s, the necessity of sex education was gradually recognised by the PRC, at the same time a few works on sexuality were published with the aim of educating the general public. Premier Zhou Enlai who started to promote sex education for young adults in the beginning of 1950s, was generally regarded as the main supporter of sex education. The speech he made to students at Peking University in 1954 was constantly referred to. It was said in his speech that 'the mystery of sex should be broken and the students should be educated with sex knowledge' (Liu, 1994; Yao, 1992). Together with him, in the late 1950s, Chairman Mao started to agree to some forms of sex education. Mao decided to introduce classes on birth control among middle school students at that time. However, the Great Leap Forward (*大跃进*) in 1958 interrupted this birth-control policy and young people's sex education was reduced to silence (Aresu, 2009). Later, in 1963, Zhou Enlai proclaimed that the rapid growth of Chinese population needed to be controlled by contraception methods and late marriage. At the same time, Zhou Enlai raised the focus on 'popularising scientific sexual knowledge' among adolescents at the National Conference on the Hygiene Science and Technology Programme along with a new focus on birth control as well as family planning (Aresu, 2009). The effort Zhou Enlai made was considered to be a crucial point in Chinese sex education (Aresu, 2009). In spite of all his effort to keep the discussion on sex education public and essential, the topic of sex was prohibited and sex education was silenced during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Later in the early 1970s, the new birth-control campaign was implemented, but its launch did not bring back the discussion of sex education right away. The debate on education on sexual hygiene only came back during the late 1970s. The launch of the one-child policy from 1978 aimed to control the size of population and increase the quality of children. Again in the

early 1980s, sex education among young adults was taken into consideration by the government. The government also treated school as the basis of education of birth control. Furthermore, since the Open Door policy and the economic Reform in 1978, social ideology and traditional family expectations were dramatically changed by Western ideas and values. Young people expressed growing interest in sexual expression. Later on, since the late 1980s, sex education, which is frequently referred to as 'puberty education' in most schools, has been widely promoted as part of the curriculum of secondary schools in China. Premarital sex was constructed by educators as harmful and to be avoided before the 1990s (McMillan, 2006). The dangers of premarital sex were defined as threefold: 1. It leads to sexual problems because it is usually conducted under extremely anxious circumstances and is likely to lead to chronic problems of frigidity in women and impotence in men (Chen, 1998). 2. Any form of premarital sexual behaviour inevitably leads to the loss of virginity, which is disastrous for women. 3. "The calamitous consequences of giving in to premarital temptation have ramifications for an entire marriage" (McMillan, 2006, p. 64). The 2001 Marriage Law further controlled non-marital sex by forbidding married people from cohabiting with a partner who is not their legal spouse (*禁止有配偶者与他人同居*).

One can identify that physical and psychological changes during puberty, sexual hygiene, sexual morality and ethics are designated as the main subjects taught in puberty education. In addition, according to Aresu (2009), the focus on puberty in sex education is also acknowledged in the 2002 Population and Family Planning Law:

> Schools shall, in a manner suited to the characteristics of the receivers, and in a planned way, conduct among pupils education in physiology and health, puberty or sexual health. (Legislative Affairs Commission of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2002)

Apart from the main sex education content of puberty, the emphasis of sex education is often placed on moral discipline, heterosexuality, monogamy, marriage, and the moralist agenda of the Party-State (Zarafonetis, 2014). The moral education was also emphasised by Aresu (2009) by pointing out that the main task of sex education in contemporary China is to create healthy and moral bodies. Meanwhile, another point of school based sex education is "to regulate young people's social and sexual behaviour by moulding them as self-controlled, self-disciplined, rational and responsible, healthy and moral subjects" (Aresu, 2009, p. 532) and to help them resist the temptations of adolescence. Besides, there is "a set of 'truths' defining normative standards of moral, responsible, and healthy sexual behaviour" which young adults are advised to consult and to use in everyday life (Aresu, 2009, p.532). In general, adolescents' sex education is intended to teach young people to distinguish between moral and immoral, and socially acceptable and unacceptable sexual behaviour. Puberty and sexual morality education is seen as a middle path between feudalism and the western ideals of individualism and personal freedom, one which will protect vulnerable Chinese youth both physically and psychologically (Bulbek, 2008). Furthermore, the approach of 'abstinence only' largely controlled Chinese sex education and it was rarely challenged until present times (Aresu, 2009). However, the emphasis on educating moral bodies conflicted with the sexualised society in contemporary China. The conflict young adults are faced will be illustrated at the end of this chapter. Young adults have to develop their own methods to cope with the tension between the socialist morality and the sexualised culture.

Li et al. (2004) conducted a survey on the aspect of sex education in 2002 with 440 undergraduate students at a university located in eastern China. A questionnaire was administered to test participants' needs and preferences regarding sex education. Two questions asked students at what time they had first had school education on reproductive and puberty knowledge, and at what time they had first had school education on sexual conduct and related themes. This

study also asked students about the sources from which they received sexual information and their preferences about the topics that should be included in a college-level sex education curriculum, both completed by multiple-choice questions. At the end, six teaching methods were ranked by the preference of students. The results showed that 47% of participants had received no school-based education on sexual conduct or related themes before college, while all students had taken a curriculum related to procreation. Overall, reading materials were ranked as students' favourite source of information, while personal information was listed to be the least favourite.

Studies are carried out to investigate young adults' online sexual explorations. Researchers like Hong, et al. (2006) do not agree that online resources are a good choice for self-education when formal school sex education is not provided. Scholars in other countries have researched how university students' Internet use behaviours affect their sexual behaviours and attitudes (Goodson et al., 2000; Perry et al., 1998; Goold et al., 2003). Their findings suggested that the Internet was used by college students to find out about sex, set up personal connections, as well as search for sexual entertainment. To fill the gap in online sex-education research in developing countries like China, Hong et al. (2006) conducted a survey among 1,845 university students in an eastern province of China, with the aim of assessing the pattern of Internet use among Chinese young adults, examining the relationship between Internet use and HIV information, and investigating the relationship between online risk behaviours and sexual status, sexual intention, and sexual perceptions. Their results were consistent with research outcomes from developed countries which underlined the importance of guided Internet use for sex education and HIV prevention.

While sex education research in the western world is trying to challenge the the hegemony of heteronormativity, sex education in contemporary China is employed by the states as a mean of teaching acceptable sexual morals and behaviours (Haggis & Mulholland, 2014). My review of current studies on China

revealed a tendency to downgrade sex education to puberty education and moral education; but what was the situation among my interviewees? How did sex education from both schools and families prepare them for sexual lives? And to what extent did current sex education promote or impede the idea of sexual revolution?

**Limited sex education**

Although it is required by the government to implement sex education classes in schools, research have argued that the sex education among young people was inadequate (Aresu, 2009; Li, et al., 2004). Little attention is paid to sex education especially in secondary schools because of the cultural norms which inhibit sexual discourse and also the competition for students to enter good high schools or universities, which place greater priority on other academic subjects other than sex (Lou, et al., 2006). Moreover, most school based sex education offered only knowledge of puberty instead of a complete sex education including contraception and sexual desire. Besides, most young adults also experienced a silence around sex education in the family.

Previous studies, such as Davis et al. (1998) and Zhang et al. (2007), pointed out that teachers in China are not comfortable teaching about sex-related knowledge. Zhang, Li, and Shah (2007) carried out research in Changchun city, China, targeting at examining that where Chinese teenagers find out about puberty, sexuality and other health related issues. Their data were collected in 2001 among unmarried adolescents aged between 15 and 19 (322 males and 360 females) by using a cross-sectional survey with self-administered questionnaires. Their results showed that sex education at school and the media were determined by students as the two most important sources of knowledge about sex. Their findings also suggested that adolescents mainly obtained puberty knowledge

from teachers, while more students recognized peers as the key source of knowledge about sexuality. Although a few teachers mentioned the topics of STI/HIV/AIDS, most teachers and parents tended to focus mainly on topics which are less sensitive and with fewer cultural taboos, such as knowledge about puberty. Young people in China hardly receive any education on the topics of contraception, safe sex, or sexual desire.

The narrative from Lingjun Yang, who live in Linyi, revealed a puberty focused sex education in her school life:

> *Guanlan: Did they teach you any sexual knowledge except reproduction?*
>
> *Lingjun Yang: They were all mixed. We started with the different biological structures between men and women, then what happens at puberty, both physically and mentally. And this course lasted for a term in primary school, mainly about things like puberty and periods. They never taught us anything sexual, only your physical changes at puberty.*

While Lingjun Yang realised that there was a difference between puberty education and sex education, Jing Kou, a participant in my study from Chongqing, conflated sex education with puberty education. Jing Kou said that she had received lessons on menstrual periods and secondary sexual characteristics, which are obviously part of puberty education.

> *Jing Kou: I had sex education when I was in primary school and they talked about menstrual periods, secondary sexual characteristics, masturbation and so on. However, they stopped offering us anything related to this after primary school. Maybe it was part of the* suzhi *(quality) education in primary school. They assume that you've got some sexual knowledge when you enter secondary school, and you would be encouraged to explore this aspect more if they taught you about sexual information.*

While US respondents in Bulbeck's work identified the importance of "sex education as a weapon for safe sex" (Bulbeck, 2008, p.119), one of the main purposes of school-based sex education in China is to control students' sexual behaviours, help them resist the 'temptation' they meet at puberty and preferably make them abstinent adolescents (Aresu, 2009). Avoiding the provision of sexual information at secondary school is a way of discouraging adolescents to explore sexual matters and by this 'temptation' is resisted. Moreover, it is not only Jing Kou who equated sex education with puberty education. M, who was also from Chongqing, claimed that he had taken school-based sex education. M recalled that he started to have sex education in primary school, when he gained sexual knowledge from both biology classes and special classes on sexuality. He even clearly remembered the name of the book distributed in that sexuality class and some of the sexual information in the book:

> *M: I remember having sex education since primary school. I was very curious at that time, because boys and girls were separated in this class. We were brought to a very big classroom. Girls went to have the class first, then boys. That's the first time, and then they distributed a booklet. The content of that booklet was not taught by teachers, but I still remember the name of it – 花季心语 (hua ji xin yu). It was about something sexual. After that, I only learnt things like body structure from biology class.*

However, a further interview with M via the Internet revealed that the book he mentioned mainly contained information about puberty and hygiene. According to M's description, both physical and psychological changes at puberty, including a detailed introduction to the male and female sexual organs, were included in that book. In any case, details related to contraception, sexual desire or safe intercourse were absent during any stage of the sex education that M received. Although both Jing Kou and M declared that they had received school-based sex education, what they received mainly focused on puberty and bodily hygiene.

The emphasis on puberty in school-based sex education is also reflected in Zarafonetis's (2014) study. Zarafonetis interviewed 43 young Shanghai women about their opinion on sex, sexuality and intimate relationships. Young Shanghai women in Zarafonetis's interviews evidenced a focus on puberty and a silence around sexual health and desire in school-based sex education. The data from my research is consistent with Li et al.'s (2004) results that many people received reproductive education while others had taken sex-related, mainly puberty education. Thus the focus on puberty in sex education, which is acknowledged in the law, was further confirmed by my interviewees. In addition to this, my data also suggests that the economic level of cities serves as a factor in school-based sex education. Most interviewees in Chongqing, which is the most economically developed city among my three research cities, reported having taken puberty education, including learning about both physical and psychological changes during puberty, whereas many interviewees in Linyi and most interviewees in Houma had either experienced a complete silence around sex education or were only offered reproductive knowledge at school.

Gendered sex education at home

Although family was suggested to be the primary source of information on sex during the Republican period, family based sex education was generally absent in contemporary China. The topic of sex education at home was not included in my interview guide, but the lack of sex education at home could be reflected by parents' attitudes towards premarital sex. Zarafonetis's (2014) finding indicated that sex was a highly sensitive topic in Chinese families, and it was considered 'normal' for Chinese parents not discussing any sexual issues with their children. Yet, interviews with young women such as Lavender and Ping Lu surprised me by their parents' mention of contraception:

*Guanlan: Has your parents mentioned anything about premarital sex?*

*Lavender: Yes, my mum told me don't forget contraception.*

*… …*

*Ping Lu: Mum told me to be careful and don't get pregnant. My dad never mentioned anything about that, he always ask mom to talk to me.*

Though detailed education on safe sexual practices were not mentioned, a few parents' of young women discussed contraception with them. However, there was a gendered difference in parental sex education and attitudes towards premarital sex. In general parents of young women are likely to discuss sexual matters with their daughters than the parents of young men. Additionally, the work of Zhang et al. (2007) also indicated that people who were younger, female and were not in an intimate relationship were more likely to receive information about sex from their parents. The parents of young men were either reticent or shy about providing them sexual knowledge or held liberal views on sexuality. Wenwu Feng's parents never discussed sexual matters with him and he thought that was because 'guys are certainly different from women'. Like Wenwu Feng, M's parents did not discuss premarital sex with him, but they thought he could make the right decision on this matter. At the same time, premarital sex was clearly prohibited by young female participants' parents, Moreover the mother rather than the father or both parents were mentioned frequently by young women:

*Jing Kou: My mum is quite self-contradictory on premarital sex. She told me not to have any premarital sex. And she keeps telling me that man will not cherish me if he 'get' me before marriage or my future husband will dislike me if I had sex with someone else before him. On the other hand, she told me to put a condom in my handbag and use it if I came into some emergency situation like criminal assault.*

*Guanlan: Is it only your mother talking these to you all the time? Did your father mention anything related?*

*Jing Kou: Of course only mum would talk about these to me. It would be more embarrassing if my dad did the same thing.*

Noticeably, the emphasis of young women' mothers was on contraception and the harmful consequences of premarital sex. Unmarried pregnancy and the risk of abortion or bodily harm are normally only a concern for young women (Zarafonetis, 2014). Thus, parents of young women treated contraception and avoiding premarital sex as their primary task in family-based sex education, whereas the topic of sex was largely absent from young men's families. As sexual knowledge is normally not provided either in school education or within the family, young adults have to find out about sex through other methods, such as the media or peer discussion.

**Various methods of finding out about sex in contemporary China**

'The sex education of China is very much falling behind' (Chad from first focus group) is the general impression among most Chinese people. Also, according to Lou et al. (2006), the content of school sex-education classes is superficial and cannot meet young adults' needs. Additionally, the manner in which sexual knowledge is taught at school normally cannot draw students' notice or interest. The inappropriate teaching methods together with the pressure students faced to enter a good high school lead to the result that students in secondary schools normally gained little sexual information from school based sex education. Knowledge about puberty, sexual hygiene, and reproduction remains the focus of school sex education among my interviewees. Due to the absence of complete sexual knowledge at school and in family, other ways of find out about sex were reviewed in my study.

Both my data and previous studies (Zarafonetis, 2014; Li, et al., 2004) showed that school-based sex education is not the only source from which young people

gain their information about sexuality. University students are more likely than other age groups to be sexually curious and active, and to find out more about sex in Chinese universities. Data from Li et. al's (2004) study which is reviewed in the earlier section showed that among all the sources, reading material, radio, classroom lectures together with parents were the sources more frequently referred to by women than by men, whereas friends, the Internet and personal sexual experience were more popular among men than women. The results also indicate that there is a gender difference in how best to convey information on sexuality, with women generally favouring private methods, such as reading. Generally, school-based sex education before college covered subjects like anatomy and physiology, but most students considered topics like sexual response, HIV/AIDS and STIs to be the most practical in the course on sexuality.

Lavender's description from our one-to-one interview not only showed that the Internet was not the most preferred source for her, but also showed that friends were her favoured pathway, along with Lingjun Yang and Jing Kou. This is different from the female students in Li et al.'s research. However, my study is a qualitative study with relatively small group of participants. One interviewee's experience in my study cannot be used to refute Li et al.'s quantitative study.

*Lavender: No, no, no, definitely not the Internet. I'll say mainly from friends.*

*Guanlan: You have one or two friends who know a lot about this, do you?*

*Lavender: I've got this classmate in college, a woman of course, who kept telling us things on that (sexual) aspect. And she also gave us copies of sex videos [laugh].*

*.....*

*Lavender: I guess men would watch this kind of video alone, but women watch together in the college dormitory.*

*Guanlan: Did you only gain sexual information since your college days through friends? Did you know anything about that before college?*

*Lavender: Yes, but I only had limited knowledge. We had taken one or two lessons on reproduction in middle school.*

Young women like Jing Kou not only gained some information though the Internet, but they also gained knowledge by chatting with friends. However, what they gained is normally visual knowledge rather than basic information:

*Jing Kou: … I don't think what I get from chats with friends or the Internet is knowledge. It's just chatting with friends. I was Funü [a spoiled girl[21]] when I was in Senior High school. I joined all kinds of BL [boys' love] chat groups. They send not only man-to-man, but also heterosexual stuff in those chat groups.*

BL, which stands for Boys' Love, is originally a popular Japanese term. BL products normally focus on fiction, comics, and adult videos. They are female-oriented homoerotic male sexual relationships, usually produced by female writers. Funü is the term by which BL fans identify themselves and it is written 腐女子 in Japanese. Several of Jing Kou's friends were also self-defined as Funü. They obtained lively sexual information (both homosexual and heterosexual) by reading BL fiction and watching BL videos. Under the mask of Funü, young women will not be judged for searching for sexual information online.

Although a few female interviewees such as Lavender and Ping Lu received information about contraception from their mothers, parents tended to talk about less sensitive and less taboo topics, such as puberty. Furthermore, compared to other sources, parents were not a frequent source to which adolescents would

[21] Funü or spoiled girl is a reclaimed Japanese term for female fans who enjoy any media works or fanworks with romantic relationships between men. (https://fanlore.org/wiki/Fujoshi)

refer. Gao et al. (2001) suggested that one potential reason for this result is that affected by the very conservative sexual cultural norms originated from the Song Dynasty Chinese parents may be may be concerned that sex education, especially sexual information like contraception or sexual desire, would encourage their children to be sexually active at early ages, and also put their children under great risk of acquiring STI/HIV/AIDS. Another possible reason might be that, the influence of sex education on sexual related disease and risk reduction might not be perceived by most parents. Further possible obstacles that prevent parents from becoming one of the key sources of sexual information for young people include inadequate general communication among the family and also the generational gap in sexual attitudes (Gao, et al., 2001).

Besides school-based and parental sex education, the Internet is also one of the main sources through which young people gain sexual information. Because of the Open Door policy, rapid modernisation, and also increased exposure to the Western media, the sexual attitudes of Chinese youth are becoming much more liberal. Studies (Farrer, 1998; Wang, 2017) also show that an increasing number of young people are having sex before marriage, and the age at sexual debut is declining (Gao et al., 2002). The Internet has attracted great attention and interest among Chinese university students and it has become an ever-increasing resource for health information. Participants' responses during both the one-to-one interviews and focus groups in my research were consistent with the results of Li et al.'s (2004) research that the Internet is the main source through which young men gain their sexual knowledge. Men like Wenwu Feng, Yo Duck and Paul mentioned that the Internet is full of information on sexuality and people can gain sexual information even when they do not search for related topics intentionally. It has been indicated by the studies above that the Internet has gained great popularity among young people in the world. Data from the China Internet Network Information Centre[22] showed there has been an intensive

[22] China Internet Network Information Centre (CINIC). Available at: www.cnnic.net.cn/

increase of Internet technology and use in China recent years. In addition to that, it is also recorded that the users of Internet has increased 192 times after 1997, with an approximated users of 103 million in 2004. Many young people reported searching for sex-related topics on the Internet and some of them even rely on the Internet as their main method of gaining sexual information. Moreover, studies have indicated that the Internet has been became one of the key sources of sexual knowledge, especially among young men (Zhang et al., 2004; Li et al., 2004). Gender differences were found in college students' Internet behaviours (Sherman et al., 2000). Findings of Hong et al. (2006) also suggest that there were great gender differences in Chinese university students' Internet use. Generally young men used the Internet more frequently and spent longer time online than young women. There was also gender difference among young people's online risk activities, with more young men than women accessing pornography online and engaging in cyber bullying. Gender differences (young men use pornography more frequently than women) regarding pornography used were also identified in Mulholland's (2013) work of young people and pornography. Moreover, data showed 88.1% of male Chinese university student had watched pornography which far exceeded the 36.1% of female students (Pang & Yang, 2004). Although the Internet is frequently employed to gain sexual information, data from their research did not find any relationship between Internet use and knowledge of sexual diseases. Students who spent longer time online did not have better HIV/AIDS knowledge than those who spent fewer hours online. The study of Internet use amongst young people in the UK by Goold et al. (2003) also indicated that, although the Internet was frequently used, not many people accessed it for health information. However, their results showed that the Internet would be a useful approach of offering sexual knowledge, especially when it is embodied in ways and websites students like. Some studies have pointed out that, due to the current lack of Internet-based sex education programmes, it is actually the online pornographies and sex stores that offer 'sex education' to Internet users at the current time (Fisher & Barak, 2000; Cooper et al., 1999).Given the

fact the that a great number of Chinese university students are using the Internet and many of them use it regularly, Hong et al.'s (2006) study suggested that methods should be taken to regulate Internet use among college students, and also that the Internet could be used as an efficient resource for sex education. To evaluate the practicality of Internet based sex education, research was carried out by Lou et al. (2006) among students from both high schools and universities in Shanghai. During the study, students were divided into two groups: one intervention group and one control group. Students in the intervention group were offered sexual and reproductive knowledge, and counselling. The intervention was carried out through webpages, online videos, and an expert mailbox. The study lasted for ten months and the findings suggested that Internet based sex education which is regulated and pre-designed could effectively attract students' interest, increase their sexual knowledge, and change their sexual attitudes.

Various examples from both previous studies and the findings of my study show that school-based sex education in China is far from comprehensive. The limitations of the sexual knowledge provided in school lead young people to turn to the Internet, especially pornographic websites, for sexual knowledge. A *China Daily* article revealed that in four of the country's biggest cities only two per cent of the population reported having received school base sex education, while 70 per cent considered pornography to be their principal source of information (McMillan, 2006). In actuality, despite the widespread use, pornography is technically illegal in China (Ho, et al., 2018). Moreover, the morality of applying pornography as a source of essential sexual information was challenged by Paul, one of the participants in the focus group.

**Conflicts between socialist moral citizen and sexualised society**

There is a boom in sex-related enterprises in China. Sex clinics and sex shops have opened all over the country, and sexual advice is a mainstay of social media. It seems that Chinese people are finally 'opening up' to sex. However, China has its own standards of morality towards people's intimate lives, including pornography, prostitution, and sex outside marriage. Attention should be paid to who is entitled to live a free sexual life, and who is disqualified. Pan and Yang (2004) carried out a national wide survey among university students on their sexual behaviours in 2001. Their survey results indicated that only 16.9% of all 961 participates had had sexual intercourse before survey. While most young Chinese in my research received limited sex education and remained sexually inactive, hooking up has become the normative of intimacy among their American counter parts (Kalish and Kimmel 2011). Traditional dating was abandoned among US college students, instead, young people went and met their potential sexual partners at casual occasions such as bars and parties with a group of same sex friends. Sexual interaction would happen after a few drinks. Although, no further relationships were expected and only a few hook ups would result in relationships, most relationships did begin with hook ups (Kalish and Kimmel 2011). This would be completely unacceptable in the premarital sexual scripts of young Chinese adults who expect a close connection between sexual intercourse and a relatively steady relationship (Farrer, et al., 2011).

In addition to sex education, sexual morality was also discussed in the first focus group, and all the men except Paul agreed that, as everyone can search for whatever they want to know online, there is no need for sex education. Nonetheless, Paul insisted on the need of guidance in online sex education:

> *Paul: Well, everyone knows how to do it. We don't need to be taught, but the thing is how you do it. And with whom? Are you going to do it in an orgy or are you going to be loyal to one person? There is sexual information all over the Internet, but not everything online is correct. Things like um... I'll say it straightforwardly, things like having sex with animals, with children and*

*incest. Are all these things correct? We need a correct idea and guidance for sex education.*

*Chad: I have a sharp question. What's your standard there? How can you tell right from wrong?*

*Paul: I think sex serves reproduction, but all the other things I mention only pursue physical pleasure. And I'm against these kinds of pleasure.*

*Guanlan: Will you still seek physical pleasure when your reproduction is completed?*

*Paul: Then it will be dispensable for me.*

Paul's opinion that sex without serving reproduction is immoral might derive from the notion that "some kinds of sexual acts are unnatural and therefore wrong" (Gilbert, 2005, n.p.). Although Paul's moral standard of sex is extreme, his query about pornography as a source of sexual information is an appropriate subject of debate.

Sexual intercourse presented in pornography is always perfect and constantly conducted smoothly, but that is an unrealistic aspect of pornographic display. In 1990s Shanghai, Farrer found that most young men and women, both urban and rural, had watched or read pornography. Article 367 of the *Criminal Code of the People's Republic of China*, revised in 1997, defines "obscene items (pornography *淫秽品*) as those that describe the specifics of sexual conduct (*具体描写性行为*), or are crude (*露骨*) erotic (*色情*) incitements" (McMillan, 2006, p. 100). However, "scientific works on human physiology and medicine are not obscene, nor is literature or art with erotic content that has artistic value" (McMillan, 2006, p. 100). A strict ban on erotic fiction and pornography was in place since the PRC was founded in 1949. The anti-pornography campaigns (sweep away the yellow (pornography) *扫黄*) have lasted until the present. "The

Measures for the Administration of the Publication of Audio-Visual Programs through the Internet or Other Information Network" which came into force in 2004 were further tightened on June 30, 2017. Pornographic and other sexually explicit images and scenes are to be prohibited (Ho, et al., 2018). Yet, Pan and Yang's (2004) survey showed that university students who had watched pornography rose from 35.3% in 1991 to 65.7% in 2001. Even after the tightening of recent censorship, a dramatic fall of young Chinese adults who watched pornography is not expected. Most young adults gain their access to pornography by either downloading from illegal domestic websites or online watching on websites in foreign countries using a vpn, thereby avoiding the legal censorship. McMillan (2006), in her work *Sex, Science and Morality in China*, stated that many Chinese scholars suggest a link between exposure to pornography and the use of prostitutes. The sex educator Gao Dewei pointed out that adolescents, as incomplete people-in-progress, cannot distinguish 'correct' sexual material from 'incorrect'. Adolescents are considered to be extremely vulnerable if exposed to inappropriate material like pornography, because they lack the power of self-control and knowledge about standards of sexual morality. Gao Dewei also developed "Four Don'ts" for adolescents:

> *Don't watch pornographic videos; Don't listen to pornographic stories; Don't use dirty speech or tell pornographic jokes; and Don't do things that overstep the mark.* (Gao, 1998, p. 110)

However, I would question Gao Dewei's view on pornography. The "Four Don'ts" Gao developed is a moralistic statement and it also denies the agency of young people and their critical understandings of pornography. Young people in Mulholland's (2013) Australian study were rational consumers of pornography. They claimed that they can tell correct from incorrect and would not mimic harmful or violent behaviours presented in pornographies. Additionally, in Allen's (2005; 2008; 2011) studies young people desired sex education based on their own needs and fit with the sexual cultures they were in. Mulholland (2013)

insightfully suggested to include discourse of erotics in the curriculum and employ critical analysis of pornographic images or videos. Raising questions such as ‘how are pornographies produced, by whom and for whom?’ and ‘how do you think pornography effects our sexual attitudes and behaviours?’ could help young people think analytically about pornified culture. Pornographies could also help challenging sexual stereotypes by investigating questions as ‘how are men and women portrayed in pornography?’ and ‘how can we think beyond class and raced sexual stereotypes?’

If adolescents are too vulnerable to be exposed to pornography, is it acceptable for adults to watch pornography? What kinds of pornography and what kinds of sexual behaviour are moral? Like the question Paul raised, are adult-child sex and incest moral? Morality, and the existence of sexual morality, need to be discussed before debating the questions above. Benn (1999), Goldman (1980) and Malón (2015) all agree that “sex in itself does not have any special morality” (Malón, 2015, p. 1073). Sexual morality is a part of general morality; hence, all sexual conduct should be discussed within the scope of general morality.

According to Goldman, there are only three main situations under which sexual relationships, including adult-and-child sex, can be considered immoral: 1. there are no mutual benefits in this relationship and only one of the participants benefits, or one is even being harmed in this sexual exchange; 2. it is not a rational free exchange between the participants; 3. participants fail to be treated as human beings, they are treated as objects instead. However, Goldman considered the first two situations to be sufficient. As in other human interactions, what matters is that people’s rights are esteemed and their dignity is identified (Goldman, 1980). The objectification of people’s body in a sexual relationship is widely condemned by theorists. For example, feminists’ fight against pornography is understood as a case of condemning women being seen as objects in a patriarchal structure (Dworkin, 1989). The perspective that all sexual participants should be treated as a person offers Paul an answer to *with whom one*

*may morally have sexual relations*. Gilbert (2005) summarised four criteria according to this view: the first restricts sex to marriage, which in particular excludes homosexuality[23]; the second restricts sex to a love relationship, which excludes casual sex; then sex is restricted to those who are desired and respected and are treated as a person, which excludes prostitution; and the last restricts sex to consenting adults, which excludes sex with children or with animals. Yet the first criterion, which rules out sexual relationships such as homosexual ones, runs counter to feminism, which sees "different sexualities as constitutive of people's identities" (Gilbert, 2005, p. 1).

Bound by Maoist collectivism, marriage carries with it a social and historical duty and is seen a contribution to social stability and the promotion of human civilisation. As family in contemporary China is considered as the foundation of social harmony, legislation and governmental policies are not friendly to sex industries and extra-marital sex. Sexual relations outside marriage are controlled for the advancement of humankind and the socialist spiritual civilisation. "The ideal sexual citizen is supposed to exercise self-restraint in avoiding sex outside marriage and seek harmony and balance within marriage. The only fully legitimate form of sexual expression in China is heterosexual, martial and monogamous" (Ho et al., 2018, p.27). Extra-marital sex has consistently been considered a threat to social and family stability, and is prohibited by the 2001 Marriage Law.

Although media representations of premarital sex have softened in recent times, it is not encouraged and policing is undertaken to stop young people from engaging in it. According to McMillan (2006), besides dissuasion and various instructions to stop adolescents from having premarital sex, the accommodation pattern of collective dormitories in Chinese schools and universities makes one's first experience inconvenient and forbidden. The university authorities even

[23] Same-sex marriage may be prevented in China, but same-sex marriage (homosexuality) is not excluded elsewhere.

make accommodation fees compulsory for all, only students with certain conditions, such as physical illness, can be excluded from this dormitory living. Dormitory living not only subjects students to collective scrutiny, but also controls the visiting of students. Visitors are required have their name and work unit registered before visiting and curfews stop anyone trying to stay overnight. In the case of my university in Beijing, female and male students were not allowed to enter dormitory buildings of the opposite gender, the dormitory door was closed every night at 10:30, and to prevent students from renting properties or staying off campus overnight, instructors from each major would randomly make dormitory checks after 10:30 and make sure no one was missing. According to a personal conversation between McMillan and Gao Dewei (November, 2000), only six per cent of female university students and ten per cent of male students reported having experienced sexual intercourse, and just under half of all students reported that they were dating or had dated before.

Ironically, sex might be supported only within marriage, but it is considered to be a necessity of married life. In both popular and official discourse, marriage can be stabilised by 'harmonious sex', relationships between sexless couple are considered "to be in jeopardy". "Marriage experts, analysts, and therapists have consequently rushed to provide a cure" (Wong, 2016, p. 75).

In 2006, President Hu Jintao published a statement for building a 'Harmonious Socialist Society', which is defined as a society that "gives full play to modern ideas like democracy, the rule of law, fairness, justice, vitality, stability, orderliness and harmonious co-existence between humankind and nature."[24] The core values of a harmonious society are self-restraint and balance. According to Wong (2016), there is "a hybrid socialist-neoliberal form of political rationality" (p. 72) in contemporary China. This kind of hybridity has its reflection in sexuality: On the one hand, socialist ideas and collectivist values enjoin people to

[24] http://en.people.cn/90002/92169/92211/6274973.html

devote themselves to the nation and embrace self-restraint, including becoming self-conscious sexual subjects, understanding the nature of the sexual impulse, and establishing an appropriate and positive attitude to masturbation. On the other hand, neoliberal ideas based on the free market shape people's subjectivities, urging them to be masters of their own lives. In the realm of sexuality, this subjectivity leads people to pursue pleasure in various ways, including purchasing sex toys, gaining familiarity with sexual techniques, and consulting with therapists.

Yet there is a gap between the advocated socialist morality and what is happening in society. Ho et al. (2018) discuss that sexuality in China is associated with the political system and Chinese people face dilemmas and conflicts when negotiating their sexual lives under "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (p.2). One aspect of the corruption of government officials frequently reported by the Chinese media involves extra-marital affairs, such as keeping mistresses or second wives. A news item in September 2017 reported the corruption of a government official, Zhao from Inner Mongolia, and listed the number of his mistresses as an index of the degree of his corruption. According to Osburg (2013), studies of corruption cases showed that 93 out of 100 cases involved mistresses, and another study in Guangdong revealed that all 102 corrupt government officials had extra-marital affairs and kept at least one second wife. Mistresses are often portrayed as an accelerometer of corruption and enhance officials' greed for corruption. In another case of reported corruption in 2015, Chen Anzhong, of Jiangxi province, publicly demanded a BMW for his mistress from an entrepreneur and most of the bribes he received went into the bank account of his mistress. The interpretation of the phenomenon of keeping mistresses by government officials is twofold: on one hand, it is generally viewed by the public as form of corruption; on the other hand, it is regarded as increasing the prestige of men (Zhang, 2011). In addition, it is not only government officials; in Osburg's (2013) work, wealthy men are also part of this 'grey beauty

economy'. In massage parlours, karaoke rooms, nightclubs, and bars, rich men escort young sexualised women as a symbol of their wealth.

According to McMillan (2006), prostitution in China is criticised by "a moral code that centres on the collective good" (McMillan, 2006, p. 112). Problems include: undermining marriage and the family, destroying social stability, and obstructing socialist spiritual civilization. The government outlawed prostitution as soon as the People's Republic of China was founded, and the success of the elimination of prostitution was claimed by the mid-1950s as a major governmental triumph. Although it re-emerged during the Reform era, the Ministry of Public Security issued a "Circular on resolutely stopping prostitution" in 1981, and "documents of similar kind were issued almost every year of the next decade" (McMillan, 2006, p. 114). Also, Article 37 makes it illegal to sell sex and to purchase prostitution, or to organise, coerce, lure or introduce women to work as prostitutes. President Xi Jinping launched an anti-corruption campaign in 2013 and this led to a crackdown on prostitution in the city of Dongguan. However, the prostitution industry is very large at the scale of the national economy. According to a *Financial Times*[25] report, the value of the prostitution industry in the city of Dongguan is estimated to be $8.2bn, which accounts for 10 per cent of the city's GDP. In addition to that, the sex industry in China as whole contributed around 6-8% of the nation's annual GDP (Burger, 2012). This crackdown will have a broader impact on the country's statistics, according to the *Financial Times* economist. Thus, the state cannot afford a complete sweep down of sex industry. Given the contribution and the continued economic growth, the effect of the past against prostitution campaigns was limited.

**Summary**

[25] https://www.ft.com/content/33a47fa1-4c46-31f0-b673-444cf92154d1

All the behaviours including keeping mistresses, consuming commercial sex and pornographies were all unquestionably considered as 'deviant' in terms of socialist morality, but they were evident in the society young adults lived in. In such an environment, young people are facing a contradiction between a sexualised society and socialist morality and policy. According to participants' discussion in the focus group, young people in China are widely exposed to various forms of pornography. The consumer culture in contemporary China has provided a demand and market of sex related commodities (Ho, et al., 2018). Young people are facing a highly sexualised society: officers spending money on their mistresses are always in the news; pink barber shops (*洗头房*), which offer prostitution, are open near universities. The anti-pornography campaigns (sweep away the yellow (pornography) *扫黄*) has never stopped, but both commercial sex and pornography were widely accessed by at least rich men and governmental officials. At the same time, the Chinese government is promoting a "socialist morality" (Aresu, 2009, p. 538), and has launched a conservative approach via sex education to encourage young people to be self-disciplined. Information about sexual relationship and contraception is barely provided in school sex education, which is in direct conflict with the state's second-child-promoting policy. Moreover, given that puberty education is the main subject taught in China, there is no clear evidence that current sex education in China serves as a liberalising force of sexual revolution in changing conservative trends. Young adults' sexual values on matters such as non-marital sex or homosexuality are not shaped toward a more liberal direction. While some of those I interviewed appeared to approve of a free sexual morality, they were just conforming to what they thought is a trend. In their own behaviours or values they will not perform the changing sexual morality (as will be explored in Chapter 6). Hence, Wang (2017) suggests that the current 'sexual revolution' in China is not finished. She argued that "A real revolution usually needs a core new value system and leadership to bring a rapid change to society and push things forward" (p.168). However, the so called 'sexual revolution' in China has

neither “a core new value system” nor “a core leadership” (Wang, 2017, p.168) and does not challenge the current social morality. It is no more than a set of individual sexual conducts emerged spontaneously in a changing society (Wang, 2017).

In addition to social pressures and governmental regulation, young adults are facing more challenges in everyday social interaction characterised by double standards of morality and gender differences. In the next chapter, young adults’ individual interpretation of morality and traditional gender role expectations will be explored.

# Chapter 5

## Virginity as a cup – insist on a new cup or take the perfect cup with a crack on it: the sexual double standard and differentiated gender roles

The theme of this chapter was inspired by Xuepiaoguo, one of my interviewees, who used metaphors to explain his female virginity complex to me: 'female virginity complex for men is like if you are going to buy a cup, you do hope the cup will be brand new and you won't possess a cup with crack in it.' Xuepiaoguo's metaphor of female virginity is very suggestive and clearly runs counter to any feminist understanding. He objectified and commoditised female virginity in his metaphor and was clearly expecting his future spouse to be flawless. To prefer a virgin as one's future spouse can be interpreted as an aspect of doing masculinity (Connell, 1995). By doing this, men take part in the support of virginity norms. In this way, Xuepiaoguo claimed his right over his future spouse's virginity, demonstrating his virility and his masculinised sense of self at the same time. The commodification of female virginity is not uncommon, and 'gift' is another frequently used metaphor for women's virginity. Also, a Chinese student in Farrer et al.'s (2012) research on premarital sex objectified female virginity by saying "Boys certainly don't want to 'eat' somebody else's left-over dish" (p. 10). Moreover, Xueoiaoguo's demand for a flawless or untouched spouse supports the honour-based norms on women's virginity and men's honour (Rexvid & Schlytter, 2012).

Many young Chinese people still value the virginity of women before marriage; and in my research some female interviewees were supporters of socially preferred masculinity and considered women who had premarital sex to be 'unclean' or 'spoilt'. The persistence of this attitude challenges the idea that there has been a sexual revolution in China. Although gender inequality has been

criticised since 1949, and women seem able to compete with men in many areas, including career success, in contemporary China and possess equal opportunities and rights with men, they are experiencing different gender role expectations in their family lives. Zhang's (2011) article on the phenomenon of *Bao Ernai*[26] in media reports offered a cultural perspective around gender and power distribution and argued "the patterned nature of domestic power and its link with wider social forces". Zhang (2011) discussed that despite the fact that gender relations between men and women had gradually changed, women are still expected to preserve the image as "a virtuous wife and good mother"[27] (p.145). The use of this four-character expression first appeared advocating equal education between men and women in the early 1900s. However, the main aim of this education reform was to make women take the responsibility of educating their offspring and raising children in a civilised way (Sechiyama, 2013). Yet the use of 'virtuous wife and good mother' soon shifted from a positive tone to be tied to feudalism in 1917. 'Women staying at home' was criticised for interfering with women's individual development. Again idea of separating gender spheres such as 'women returning home' was largely denied in the Maoist era. In spite of being rejected twice in history, the idea of women returning home, supporting their husbands and raising children has gained its popularity again in contemporary China.

In addition, the dominance of men can also be identified in many aspects of life, such as intimate relationships, and themes of gender and sexuality (Zhang, 2011). The display of masculinity and men's ownership of women's bodies and virginity still exist among the young generation, and many young adults share the traditional gender role expectations, especially in their sexual lives. This chapter looks at double standard in relation to virginity and connects this with differentiated gender role expectations in China through probing young Chinese's

[26] *Bao Ernai* means keeping mistresses.

[27] The four-character phrase carrying the idea of the 'good wife and wise mother' or the 'virtuous wife and good mother' was developed in Japan in the 19th centaury and was first borrowed to China in 1905 (Sechiyama, 2013).

attitudes towards one another's premarital experience and their expectations of ideal future spouses. I further attempt to locate young adults' dilemma in their sexual and marital lives in the broader context of debates about sexual revolution in China.

Holland, Ramazaňoglu and Thomson (1996) found that young men generally regard their first heterosexual experience as a positive step into manhood, while young women have an ambivalence feeling on their first experience of sex. Although Holland, Ramazaňoglu and Thomson did their research on first heterosexual experiences in the Western context, their findings fit China as well. Traditionally, women in China were seen as housebound, submissive, and also as second-class citizens (Zhang & Sun, 2014). In this inferior position, they were assessed on the basis of their chastity and fertility (Breiner, 1992). Nowadays, the status of women has improved, but there is still a gendered difference in young people's sexual experience (Evans, 1997; Wang, 2017), and this reflects the different gender-role expectations in sexuality.

As the one-to-one interviews went on, I led interviewees from talking about the sexuality of the BFSU students to their own sexuality. Stories of young adult women and their mothers in both Britain and Hong Kong in Jackson and Ho's (2014) work were shown to them at the beginning. In this chapter, I will analyse Chinese young adults' definitions of virginity for both genders using data from my two focus groups, and continue with data from in-depth interviews to discuss Chinese young people's attitudes towards premarital sex and different gender role expectations of first sex. Following this, I will use data from both focus groups and interviews to underscore the sexual double standard that exists in the way in which young Chinese people define male and female virginity and also their interpretations of the sexual experience of both genders. To further investigate the traditional gender-role division in China, young people's choice of future spouse will be explored by analysing data collected from interviews.

**Defining virginity**

Virginity and virginity loss are diffusely understood by both scholars and lay person alike and people may assign diverse meanings to virginity, but scholars and popular writers in the past have almost invariably defined virginity loss as the first time people engage in vaginal-penile intercourse (Jessor and Jessor 1975; Sprecher and Regan 1996; Weis 1985). Most literature in this area is decades old and Western, and the virginity of both men and women is included; yet, due to the unbalanced power relations between men and women, they approach virginity in different ways. Young women normally regard their virginity as valuable and predicated sexual activity on a romantic relationship, while young men typically perceived their virginity as neutral or even stigmatising, and tended to lose it beyond a normative relationship (Rubin 1990). In their study, Holland, Ramazaňoglu and Thomson (1996) used purposive samples and in-depth interviews with 150 young women aged 16 to 21 and 50 young men, both stratified by class and ethnicity. In analysing the interview accounts, Holland, Ramazaňoglu and Thomson (1996) found first sexual intercourse to be a critically gendered moment in the development of sexuality and that there are dramatic gendered differences in the meaning of first intercourse. Generally, first sex is viewed as an induction into manhood by young men, whilst young women's accounts of first intercourse seemed to be varied and contradictory. Correspondingly, gendered differences in the meaning of virginity are also reflected in my interviews.

Although the physiological meaning of virginity loss has been considered in other studies, a detailed analysis of young people's definition of virginity has not been described by scholars. Virginity as a key word in my interviews is not clearly defined by either scholars or my interviewees. People were all convinced that women retain their virginity until they have their first sexual intercourse with someone of the opposite sex. Also, there was an assumption among my interviewees in China, that people lose their virginity when vaginal-penile sex is

involved. However, different definitions, especially inconsistent definitions of male virginity, may exist among young Chinese people. To further investigate Chinese young adults' definitions of virginity, two focus groups were conducted in the UK.

I did not straightforwardly ask questions about the existence of a sexual double standard. Instead, I asked them to define male/female virginity and for their views on male/female virginity complex. Although they realised clearly that there was a gender comparison, respondents in the focus group did not conceal their tendency towards a sexual double standard. The first group reached a clear agreement on the definition of virginity after group discussion, whereas discussions in the second group went round and round and their definitions of virginity were never consistent. Consistent or not, a double standard in relation to virginity definitions runs through both groups.

At the beginning of first focus group, when asked for a definition of female virginity loss, Chad, who has a PhD in Electronics, asked whether we were discussing the medical discourse or the ethical aspect. However, when explaining it from the medical aspect, instead of defining virginity loss as having vaginal intercourse, Chad employed the hymen as the indicator of female virginity:

> *Chad: Your question... Do you want me to define it from a personal view or do you want a general definition? I mean, are we talking in a medical or ethical context?*
>
> *Echo: How many definitions are there in your view?*
>
> *Chad: Well, I think it can be defined in many ways.*
>
> *……*
>
> *Chad: I don't really know very well how virginity is defined in medical discourse [Laugh] but I know the way to define it. However, there is no way*

*to know whether a female athlete is a virgin or not.*

*Echo: What's it got to do with the athlete?*

*Chad: For example, from the aspect of medicine, some female gymnasts may break their hymens (Tina: but it's just the hymen) [during training].*

Although intending to discuss virginity in a scientific way, Chad treated the hymen as the scientific marker of female virginity. Chinese media presented all kinds of misunderstanding of non-virgins before the 21st century, including the belief that the offspring of a woman who is not a virgin on marriage would look more like his/her mother's first man than his/her biological father[28]. Although there is now less misunderstanding of female virginity, medical experts and lay people alike still often equate virginity strictly with the hymen.

Like Chad, Yo Duck asked me to clarify my purpose in defining female virginity and explained that female virginity could be defined in different ways for different purposes:

*Yo Duck: We need to clarify your purpose before we define female virginity. That means why you need to define it. If you only want to define it in a medical context, like Chad said, then the fact is there, right? There would be nothing to argue about. However, if you have other purposes then you'll get different definitions.*

*……*

*Researcher: Does that mean you believe that women without hymens are not virgins?*

*Yo Duck: Yes.*

[28] http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_53b252b101017nw0.html

Throughout the focus group, Yo Duck never explained what these other definitions for different purposes might be. Both Chad and Yo Duck tried to discuss female virginity from a variety of perspectives, but they ultimately believed the hymen to be the scientific marker of female virginity. Their focus on technical virgin reduces the meaning of virginity to the hymen only (Mahadeen, 2013). Nonetheless, Chad and Yo Duck are not the only two people to reduce female virginity to the hymen, many people in other countries also hold the same view; for example, in Jordan. The definition of female virginity adopted by the Jordanian media uses a medical discourse and therefore downgraded the meaning of female virginity to the hymen (Mahadeen, 2013). However, at the same time, medical experts in Jordan have tried to improve people's realisation about the non-sexual reasons of virginity loss by reporting that, apart from vaginal intercourse, situations like horse riding, doing the high jump and gynaecological examinations can all lead to hymen breakage (Mahadeen, 2013). Given the fact that non-sexual activities can cause virginity loss, then the 'essential' value of the hymen must be reconsidered (Mahadeen. 2013).

In Mahadeen's (2013) analysis of Jordanian media reports, the hymen as the indicator of female virginity was discarded, "mainly due to the ease of its restoration and the accessibility of this procedure" (p. 7). Virginity is then accordingly shifted from a body-related to a moral concept. Reframing the debate around virginity also happened among my focus group:

> *Paul: I think it (virginity) should be based on the fact. I'll believe that she is a virgin if she tells me she has an intact hymen.*
>
> *Chad: What if she told you that she's got a broken hymen, but she's still a virgin?*
>
> *Paul: I think you should trust her when you are in a relationship.*

*Guanlan: Then do you guys consider the hymen as the marker of female virginity?*

*Paul: No I don't think so. I think the marker should be sexual behaviour.*

*Yo Duck: I'll accept and believe whatever she says. If she thinks she's a virgin then she is, if she believes she's not a virgin then I'll think the same way.*

*Chad: He (Yo Duck) chooses to believe his partner.*

Both the focus group discussion and the Jordanian media reframed female virginity and believed that the actual marker is moral and the degree of self-respect that men and women have for themselves (Mahadeen, 2013). However, unlike Jordanian society, where people have given up the hymen as the indicator, mainly due to hymen reconstruction surgery, some respondents in the focus group reconsidered the value of the hymen because they knew that, with appropriate techniques, a woman can still have an intact hymen even if she is sexually experienced.

When I think of female virginity I am thinking about defining it by different sexual behaviours rather than in a medical or moral sense. Chad and Yo Duck's discussions around a general medical or personal moral point of view confused not only me, but also other participants.

*Tina: I'm also confused. I personally care more about the boundary between direct sexual behaviour[29] (直接性行为) and indirect sexual behaviour (间接性行为) rather than the hymen. And also borderline sexual behaviour (边缘性行为), I think these make it difficult to define female virginity.*

[29] Direct, indirect and borderline sexual behaviour are directly translated from Chinese. There are no clear definitions of these terms, but normally in everyday conversation, direct sexual behaviour refers to vaginal-penile intercourse while indirect sexual behaviour includes all the other sexual behaviours. It is common to use these terms in China to avoid naming the actual intercourse.

Later in the discussion, when Tina said that she believed direct sexual behaviour to be the marker of virginity, she argued that indirect sexual behaviour should not be considered to be sexual behaviour. She thought that women who engaged in indirect sexual behaviour were still virgins, thus indirect sex was not sex. However, people continually corrected themselves in the focus group. Tina firmly believed and stated twice that she thought direct sexual behaviour rather than the hymen should be viewed as the indication of virginity. Yet, after being challenged by Chad, Tina changed her opinion to believe the self-judgment of the people being judged. Paul, at the beginning of the above conversation, believed that an intact hymen is the marker of virginity, but then contradicted himself and considered sexual behaviour to be the indicator of virginity. I also noticed that men and women in the first focus group used sexual behaviour terms differently, but in an inconsistent way to Robinson et al.'s (1980) study. Chad used the term cohabitation whereas Tina said 'direct sexual behaviour' when they were both referring to vaginal-penile intercourse. Meanwhile, Hugo, in the second focus group, commented that the women in his group were 'very liberal'. This difference may be due to my use of a female sample of PhD students enrolled in sociology. Students enrolled in a social science course may have more liberal attitudes towards sexuality than students in other discipline, because attitudes towards sexuality are more likely to be influenced by course content. For instance, Fion, in the second focus group, was researching a project which was slightly related to virginity, so she talked in a more liberal way than others.

There was confusion in the second focus group and their discussion never reached a consensus. This illustrates the complexity of the topic of defining virginity and the challenges young people have in discussing sex. Not reaching an agreement in a focus group can be a good thing and reflect differences in perspectives among individuals. Even if Hugo in the second focus group mentioned the hymen as the indicator, he believed that sexual behaviour should be the boundary between a virgin and a non-virgin. And in the discussion with

Hugo, Emily brought up the subject of homosexuality. She talked about homosexuality not only in the conversation about female virginity, but she also inspired other group members to think about sex between the same gender when male virginity was discussed:

*Hugo: There is a general accepted knowledge in the aspect of organs that women have a hymen under there and she won't be a virgin when that hymen breaks. Yet the hymen can break during everyday life and some strenuous exercise, but I do believe women in these kinds of cases are still virgins. So actually, it is really easy to define, that people who experience sexual behaviours, including oral sex, are not virgins.*

*Emily: Are you talking about it among the same sex or opposite sex?*

*Hugo: Both.*

Wu in the second group gave a consistent definition of male and female virginity as 'blank paper' at the beginning, but changed his definition and revealed a sexual double standard as the focus group discussion went on:

*Wu: A male virgin should be a piece of blank paper.*

*Hu: Not paying any attention to that kind of thing, right?*

*Wu: No no. If he's had sex he's not a male virgin anymore.*

*Hugo: Same standard as female virginity.*

*Wu: I think this might be prejudice, but I only consider men who have had real sex as non-virgin.*

*Emily: What about with the same gender?*

*Wu: They are all the same for both sexes.*

... ...

*Hugo 1: I'll base it on organs. And if it was about organs, then there will be different standards for male and female.*

*Wu: Yes. Men have a wider range [in this area].*

*Hugo: I think it's the same as how I define female virginity. However there's one thing that complicates it. Masturbation. Many people have masturbated since they were very young. I don't know, should this be counted in or not?*

*Hu: What do you think?*

*Hugo: I think this shouldn't be counted in. He will still be a male virgin after masturbation, but he will not be a virgin if he had oral sex.*

*Emily: Then what about women helping men masturbate?*

*Hugo: Um... this won't affect the fact of him being a male virgin.*

Wu and Hugo 1 revealed a tendency towards a sexual double standard even though they clearly knew my study would do a gender comparison. What Wu said did not surprise me, because he was a person with strong independence of thought. He came to the focus group fifteen minutes later than the others and still had his own definition of female virginity after Hugo explained to him what had happened before he arrived. Being different from all the rest, who were trying to define female virginity by different types of sexual activity, Wu elucidated female virginity as mental purity. What is remarkable is that Hugo 1 expressed his view on the sexual double standard. Hugo 1 is a friend of Hugo and he was not in the named list of participants when I was recruiting. The only reason Hugo 1 came to the focus group was that he was with Hugo when it was time for the meeting. Hugo 1 performed perfunctorily most of the time and always gave the same answer as Hugo. Nonetheless, Hugo 1 did not show conformity with Hugo

and the rest of the group on the issue of male virginity. Although Hugo twice claimed that he held the same standard for both male and female virginity during the discussion, he slightly changed his mind and defined male virginity differently from female virginity. When defining female virginity, Hugo mentioned that any contact with the sexual organs of another person, including masturbation, will make a woman a non-virgin. On the other hand, Hugo excluded manual-genital contact and hand jobs as behaviours affecting male virginity.

As sexual behaviour is personal and cannot be assessed and evaluated straightforwardly, there is a debate over whether oral sex is labelled as sex. Bogart et al. (2000) argue that whether oral-genital contact constitutes having 'had sex' depends on the gender and viewpoint of the actor, and whether orgasm occurred. They find that 97%, 93%, and 44% of the participants in their study thought that vaginal, anal, and oral intercourse, respectively, would be considered sex. Meanwhile, in the Sanders and Reinisch (1999) study, 99%, 81%, and 40% of the students classified engaging in these behaviours as having sex. Furthermore, Bogart et al. (2000) found that respondents believed that the people receiving oral sex would be more likely to see the behaviour as sex than would the partner performing the act. Individuals who stimulate their partners may not consider the activity to be sex because they are unlikely to experience orgasm themselves.

In contrast, all respondents in the second focus group in my study believed that oral-genital contact should be counted as 性行为 (*xing xing wei*). 性行为 (*xing xing wei*) is a Chinese term directly translated as 'sexual behaviour'. However, what needs to be noticed is that both direct and indirect behaviour are sexual behaviours. Participants did not explicitly name what counted as direct and indirect sexual behaviour. Yet, Fion explained in English that she believed oral sex is also sex. As a consequence, the meaning of other commonly used sexual behaviour terms, such as sexual partner and the sexual activity level could be

re-examined and re-defined according to Bogart et al. (2000). However, Zoe believed that not all types of sexual behaviour will affect one's status as a virgin:

> *Zoe: I think both oral-genital and manual-genital contacts are sexual behaviours, but a woman is still a virgin if she is the one performing the act.*
>
> .....
>
> *Hugo: He'll still be a male virgin after masturbation, but she'll not be a virgin if she had oral sex.*

Although Zoe classified oral-genital contact as sexual behaviour, she believed a woman to be a virgin even after oral-genital contact. In contrast to Zoe, Hugo labelled men as non-virgins if they had oral-genital contact. This view may be related to the finding in Bogart, et al. (2000) study that orgasm matters in people's definitions of sex. People who are receiving certain sexual behaviours would be more likely to classify them as real sex than would the person performing the act.

Despite all the argument about the definition of female virginity, most informants associated it with either the hymen or vaginal-penile intercourse. However, unlike the debate on the definition of female virginity, which was confusing and intense, the discussion about male virginity was calm and peaceful. There was less disagreement among informants compared to the discussion of female virginity. The informants reached an agreement in a very short time and defined a male virgin as a man who has not experienced vaginal-penile intercourse. There was a gendered difference in the wording of virginity and a double standard in the way they defined virginity. To further emphasise the sexual double standard and different gender-role expectations, I will explore young adults' attitudes towards premarital sex and how premarital sex was interpreted differently by each gender.

**Attitudes towards premarital sex**

As well as young adults' definitions of virginity, their opinions about premarital sex could also be a reflection of different gender-role expectations in China. Traditionally, premarital sex was perceived as in a neutral way or even be supported for men but can be stigmatising for women (Holland & Thomson, 1996). Though these kinds of conservative attitudes are currently less articulated in Western cultures, traditional gender role expectations continue to exist in many Asian cultures. In China, Confucianism preaches the restraint of passionate love. Marriage was considered as business between families and was arranged either by the parents or by match-making officials before the founding of the PRC. From the Song Dynasty (960–1276 AD) onwards, the draconian interpretation of Confucius' views on sexual behaviour by the Neo-Confucians became a repressive ideology with strict moral and social principles that have controlled and influenced Chinese attitudes and behaviours towards love and sex up to the present day. Thus, sexual behaviours beyond reproductive purposes, such as premarital sex and masturbation, were all disapproved of. Moreover, traditionally, due to the low and submissive status of women, women were assessed on the basis of their chastity and fertility (Breiner, 1992). Over time, the old feudal values about love and marriage slowly vanished and the western idea of romantic and passionate love was introduced with the fall of the Qing dynasty. Due to the Open Door policy in 1978 and the economic reform in China, social values and norms relating to intimate lives have changed greatly. Studies in contemporary China indicated that premarital sex became more common and acceptable since the 1980s (Farrer, 2002; Farrer, 2014). However, a study conducted among 505 Chinese university students and 338 university students in the United Kingdom by Higgins, Zheng, Liu and Sun (2002) suggested that the traditional values in spousal choice remain stronger in China than in the UK. Their findings further indicated that in spite of the social revolution in China in the past two decades,

very conservative sexual attitudes continue to exist among young adults, especially among young women.

Unlike the informants in the focus groups, who had been in the UK for around four years and were expected to be more open minded and liberal on the topic of sex, most of my interviewees were comparatively conservative. Hence, when discussing premarital sex, I started by asking about their parents' views on their partners sleeping over at their place to put them at their ease and showed them cases in Jackson and Ho's (2014) work in Britain and Hong Kong.

> *Ping Lu: my mum wouldn't let him sleep over, but would allow us to stay together if it was a short trip.*
>
> *… …*
>
> *Jing Kou: She would agree. My boyfriend came to see me at my parents' place and he slept in the study.*

There is a gendered difference here. When I said sleeping over, most young women automatically considered it as just sleeping at their place and staying in different rooms. Young men like Wei Zhao, M, and Wenwu Feng directly linked sleeping over with sleeping together in the same room and sexual behaviours might be involved:

> *M: Yes, they would agree.*
>
> *Guanlan: When I say sleeping over I'm not saying sleeping in your home in different rooms.*
>
> *M: I know, and I think my mum would agree if she came.*

My finding that men and women interpret 'sleeping over' in different ways is consistent with Robinson et al.'s (1980) study, in which sexual terms were understood and used differently by different genders. For example, their study

suggested that different meanings were associated with the word ‘intercourse’ by different genders. Men were more likely to associate body centred words with ‘intercourse’, such as breast and vagina, while, relationship or intimacy centred words, like love and marriage were more frequently used by women to associate with ‘intercourse’. In my case, most young men associated the phrase ‘sleeping over’ with sexual behaviours while young women simply interpreted it as staying at their place in different rooms. Furthermore, this gendered difference in interpreting ‘sleeping over’ also mirrors the traditional gender image. Women are frequently represented as pure, passive, and sexually naïve ‘good girls’ (Kelly, 2010). Young women who were sexually naïve were also perceived as pure and unsophisticated in Farrer’s (2002) research among Shanghai youth. Farrer’s work in Shanghai further revealed that premarital sex was generally acceptable among both genders and young Shanghai men and women no longer treated sex as a demand for marriage. Although this research was conducted more than a decade later than Farrer’s fieldwork, many of my female participants, like Yoshiko and Xiao Xiao, insisted on not having premarital sex, whereas some young women, such as Xiao Meng and Rong Rong, approved of premarital sex in a stable or a future-committed relationship. Women like Ping Lu and Xiao Xiao treated premarital sex as ‘shameful behaviour’ and used expressions like ‘spoilt’, ‘unclean’, and ‘irresponsible to themselves’ when describing women who have premarital experience. This indicates a great difference in sexual attitudes between metropolitan youth and young adults who live in cites that are not economically well-developed. In addition, marriage is still a crucial factor in the discussion of premarital sex. Farrer et al. (2012) did a qualitative comparative work of young Japanese and Chinese on the subject of pre-marital sex. 135 in-depth interviews with Japanese and 111 individual interviews with Chinese were carried out from 2002 to 2007. The findings suggested that in the discourse of sex, most Chinese people prefer to associate sex with a committed common future and, in return, sex could strengthen this commitment. Data collected from 43 in-depth interviews and three focus groups with young men and women in

Beijing in Wang's (2017) work showed that women prefer to have their first sexual intercourse in a relatively stable relationship with long-term prospects. Also, Jeffreys and Yu (2015) concluded from the 2009 National Youth Reproductive Health Survey data that, for young adults in China, first sex often occurs in the context of serious relationships and preferably as "a precursor to marriage" (p.45). Interviewees in my research, both male and female, approved of premarital sex when it was with their future spouse. The following two quotes from a young woman Ping Lu and a young man Xiaoyu Liu pictured the idea of a future-oriented commitment as the precondition for sex:

> *Ping Lu: At present, I think you can do it when it's the right time, but girls who are just playing, not doing it for the purpose of marriage, are spoilt. They are not taking responsibility for themselves.*
>
> *… …*
>
> *Xiaoyu Liu: I won't touch her at all if I'm not intending to marry her. I think I should take responsibility.*

Studies of Chinese people's attitude towards premarital provided inconsistent results. The first national survey of Chinese sexual practices was carried out among 23,000 participants covering fifteen provinces. According to the data, premarital sex was tolerated by 86% of all the participants (cited in Bullough & Ruan, 1994). Moreover, Pan's (2003) surveys of sexuality indicated that 81.2% of Chinese people who had had premarital sex among those who married after 1979 had premarital sex. Nonetheless, the critical factor in premarital sex was the identity of the sexual partner (Pan, 2003). Pan's (2003) finding suggested that 89.2% of premarital intercourse happened with future spouses, 8.9% happened in a steady relationship, while only 1.9% of premarital sex happened outside a relationship or a relationship with marriage commitment. These studies indicate that most Chinese would approve of premarital sex with future spouse. In

Higgins et al.'s (2002) study, the survey question did not specify the circumstance under which participants would approve of premarital sex. Hence, a total of 46.3% of male participants and 41.2% of female participants showed neutral attitudes. Furthermore, in their study, there were more young women (46.9%) than young men (29.9%) among those who were against premarital sex. Moreover, only a few (12.9% men, 11.4% women) were against the statement: "A couple who have had sexual intercourse before marriage ought to marry each other" (Higgins, et al., 2002, p.10). This shows that sex was still strongly connected to marriage in China and this idea affected Chinese people's sexual attitudes. Only 34% of men and 36.5% of women were willing to marry someone who had had premarital sex with somebody else. The result of Higgins, Zheng, Liu and Sun's (2002) research is consistent with the relation between premarital sex and marriage in Teachman's (2003) study. Teachman (2003) found that women were more deeply affected by traditional sexual morality and attitudes than men. Women who have more than one intimate relationship before marriage have higher possibility of divorce than women who have not (Teachman, 2003). Although the young adults participating in my research generally shared the view that marriage or a committed future was a precondition for sex, this stance was not universal. There were other people, mainly young men, who would accept sex as long as it occurred in a loving relationship or, as most participants said, when the 'feeling' (*感情*) is right. Young men like Xuepiaoguo and Wei Zhao mentioned a natural development of 'feeling' as a desirable condition for sex. And this kind of 'feeling' as an essential element is also presented by Farrer (2002) in his study among Shanghai youth. "As with relationships generally, 'feelings' are the moral touchstone for sex" (Farrer, 2002, p.233). Although 'feelings' were characterised as a fundamental component of sex by nearly all Shanghai women, this concept was mostly brought up by male participants whereas most young women insisted on marriage as the crucial prerequisite for sex. However, the judging and expressing of 'feelings' could be highly personal and situational. From practice, the expressing of 'feelings' ranges from "a

momentary passion to a committed relationship" (Farrer, 2002, p.233). Due to the ambiguous nature of feeling, it is resistant to public judgement. The conversation with Xiaosong Liu, an undergraduate student from Houma city, is an example of personalised feelings:

> *Xiaosong: I think it (sex) is acceptable when the feeling (感情) is right, when feeling between the two is at the right stage.*
>
> *Hu: What if you two broke up after sex? Would you consider not breaking up with her because you have had sex?*
>
> *Xiaosong: No. I'll never think that way. She agreed to that and she doesn't care. She's a woman and she doesn't care. Why would I care?*

Xiaosong's 'feeling' was not the 'feeling' of a marriage commitment and this 'feeling' would never be a trap for him in a relationship. However, how do women like Xiaosong's girlfriend face the stigma of being 'spoilt' and 'irresponsible' in their own lives and deal with the identity of non-virginity? Interviewee Rong Rong from Houma city was an undergraduate student and she clearly described a change in attitudes toward premarital sex:

> *Before this (first sex) happened, I was taught not to do it (sex) before marriage and I also thought women should follow this rule. Yet, after it happened, I was like, since I love him, I'm willing to do whatever I want with him. This (virginity) should never be a constraint to yourself. Moreover, I was indifferent to the comments on virginity complex online before this, but now I kind of dislike men with a virginity complex.*

According to Schlegel (1991), women's autonomy can by assessed by their control over their own sexuality. Wang (2017) argues that virginity loss seems to be a turning point in women's autonomy because her research group of non-virgins in her study was more independent, they had more freedom to do

whatever they wanted. I agree with Wang (2017) about treating virginity loss as a turning point, because Rong Rong clearly stated her desire to do whatever she wanted in a relationship after she lost her virginity. Farrer (2002) suggests that, in the issue of first intercourse, age is a more important determinant for young people than gender or social class. Research findings from Wang (2017) also support Farrer's statement, which is that women change their attitudes towards virginity loss as they grow older. According to Wang (2017), Chinese women normally consider that an age below 20 is too young for first intercourse; they prefer to engage in sex at a later age, when they have better control of their own lives and usually graduation is considered good timing; there is a tendency among Chinese women to change their role from 'gatekeepers' to "active participants in sex" (Wang, 2017, p.159) when they are older than 25; however, by the time they reach the age of 30, virginity will no longer be a treasure for most women, rather it becomes a burden to get rid of.

Differently from Rong Rong, who shifted to a relatively 'liberal' attitude after first intercourse, or other young women who gradually changed to accept premarital sex, Jing Kou's stance turned from not caring about her virginity to cherishing it:

> *Jing Kou: I didn't have a firm knowledge on this aspect when I was young. I remember I knew this girl when I was in Junior High school, and she had sex with her boyfriend. She would sometimes talk about this kind of stuff to me. And I was like, if it really hurts the first time, I should have it with someone experienced. At that time, I didn't consider it as something special or needing to be protected. I only considered it as one certain step in a love relationship. Now I think my first time should be saved for the one I love most and the one I'll spend the rest of my life with. I'm now having this kind of feeling, wanting to save all the best things for him.*

Jing Kou not only changed to emphasise her first time, she also defined first intercourse as giving the man something valuable. In the traditional sexual scripts, female virginity is often described as a virtue and also a gift which should be preserved for her husband on their wedding night (Carpenter, 2005). “As a culturally momentous act”, sex is also viewed as “a sacrifice a woman makes to a man” (Farrer, et al., 2012, p.10). All these metaphors and descriptions present the traditional gender expectation of the passive status of women during first sexual intercourse and in their sexual lives more generally. Holland, Ramazaňoglu and Thomson (1996) argued that, in contrast to young men, who gained their manhood through first intercourse, young women only offered their bodies, their virginity to men. There is a sense of awareness in her situation that sex is only happening for her partner. In their discussion of gendered experiences of first heterosex, Holland, Ramazaňoglu and Thomson (1996) argued that heterosexual ‘first sex’ is a positive step into masculinity for young men, while it plays an ambiguous role among young women. Although a number of young men in their study reported being anxious or nervous, these feelings were related to their performance, while their view of their first sexual experience was predominantly positive. For young men, especially young teenagers, the first sexual experience not only happens in private, it also has a social meaning due to the surveillance of the male peer group. Like young women, young men also talked about losing their virginity, but instead of losing the intact hymen, what they lose is their own inexperience. Holland, Ramazaňoglu and Thomson (1996) found that, compared to young men, young women’s accounts of first intercourse seemed to be contradictory and varied. However, one common feature in the young women’s accounts was that there was no equivalent of young men’s acceptance of first intercourse as a positive step into adult manhood. As first intercourse is not predominantly an induction into womanhood, it can be quite an ambivalent experience for young women. In most of their accounts, sex was happening for their male partner and, in the extreme version, first sex was treated as a gift to him. Young women usually do not consider first heterosex to be a positive

experience; some of them even go along with young men's idea of "virginity as a constraint on their own life and freedom to love" (Holland et al., 1996, p.155).

Gendered differences and different gender-role expectations did not only exist in the way in which interviewees interpreted 'sleeping over' and their attitudes towards premarital sex, they also appeared in parents' views on young adults' premarital sex. As the traditional gender role of wifehood and motherhood is often portrayed as women's destiny, premarital sex is perceived as an irresponsible behaviour for young women. However, unlike young women, who faced many constraints, the young men in my research generally reported less control by their parents over premarital sex and even as standing out of range of parental restrictions. The greater freedom young men are allowed in premarital intercourse than young women reflects a sexual double standard (Reiss, 1960). Moreover, the sexual double standard exists in many aspects of life, including their definition of virginity and men's virginity complex.

**Sexual double standard**

"In contemporary society, it is widely believed that men are socially rewarded for sexual activity, whereas women are derogated" (Marks and Fraley, 2005, p.1). This view has been labelled the sexual double standard, and has attracted attentions from both researchers and lay person. After briefly reviewing the studies on the sexual double standard, Marks and Fraley (2005) argue that recent academic findings on the double standard do not provide enough evidence for the existence of sexual double standard. Their research findings discuss that, despite people normally considering others as having a sexual double standard, they themselves do not usually have sexual standard. Although the sexual double standard seems to be pervasive, person perception researches have largely failed to prove that people judge men and women's sexual behaviour in different ways.

It is people's belief in the sexual double standard which may lead them to recall more evidence consistent than inconsistent with it (Marks & Farley, 2006). Despite that, Sprecher, McKinney and Orbuch (1987) suggested that the research results indicating that the double standard has disappeared may be an artefact of the specific scales used in surveys to assess premarital sexual standards. In a typical sex-related survey, participants are first asked if it is acceptable for one gender to engage in pre-martial activities or other sexual behaviours, and then the same question is asked in reference to the other gender. This kind of cross-gender comparison can cause respondents to try to appear more consistent and egalitarian than they actually are (Sprecher et al., 1987). In Marks and Farley's (2005) person perception test, respondents were requested to grade evaluative statements about targets. Considering Sprecher, McKinney and Orbuch's (1987) argument that people may react more consistently than they actually are when they realise that a gender comparison is being undertaken, especially in an academic setting, participants in the above case may be pretending to be more egalitarian than they normally are. Despite all these artificial factors which may come up in research, the young men and women in my study still judged one another's sexual experience in different ways. Their double standard in relation to virginity could be reflected in topics of virginity complex and attitudes towards their future spouses' past sexual experiences.

Female virginity complex is a prevalent term in China and is used to reflect how the fetish of female virginity continues to be strong for young adults (Wang & Ho, 2011). The word 'complex' is directly translated from Chinese *情结* (qing jie) and means "a group of related, often repressed ideas and impulses that compel characteristic or habitual patterns of thought, feelings, and behaviour" (Wang & Ho, 2001, p.186). For men, this term means that they still emphasise female virginity as an important criterion for date and marriage selection. Most male interviewees had or used to have a female virginity complex. However, there were fewer women than men having a virginity complex during either the

one-to-one interviews or focus-group discussions. Yoshiko was the only woman who clearly claimed that she had a male virginity complex:

> *I'm kind of an egalitarian about virginity. You can ask your partner to be a virgin only when you are a virgin as well... I think I have a little bit of a male virginity complex. This might be because I don't have much love experience. This is the only relationship I have.*

There were male interviewees such as Xiaoyu Liu and Peng Guo who shared the same opinion as Yoshiko in virginity complex. They were not sexually experienced and had female virginity complex, so they hoped their future spouses to be virgins. Men like Xuepiaoguo and Wei Zhao expressed their preference for female virginity, but also revealed that their female virginity complex had faded over time. Xuepiaoguo who used the metaphor of a cup to describe his female virginity complex said:

> *You know that Chinese men always hope you will be as chaste as possible... I of course hope [my future spouse will be] a virgin, but if you meet someone suitable and she's not a virgin, you can't change this fact. Then it can be acceptable... for example, when I'm buying a cup I hope it will be brand new. I won't use a cup someone else has used... but when you reach a higher intellectual level and you know more, you'll change your attitude towards this.*

Like Xuepiaoguo, Wei Zhao also mentioned that, when men are more experienced, they will start to care more about women than they used to. They will begin to think that a female virginity complex might be unfair to women. Jing Kou contested Xuepiaoguo's view when I told her his metaphor of female virginity:

> *I don't know what others think, but I don't have a male virginity complex myself. And like, if I was buying a cup, what I actually care about is not is it*

*a new one or not, I care more about if it's delicate or not. The most important thing is that you like it, not that it's new.*

Another noteworthy point in Wei Zhao's interview came when he commented that '*if he really loves this woman, he'll have a virginity complex at the beginning. He'll have a virginity complex unless he's not serious about her.*' His comment was totally different from most women's views about male virginity complex. Emily in the second focus group said '*I think it's all based on your feelings for him. It won't be an important factor if you love him a lot*' when male virginity complex was discussed. Fion used to have a male virginity complex, but she cared less than she used to because '*when you get older, there are fewer male virgins around you*'. This is also an important factor that affects both men and women in giving up their virginity complex. There was one point which never came up in men's interviews: Fion and Zoe in the focus group considered a virgin partner to be an extra point in a potential relationship, but they emphasised that '*it will only be an extra point if men are twentyish. We'll think he might have some kind of defect if he's still a virgin when he's, like, 40 years old.*' Although most women consider a female virginity complex as either acceptable or negative, only Xiaoxiao viewed men's female virginity complex as a good thing, because she was a virgin.

Differences in attitudes were also evident when participants described their expectations of premarital sex. In discussions of future spouses' past sexual experience, female interviewees generally viewed young men's past sexual experience from a neutral position, while a few of them considered little or no sexual experience to be a negative trait for men. The following two quotes illustrate women's neutral and positive attitudes toward men's past sexual experience:

*Hu: What would you think if your future spouse had no sexual experience?*

*Jing Kou: It wouldn't be a problem if he could teach himself and be a master. Yet if he had no experience and didn't have good physical qualities in that aspect (sex), then it would be a point-deducting thing.*

*… …*

*Xiaoxiao Wan: I don't care whether a man has that kind of (sexual) experience or not, but he'd better have past love experience.*

Their neutral attitude may be affected by the gender comparison nature of my study, but a few of them still showed positive attitudes toward men's past sexual or love experience. Moreover, some young women's expectations of female purity before marriage revealed a sexual double standard. Female interviewee Ping Lu thought women who treat sex as fun rather than connect it to marriage were irresponsible to themselves and were spoiling themselves. To support her view of sex should be connected to marriage Ping also shared a story of her classmate:

*I got this classmate in my university who insisted that she would only have sex after she got married. She broke up with her first boyfriend because she saw no future between them. Then she met this guy and thought they will get married and had sex with him. But after a short time he went abroad and they broke up. You see you can't be sure before you are really married.*

Even women such as Jing Kou and Xiaoxiao Wan who had neutral and positive attitudes towards men's sexual experience show little tolerance to either their own or other women's premarital sex. Like Jing Kou who wanted to save her first time to the one she would spent her rest life with. And Xiaoxiao clearly stated she would not accept premarital sex and also advised other young women not to go beyond the moral boundary:

*Many people wouldn't accept it (premarital sex). If you did it (premarital sex), people may not say anything in front of you, but they will judge and gossip about you behind your back. So why will you take the risk and let people have something on you? You'd better not go beyond the moral boundary and this is also a protection for young women. What if the next man you see cares a lot about you are… um… you are… clean or not? Then it will affect your next relationship. Anyway I can't accept premarital sex myself.*

Xiaoxiao also said she could totally understand men's female virginity complex. From the comparison of women's attitudes towards men and women's pre-martial experience we can tell that while more tolerance of men's premarital experience were expressed, many women still expect female to stay sexually inactive before marriage. At the same time, that men have nothing to lose by engaging in premarital sex was commonly recognised in and used as excuses for their premarital sexual experience by male interviewees, whereas a woman takes the risk of losing her reputation and "*loses this position of power the moment she loses virginity*" (Zhou, 1989, p.287). Besides, young men in China still find a virgin bride preferable, as male interviewee Xuepiaoguo said, "*You know that Chinese men always hope you will be as chaste as possible*". Xiaosong Liu he would "*certainly expect men to be more sexually experienced than women*". This demonstrates how conventional discourses of female purity still remains very powerful in young Chinese's sexual lives and creates a sexual double standard. Even though male participant M indicated that there were pros and cons to women who had no sexual experience, his concern was about the reduction in his enjoyment of sex:

*Hu: What would you think if your future spouse had no sexual experience?*

*M: Well, there are both pros and cons. Do you know the writer Lian Yue? He said a woman will always remember her first man. And this will make you a*

*little bit unpleasant. She might be thinking of another man when you are doing that kind of thing (having sex) with her. However, actually you need to take a high risk if she has no sexual experience at all. I'll be horrified if she bleeds a lot. And I won't enjoy it if she finds it very painful the first time.*

Although sexual pleasure was articulated by Jing Kou and M, it was discussed in the discourse of spousal choice and marriage. Sexual desire and pleasure are not the critical element for their future spouses. Women face gender differences not only in the conversation about virginity, but also in the discussion of family roles. In relationships women are expected to take a submissive position, save and give their virginity to men, and women in their family lives are supposed to serve men's needs sexually and sacrifice and serve men's careers. If women's sexual freedom is largely dominated by men in terms of premarital sex, then "marriage has traditionally given men 'conjugal rights' over their wives' bodies" (Jackson & Scott, 1996, p.20). Although young men may face less moral regulation in terms of their sexual experience, this does not mean they can achieve appropriate masculinity without effort and personal investment. In fact, Chinese young men are expected to bring more material resources into an ideal relationship. These mirror the traditional gender role division: men are breadwinners and women are homemakers (*男主外女主内*). With all the gender inequities and double standards in virginity and definitions of virginity, gender-based allocation of power and social roles are reaffirmed and sexual revolution in China is by no means finished. In spite of all the dilemmas of virginity and purity, women still face difficulties and pressures from family and their marriage lives, where they are expected to fit in conventional gender roles.

**Spousal choice and parental expectations**

A common phenomenon among Chinese parents is that they discourage or even oppose any relationship while their children are at school or even university, but they encourage their children to marry as soon as they start to work or when they are approaching the age of 25. Pleasing parents, trying to meet their expectations for future spouses, is another factor which may induce young adults to conform to traditional gender ideology. In the traditional gendered division of labour, conjugal relations were formed with men at the centre of the household undertaking the responsibility for production and women in a complementary role facilitating their husbands (Whyte & Parish, 1985). These conventional gender roles of men in the career-based position and women in the domestic territory were largely rejected during the Maoist era, but there is currently a re-emergence of this discourse (Davis & Friedman, 2014). My data on parents' expectations of young adults' future spouses widely demonstrated the return of this traditional gender-role expectation.

I have mentioned in the methodology chapter that my question about parents' expectations was too vague for participants, so I changed it to "parents' views and requirements of their future spouses". Personal characteristics were the most frequently mentioned condition when parents' expectations of future spouses were discussed. Among all the traits, goodness or kindness, filial piety and good temper were emphasised by most parents. Jiuzhe's parents, who were living in Linyi, pretended that they had no special requirements for his future spouse, while they actually did have some:

> *Guanlan: Did your parents ever talk to you before you were engaged or in a relationship about what kind of daughter-in-law they prefer?*
>
> *Jiuzhe: Yes, we have... have talked... um... my father said "I don't have any requirements, anyone is okay. You should find someone who is*

*reasonable, don't date people who are always deliberately making trouble."*

... ...

*And my mother was like anyone is fine as long as you like her. [laugh] Actually... um... it seems they don't have any requirements... actually they have many conditions in their minds. They just don't let you know.*

Although parents of both genders were reported to mention the requirement of good personal characters for their future spouses, parents of different genders gave priority to different traits. Parents of female interviewees like Xiaoxiao Wan and Xiao Meng were described by them as emphasising the responsibility of their future husband, whereas male interviewees such as Jia Qing reported his parents as focusing on filial piety, caring for his parents in old age and the virtue of their future wives. Their requirements illustrate the traditional Chinese gender stereotype, in which women are virtuous wives and good mothers while men take responsibility for being the family breadwinner. The return of traditional gender-role expectations was not only demonstrated by parents' preferences for different kinds of personalities, but also by their expectations of distinct occupations. Men are conventionally believed to be the breadwinners, to support the family, and achieve successful careers, while women are expected to focus on the home. According to Ho et al. (2018), in spite of the fact that most married Chinese women are full-time and some of them even have decent occupations, men are still symbolically seen as the family breadwinner. Although there was not a clear requirement of wealth by parents of young women as narrated by female interviewees, they asked for profitable jobs and productive capacities. Such preferences are well represented by these quotes from Lavender, Xiaoxiao Wan and Jing Kou:

*Lavender: (My parents said I should) find someone with a similar family background to our family. Working in a* dan wei *or working in a bank would be a good option.*

*… …*

*Xiaoxiao Wan: …he should have productive capacity and responsibility. And his family should not have financial burdens.*

*… …*

*Jing Kou: They haven't mentioned anything in detail to me nor talked about this…, but when they talked about someone, they would say "um... there's this person in our* dan wei *who is quite good and his family is doing bla bla business." I think they're quite concerned about family elements.*

Jing Kou's reported her parents from Chongqing as did not state their requests about her future spouse's family background directly, instead they hinted to her while talking about others. And from what Jing Kou's narrative of what her parents said, we can tell that men with profitable jobs and wealthy family backgrounds were preferable. Despite the fact that many Chinese women have a decent job and some of them even have very successful career, full engagement in their workplaces financially supporting a family is still considered to be a man's obligation. Women would sacrifice their own career and take care of families to support their husbands' job (Zarafonetis, 2014). Being too independent and having an outstanding career is often seen as a 'failing woman' (Yang, 2007). Nontheless, men are always being praised for their prosperity in business "and even the oldest, ugliest most uncouth country bumpkin will be transformed by wealth into an object of desire" (Osburg, 2013, p.182).Wei Zhao's reported his parents as favouring women with less ambition in their

career, who would focus more on the home rather than their profession, and be feminine:

> *Wei Zhao: They (spouse's family) should have a stable job. It would be good if she (future spouse) does not have an intensive workload and has more free time ...um... in the aspect of appearance, she should be pretty.*

Preferences of Qing Jia's and Wei Zhao's parents for their future spouses clearly showed signs of 'machismo' (*大男子主义*) and parents of female informants further indicated the re-emergence of traditional gender divisions. Traditional gender expectations in family lives were also articulated by respondents when Zarafonetis (2014) carried her in-depth interviews with forty-three women in Shanghai. Women in her study portrayed the image of wife as being caring and supportive and taking the role of 'virtuous wife and good mother'. At the same time seeking for a great career was assumed as husband's prerogative. *The People's Daily* in China in 2008 illustrated such a reversion by commenting that women's focus should be on the family and that the duties of wives are to take care of their husbands, rear children and create a relaxing family environment (Davis & Friedman, 2014). Differently from women's staying at home as a way of serving the country during the Maoist era, the discourse of women returning back home in contemporary China is more about a concern for their own families (Davis & Friedman, 2014). This phenomenon is more like an elitist exemplification than a commonplace among the working class (Davis & Friedman, 2014). At all events, the revival of women coming back home is the re-emergence of patriarchy and runs in the reverse direction to sexual revolution which grants sexual autonomy equally to men and women (Wang, 2017).

**Summary**

After decades of advocating equal rights between men and women since the Maoist era, the traditional image of women is still sought after, even among young adults. Conventionally, women in China were identified as second-class citizens, being submissive and taking their role in reproduction. As a consequence of this subservient position, women were consistently evaluated on the basis of their virginity and fertility (Breiner, 1992). Although they had gained higher education and been defined as more 'liberal' than their peers back in China, Chinese young adults in the UK described their definitions of male and female virginity by different standards. The indisputable term of male virginity was quickly associated by both genders with vaginal-penile intercourse. However, most male participants in the focus-group discussions believed that an intact hymen is the indicator of female virginity, whereas female informants generally agreed that direct sexual behaviour or vaginal-penile intercourse is the boundary between a virgin and a non-virgin. Yet, a few young men revealed their sexual double standard and challenged these definitions by defining female virginity as mental purity or as women who have not experienced any sexual behaviours, including oral-genital contact. Their definitions of male and female virginity revealed a sexual double standard which also existed in their attitudes towards premarital sex.

Farrer (2014) conducted interviews between 2003 and 2007 among 68 young Shanghai residents aged between 20 and 28 on the themes of premarital intimate relationships. He saw a detachment of premarital intimacy from marriage in various forms that decreases the influence of "the previously well-institutionalized links between sexual intimacy and marriage" (Farrer, 2014, p.63). While studies in metropolitan cities like Beijing or Shanghai have manifested a delinking of premarital sex from marriage in China (Farrer, 2014), data from my research, which was conducted in other areas of China, suggests that most young women still consider marriage or a committed future to be the precondition for premarital sex. In contrast, feelings (*感情*) in relationships were

applied by young men as the criterion for premarital sex. Men and women not only employed different determinations of premarital sex, but they also experienced different levels of restraints from their parents. Furthermore, young women encountered harsher moral regulation in terms of their sexual experience than men. Yet, this sexual double standard does not mean that men can achieve appropriate masculinity without effort and personal investment. Young men in China are still presumed to perform the traditional gender ideology by taking on their responsibility as breadwinners in the family. Meanwhile the idea of 'virtuous wife and good mother' has been revived among contemporary young Chinese. Along with the 'virtuous wife and good mother' the traditional gender-role expectations of family lives embraced its return as well. The sexual double standard and the refashion of patriarchy in spousal choice further support Wang's (2017) argument that the 'sexual revolution' in China is not finished.

In the changing social context and the background of a sexual revolution debate, sex freedom and gender equality are promoted in a positive tone. Young adults lay in between revolution and tradition and face the changing masculinity and femininity. At one hand, due to the social environment that it is not easy to find a virgin and the pressure of gender equality, some young men's virginity complex faded over time. At the other hand, virgin brides are still preferable when the situation permits. Despite the fact that some young Chinese tried to define both genders' virginity in an egalitarian way, the double standard still appeared in their later discussion. Moreover, women encounter gender differences in the context of family life. Nevertheless many Chinese women choose to work and earn money after they are married and it seems that they have escaped the role of housewives. However, a strong woman[30] is not a preferred female image and women are still expected to take responsibility as housewives by serving husbands' needs and supporting families. The way young Chinese chose to deal with changing masculinity and femininity disclose differences in gender-based distribution of

[30] Strong woman is translated from Chinese, means woman who has a successful career and is fully engaged in her paid employment.

power and social roles which are in an opposite position to the idea of sexual revolution. Furthermore, to negotiate modern sexual culture and situate a conventional self in it, conformity as an approach was used by young Chinese. Due to conflict between draconian party-state control policies and a sexualised society, the pressure of the existence of traditional gender-role expectations and the pressure to display decent morality, young adults applied the strategy of cultural conformity. As will be explored in the following chapter, young adults chose to conform to mainstream expectations when sexuality was discussed.

# Chapter 6

## Culture of conformity: displaying 'decent' morality

From the time when Sándor Petőfi's poem "Love and Freedom" became the creed of love for young Chinese people in the 1950s, marriage on the basis of love was promoted in China. It was not until the 1980s, however, that love became a hot topic of public debate. The new status of love as a symbol of the young generation's dream was evident in endless stories of passionate love, films of tearful women and other love-related matters at that time (Evans, 1997). Despite all this new tolerance in literature and art from the 1980s, public discussion about love in China "was far from unanimous in approving the new status of romantic love and private experience" (Evans, 1997, p.96). Young people now are struggling with the dilemma of conventional gender ideology and the pursuit of love, and when love-related issues are discussed they may at the same time be affected by the culture of conformity. In this chapter, I will explore whether interviewees' statements were influenced by a culture of conformity. The theme of this chapter was inspired by Huang and Pan's (2009) article on research ethics in social surveys in China. They argued that Chinese people are affected by the 'culture of conformity', so that when they are interviewed by a stranger they have a strong tendency to conform to traditional gender-role expectations and give answers which reflect mainstream expectations. These arguments reminded me that a few interviewees stated their attitudes at the beginning of the interview before I even asked. I am going to discuss how the culture of conformity shapes young adults in contemporary China. In order to test the idea of the culture of conformity further, I discuss participants' responses to the non-conformist action of the BFSU students' photo campaign which had advertised their performance Our Vaginas, Ourselves. Moreover, I connect the idea of conformity to the idea of sexual revolution in China.

## Conformity, Confucianism and face

According to Huang and Pan (2009), the culture of conformity is mostly related to politics and may refer to showing unconditional recognition of and absolute obedience to instructions from superiors. Conformity in politics may result from the Chinese principle of 'political consistency', while the culture of conformity may be a consequence of the complex of unity in Chinese history, which dates back to Confucianism in the Han era when the emperor ousted other philosophies and only retained Confucianism[31]. The idea of unity advocated by Confucius became the common value of the whole society. However, Confucianism became the main target for attack during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution. Confucianism was criticised as one of the 'Four Old Things'[32], and both the birthplace and the grave of Confucius were destroyed. Many of the ideas of Confucianism were abandoned, but the concept of social harmony was retained as a form of New Confucianism. The Harmonious Society is "a key feature of Hu Jintao's signature ideology of scientific development, a concept developed in the mid-2000s"[33]. It is recognised as "a response to the increasing social injustice and inequality in Mainland China"[34]. Nearly four decades after the Cultural Revolution ended, Xi Jinping is actively seeking methods to improve the status of Confucianism and regards it as the origin of Chinese culture.

Another origin of the culture of conformity is the Chinese idea of face. Qi (2011) explains that this concept 'face' works as "a social force, [which] promotes social conformity" (p.290). Face is a universal phenomenon referring to "the social anchoring of self in the gaze of others" (Qi, 2011, p.280), and at the same time it

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[31] Confucianism changed over time: 仁 (*ren*) – Kindness was the core ideology of Confucianism when it was advocated during the Spring and Autumn period. Later, during the Han Dynasty, the idea of the divine right of emperors was added into Confucianism to serve as the official ruling doctrine. During the Tang dynasty, Confucianism developed aspects on the model of Buddhism and Taoism and was reformulated as Neo-Confucianism.

[32] The Four Old Things or the Four Old were old customs, old habits, and old ideas. One of the stated goals of the Cultural Revolution was to bring an end to the Four Old Things.

[33] [4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmonious_Society

has a high salience in Chinese society. Although face is an individual matter, it should be noted that it also serves as a force of social control. In Qi's explanation, the complex of face is an efficient force of social control in social interactions, as "social harmony and order are maintained, not by the subject's feeling for others, but by the subject's feelings concerning how they are regarded by others" (Barbalet, 2001 in Qi, 2011, p.290). Face originates in Chinese culture and is inevitable and unavoidable in nearly every feature of Chinese social life, ranging from personal relationships to institutional connections. To maintain face in Chinese society, one tends to represent oneself or behave in a socially accepted or respected way and, when this achieves a positive reaction from others, such behaviour will be reinforced and conformity will be furthered. Therefore, alongside the complex of unity, the idea of maintaining face may serve as another origin of conformity in Chinese culture. However, face and conformity are not only Chinese concepts, they are also shared in Western culture. Qi notes a social psychological study of conformity which was quoted in Scheff's study (1988, p.402). In this experiment, most respondents were informed by the researcher to give a completely incorrect response to the experimental respondents. The result showed that "three-quarters of the subjects in the study were swayed at least once by the majority responses, only one quarter remained completely independent" (Scheff, 1988 in Qi, 2011, p.291).

At the same time, conformity or submissive attitudes towards mainstream values only means showing agreement and may have nothing to do with actual behaviour. Typical examples would be the male participant Jiuzhe Li from Linyi and female participant Xiaomeng from Houma, who indicated that they held very traditional ideas about premarital sex before I asked about it, and they were the only two interviewees who expressed attitudes at the very beginning of their interviews. This made me wonder whether they were just showing obedience to the very traditional Chinese culture.

**Performing the culture of conformity**

Jiuzhe was the first participant I interviewed. He lived in Linyi and was engaged. As soon as Jiuzhe had the information sheet, he stated: "I'm a very traditional person, I think my parents are not more traditional than me. I think this [sex] must wait until my wedding day." However, after we talked about early relationships and virginity issues, he mentioned that his younger brother's wife had been pregnant before they were married and his attitude changed:

> *...because... um... my younger brother ['s wife]... um... got pregnant before they got married, and my parents didn't… didn't curse him... um... or teach him political lessons*[35]*. I feel they didn't criticise him harshly. Although my younger brother and his wife now live very well... um... they got married... had a child... um... very well, my parents think this aspect [premarital sex] um... anyway, I feel they are not more traditional than me um... yes, not more traditional than me [laugh]. They could accept [premarital sex].*
>
> *Guanlan: So did you criticise your younger brother?*
>
> *[laugh] yet I have changed, yes, really changed. After I dated ... this girl um... indeed changed. I think premarital sex is acceptable.*

At the end of the interview, Jiuzhe stated his acceptance of premarital sex, which contradicted his original statement that he would wait until his wedding day.

Xiaomeng was 24 years old, majored in nursing and lived in Houma, which is my home city. She was not in a relationship when I interviewed her. Like Jiuzhe, Xiaomeng also stated her traditional attitude at the beginning:

[35] To teach someone political lessons means to educate them and lead them to follow the right direction with the correct ideology.

*Guanlan: Actually it's not the case that no one else is doing a similar study to me, but they've gathered information from Beijing, Shanghai or Hong Kong. Um... I think probably young people in those cities might think in a slightly different way from people in our city, so I came to conduct interviews here.*

*Xiaomeng: People from our city are very traditional. My current thought... um... is really... um... very traditional. [This] is affected by my family, I think.*

She reacted in a different way when we were talking about attitudes towards premarital sex:

*I think as long as you can protect yourself [from getting pregnant] it will be fine. What they say about... um... first night or something else... um... I think it's meaningless to put too much value on that.*

*Guanlan: So do you mean if it's the right time and you're in the right mood then it [sex] is ok?*

*Xiaomeng: Yes.*

I think one reason for Xiaomeng to say she was very traditional at the beginning was because I mentioned that people in our city might think differently from people in Beijing or Shanghai, so she might have been deferring to what she assumed to be my opinion. However, there might have been other reasons for her to do so.

People like Jiuzhe and Xiaomeng, who stated their own views, showed compliance with the mainstream because of cultural conformity, whereas Chad insisted on his own opinion throughout the focus group. Chad equated female virginity with the hymen from a medical perspective and stated that he did not have any virginity complex when asked about his definition of

female virginity. After watching a video explaining that it is not possible to define virginity through the existence of the hymen, other study participants, like Echo and Tina, started to question the existence of a medical definition of female virginity. Moreover, before the end of the focus group, I asked Chad again about the hymen as an indicator, but he stayed silent in both situations without showing any compliance with the mainstream opinions.

### Complying with the *da huan jing*

Some of the rest of the interviewees, who did not state their attitudes at the beginning of their interviews, mentioned the *da huan jing*. The Chinese term *da huan jing* generally means the wider, but local social contexts people live in. According to Ho et al. (2018), "sexual lives are always lived within wider social contexts" (p.5). The *da huan jing* was mentioned by both genders several times on the topic of different expectations about male and female virginity before marriage. In these cases, although participants did not react in a typically conforming way – stating their attitudes in a socially expected direction – they took the *da huan jing* and gender-role expectations as an explanation for their behaviours or thoughts. However, actions or attitudes that follow the *da huan jing* or most people's attitudes are indeed indicative of a culture of conformity.

Xiaomeng was from my home city of Houma and when I was explaining my project to her, her statement that "*people from our city are very traditional*" was an explanation of her current thought influenced by the *da huan jing*. Xiaomeng referred to the *da huan jing* again when we were discussing her parents' expectations of her future spouse:

> *Xiaomeng: Because the da huan jing I live in is like this. We're not like people in Beijing or Shanghai, they're more open. Ranges (for our*

*future spouses) are restricted.*

Xiaolü was living in Chongqing and did her Master's degree in the UK. She also talked about the *da huan jing* she lived in, but her story was totally different:

*Guanlan: If I as one of your friends talked about my teenage romances to you, then at what age would you consider romance inappropriate?*

*Xiaolü: If you had asked me this question one year ago, I would say, before junior high school. However, now I... because I've heard lots of stories. Because, during my work this year, I met people of different ages... before I used to be with people all of our age, but later I met people aged like 30 or 27, 28, who are different from us. Now I consider romance in primary school... I even consider this as normal.*

... ... ... ...

*Guanlan: You consider romance in primary school as acceptable after contact with relatively older people? I would have thought that would be after contacting the younger generation...*

*Xiaolü: No! No no no no! Because I think love and marriage attitudes among Chinese youth... um... for me, I'm too blocked [conservative] (others) are gradually open, but I'm always very blocked [conservative] I think, at least for me.*

Xiaolü had been working in the media industry for one year when I interviewed her and she described her *da huan jing* as very open and her colleagues *"lead me to a new vision every day"*. She represented herself in this relatively open environment as '*blocked*' (*闭塞*), which is a negative phrase in Chinese. However, I consider her self-description to be conservative rather than blocked. When discussing love and relationships,

interviewees talked about the *da huan jing*, which was an indicator of the culture of conformity. At the same time, when past love stories were involved, some interviewees tried to either conceal or denounce their past relationships, which could be another indicator of conformity.

**Concealing past relationships**

Many interviewees talked about having been in a loving relationship that had ended before the interview took place. One interesting feature of the interviews that I found when analysing their past romances is that many interviewees would deliberately conceal one or two of their past relationships to avoid giving the impression that they were dating too frequently. The question of how many relationships have they had was asked at the beginning of the topic of past relationships, but some young adults, especially women, were found to have more relationships in later conversation than they stated at the beginning.

Endless stories of passionate, long-lasting love began to feature in films, novels and the mass media after the 1980s in China. Young adults are living in a highly sexualised society and they are allowed to enjoy more than one relationships before marriage. Yet facing the tension between sexualised society, official discourse cultivating sexually moral citizens, and peer pressure, some of the young adults choose to apply the strategy of the culture of conformity and conceal their past relationships to display decent morality and avoid being judged as dating frequently. Moreover, in spite of the mass appearance of love in literature and art, public discussion about love remains far from unanimously approving. Although love has become the basis of both marriage and family and the absence of love in marriage is now recognised as legitimate grounds for divorce according to the Marriage

Law, love in public discussion is always closely connected to marriage. Relationships that are not aiming towards marriage are not considered decent. Young people in China face a dilemma between the pursuit of love and relatively conservative public opinion.

Lavender was 25 years old, living in Linyi and was in a relationship. When I asked her how many relationships she had had, she said:

> *Strictly... um... I don't know whether [one past relationship] could be counted in or not... um... if that could be counted as a love relationship then it's twice, if not it's only once.*

Then she told me about the relationship which she was not sure should be counted in or not. She said that she had dated this man after her college entrance examination. They did not meet frequently as they were in different cities. Then she failed to gain entry to college and sat the college entrance examination again the next year. They broke up mainly because of the distance when she entered college the following year. She asked me again after her love story '*would this be counted as a relationship?*' The same situation happened with Meirong Ma, Ping Lu, Xiaoxiao Wan and Xuepiaoguo. 'Strictly speaking' and 'let's count it (number of past relationships) as' were the two frequently used terms.

Ping Lu from Linyi was extremely uncertain about how many relationships she had had and she expressed it in the following way:

> *Guanlan: So you didn't have any relationships before entering university, did you?*
>
> *Ping Lu: I had, but it ended after I graduated.*
>
> *Guanlan: In senior high school?*

*Ping Lu: Yes, in senior high school. I wasn't sensible and didn't know much [about love] at that time.*

*Guanlan: How many relationships have you had apart from your current partner?*

*Ping Lu: I had...had...one...two...one...two...one past relationship. Actually that shouldn't be counted as one (Guanlan: the one in senior high school?) no, let's count it as one (Guanlan: the one at university?) the one I'm currently dating.*

Ping Lu corrected herself so many times when answering the question about past relationships that I became confused and even after we had finished this conversation I still did not know how many people she had dated.

Meirong Ma was from Houma and working in a *danwei*[36].

*Guanlan: How many relationships have you had?*

*Meirong Ma: Two, I think.*

*Guanlan: Senior high school?*

*Meirong Ma: Yes, one in senior high school and one in college. However, I don't really think the one in senior high school could be seen as a serious relationship. I... anyway... senior high...I don't understand the so-called 'first love'...they say...um...anyway I just don't understand.*

I did not find any participants from Chongqing trying to conceal any of their past relationships and I thought that there may be some differences between north and south China or developed and developing cities until I

[36] Danwei refers to work unit in Chinese urban area. However, the *danwei* is "far more than a workplace: it also provided a range of welfare and other services, depending on its size, including pensions, housing, health care and child care" (Ho, et al., 2018, p.7).

read the transcript of Jing Kou's interview, who was from Chongqing. When asked, Jing answered without hesitation that she had three past relationships in total, one in senior high and two in college. However, when we were discussing early relationships, she admitted that she actually had one relationship when she was in junior high, but she described it as informal. Although all the examples given above are from female participants, deliberately concealing or forgetting some past relationships happened with both genders. Intentionally hiding past relationships occurred in six interviews – four with female and two with male participants.

Tolman (2005) found that 'it just happened' is a common expression when talking about sexuality. Tolman viewed 'it just happened' as 'one of the few acceptable ways available to adolescent girls for making sense of and describing their sexual experiences' (Tolman, 2005, p.2). Applying this expression in one's narrative is considered as a cover story and trying to avoid being judged for certain behaviour (Tolman, 2005). The use of 'it just happened' as a cover story is related to females by Tolman; however, males also used similar expressions in my study. When talking about previous relationships, male participant Xiaoyu Liu from Linyi used 'it just kind of went on for a while from there'. The use of 'it went on from there' also seems to be another implementation of a cover story.

Carter (2010) carried out 23 interviews with women between the age of 18 and 30 and to analyse their opinions of relationships and marriage. Her participants found it difficult to identify when their relationships started. Normally description of past relationships did not cover details about beginnings of relationships. Lavender from Linyi, however, went into a little more detail than the others. Lavender spent a long time talking about how each of her ex-boyfriends pursued her and why they broke up, but she, like others and those in Carter's (2010) study, did not mention how she fell

in love or entered into a relationship. This may be either on a conscious level of wishing not to discuss it or it may be on a more subconscious level.

Of course, it is easy to be wise in hindsight and many of the participants did this, justifying why they had become a couple in the first place, or why it had gone wrong, and here another feature of the discussion that arose in many interviewees' talk was the redefining of love in past relationships. When looking back at the emotions involved in previous relationships, it was common for the women to denounce their love or redefine it. Admitting to being ignorant about love was one common feature in the redefining of past romance. Rongrong from Houma mentioned that she had had two past relationships and did not try to conceal either of them, but she considered herself to have been ignorant in the first relationship.

> *Guanlan: How many relationships have you had before your current partner?*
>
> *Rongrong: I had one in junior high school when I was ignorant. You can't say that's love, I don't know why we ...um...dated and I didn't really love him. Nothing happened...and we didn't...basically we only held hands.*

'Not loving him' is another way of denouncing love in hindsight. Rongrong now 'realises' that she did not love her previous boyfriend and love is denounced. Another participant who used a retrospective evaluation of love is Meirong Ma from Houma, who commented, 'I don't really think the one in senior high school could be seen as a serious relationship'. Unlike Rongrong, Meirong totally denied the whole relationship. The implication could be drawn from these comments that love greatly affects our views on our past histories. Although these interviewees may have felt that they were in love in their past relationships, it is essential for them being able to deny

past love and denounce past relationships (Carter, 2010). Reasons of denouncing love vary, it might be failures of relationships, coming from a dissimilar background or the boyfriend's cheating. Love, whether denounced or redefined for any reason, is not conventional perfect love or real love. Women consciously or sub-consciously reconstruct their past memories and redefine love as not being love at all. The reason for interviewees to denounce love is that 'real' love is always viewed as romantically lasting forever (Carter, 2010). As past relationships broke down, the feelings felt in the relationship must not have been love. Tactics such as hindsight or a 'realisation' that a past relationship was not love at all are applied by interviewees to justify their reconstruction of events. However, they are not deliberately lying about their past romances. When reconstructing past events, these respondents are retrospectively reinterpreting the thoughts and feelings in their past rather than actually changing their emotions in reality (Carter, 2010).

In my participants' accounts, denouncing love and admitting to being ignorant are associated with being younger. Ping Lu from Linyi commented that '…in senior high school, I wasn't sensible and didn't know much (about love) at that time'. Ping Lu was unsure about whether she was in love at that time as she corrected herself many times about past relationships, despite what she might have thought at the time, that relationship was redefined by the time of the interview. This redefinition might be a result of her young age at the time of that relationship. Rongrong from Houma commented about her own relationship: 'I had one in junior high school when I was ignorant'. Here again, individuals are not certain whether it was 'real love' or not because they were so young and 'ignorant' and had no past experience to compare it with. Young love is often relating to passion, but at the same time it is seen as confusing by young adults, who do not know whether to identify it as true love or not. It is generally

considered by most Chinese that the relationships and love experienced at a young age, especially by teenagers, is not the same as the love in an older age in a relatively long-term relationship. Another shared idea is that the love in early relationships cannot be real because of the young age when it is experienced (Carter, 2010). Young love is not only redefined by women, Xiaoyu Liu from Linyi also reinterpreted himself as 'comparatively ignorant' in his early love.

Love has been given a very important position, not only by participants in my study, but also by the wider society. Marriage is supposed to be the step that follows from love and love is always expected to be long lasting and forever. Additionally, the concepts of 'one true love' and 'soulmate' reinforce the notion that there should only be one true love in our lifetime, and ideally that person will be our husband or wife. These beliefs are often taken for granted and given high status, and their validity is never questioned. The search for true and unique love remains an important part of one's life and those who believe they have found their true love might 'downgrade' their other relationships and announce that there has only ever been one 'real' love in their lives. People are always trying to make 'their lives fit the narratives of romantic love' (Holmes, 2004a, p.255), in which 'real' love only occurs once in a lifetime. Consequently, women denounce or deny their feelings in previous relationships when they think they have found their 'real' love. When people find 'real' love, all the other love they have experienced before must be inferior to this 'real' love (Carter, 2010).

As with concealing past romances, this is not an exclusively female circumstance. Xiaoyu Liu from Linyi stated his innocence during his interview:

*Guanlan: When did you have your first love?*

*Xiaoyu Liu: First love...um...after the college entrance examination. Actually, I don't think that could be seen as first love, because I met her for the first time after my college entrance examination when we were singing Karaoke...and...we were in the same grade...a friend of a friend...and we dated for a while. Then the results of the college entrance examination came out and I didn't do well, so I went to senior high school for another year and we broke up.*

*Guanlan: That couldn't be seen as first love, why not?*

*Xiaoyu Liu: I feel like I was comparatively ignorant.*

While both Rongrong from Houma and Xiaoyu Liu applied the term '*ignorant*', Ping Lu from Linyi used the phrase '*not sensible and not knowing much [about love]*' and Meirong Ma from Houma said '*I don't understand so-called first love*' to express their innocence in past relationships. This might be an excuse to avoid being judged as dating too frequently. However, interviewees' memories of their past love stories do not necessarily reflect how their past relationships were or should be. In Jackson's (2010) article, she states that memories are reconstructed "from particular temporal locations" (Jackson, 2010, p.125) and are shaped by our present preoccupations. The stories we tell about ourselves which include a past are always implicitly or explicitly related to a present and even to a potential future. Jackson (2010) further explains that the "act of telling a story takes place within the flow of time and is situated within a sequence of social interactions between narrator and audience" (p.2). Hence, interviewees' narratives of their past relationships are based on a researcher and researched relation that could have a possible influence on their reconstruction of memories.

**The appropriate age to date: generational changes in love stories**

Teenagers' romances always remind me of puppy love, school romance or love at first sight, which are common in romantic films. In China, we have another term for teenagers' romances, 早恋 (*zao lian*), which literally means early love. *Zao lian* usually refers to love before university stage. The term *zao lian* itself is not negative, yet it is constantly accompanied by words like 'forbidden', 'rebellious' or 'harmful'. In my generation, *zao lian* was strictly forbidden in school and once students were noticed in an early love by teachers or the school authorities, their parents would be called and harsh punishment would follow. One young couple was caught in my class when I was in the second year of senior high, and the boy was forced to transfer to another school in a nearby city. Thus, this might be another explanation for interviewees concealing past romances or claiming that they were ignorant of love while at school.

Evans (1997) defines *zao lian* as "an implicitly pejorative term that is specific to the post-Mao period – [which] refers to the increasing tendency among adolescents to become prematurely sexually experienced" (Evans, 1997, p.76). The state began to be concerned about adolescence and to take adolescent sexuality under the state's supervision for the sake of the country's future after 1949. The authorities construct *zao lian* as the immature "expression of sexual desire at a time when biological growth has outstripped psychological and emotional development" (Evans, 1997, p.76). It is consistently asserted that adolescents' increasing sexual interest and desire for the opposite sex are unacceptable and distract attention from education. The responses of parents and school authorities to *zao lian* were consistent with the moral and sexual standards of the dominant discourse and endless stories about a miserable fate are prepared for young people who disregard their advice. At the same time, in the UK, people believe that "Childhood is a time of presumed sexual innocence" (Renold, 2005, p.17).

Although a different age is being discussed, by saying innocence they mean their purity not their morality. However, during the decade between 1996 and 2006, convenors of sex education in China such as Gao Dewei stated that sex education for young people is intended to ensure an outlook that shapes their moral values (McMillan, 2006).

However, circumstances seem to have changed and people's attitudes towards *zao lian* for the post-millennium generation[37] have become more tolerant than they were for the generation born in the 1980s. When discussing early relationships, some participants made comparisons between the attitudes towards early relationships of the '80s and post-millennium generations. Their common opinion is that the post-millennium generation are more open than the '80s generation and more forgiving of the younger generation in the issue of early relationships.

I interviewed Xiaoxiao Wan, who was living in Linyi, during the early fieldwork phase, when I was still struggling to explain my interview questions in a proper way. Xiaoxiao Wan gave a representative instance on the comparison of two generations:

> *Guanlan: What age do you think is appropriate to have an early relationship?*
>
> *Xiaoxiao Wan: Actually if it happens now...if it happened in the past, like our generation, I could understand an early relationship in junior high school, but I can understand the younger generations now in an early relationship at any age [laugh]. I have this cousin who is in primary school and holding his little girlfriend's hand all the time...um...like this.*

[37] Most of my interviewees are born in the 1990s. By this, my interviewees are talking about younger generation. They referred them to the post-millennium.

*Guanlan: Are they serious? Is it a serious relationship?*

*Xiaoxiao Wan: I don't know whether he's serious or not, but they are dating indeed. They are just in grade three.*

*Guanlan: As you know about their relationship...does this mean their parents know about it as well?*

*Xiaoxiao Wan: Yet no one takes it seriously. They all say 'it's they are just 过家家[38](guo jia jia)', but he is serious. He would give her half even if it's just a roast sweet potato. [laugh] Younger generations are early-maturing…*

Most interviewees, like Jiuzhe, Lavender, Ping Lu from Linyi, or Rongrong from Houma, mentioned that the youngest age for relationships that they could accept was the age at which they had had their first relationship. However, Xiaoxiao Wan from Linyi could accept an early relationship in junior high school although she had her first when she was at university. When discussing this, Xiaoxiao Wan brought up the topic of early relationships among the younger generation and showed her tolerance. Later in the conversation, when we took up intimacy in an early relationship, she gave examples of intimacy among the post-millennium generation.

*Guanlan:…so if it's in the same setting, and the kind of intimacy you could accept in early relationships in junior high which you said you could understand. What step could you accept? Holding hands? Hugging? Kissing? Or could you accept all sorts of intimacy?*

*Xiaoxiao Wan: I think at the beginning...anyway, I think you shouldn't be too intimate before getting married.*

[38] 过家家(guo jia jia) is a game among children when they imitate adult life. When playing, children take the part of 'father', 'mother', 'brother' or 'sister' and do all kinds of housework.

*Guanlan: To be straightforward, this means not to have sex?*

*Xiaoxiao Wan: Yes yes yes, anyway I can't accept this and like…I'm fine with all the rest.*

*……*

*Guanlan: Many of the young generation go to 开房*[39]*(*kai fang*) these days and…*

*Xiaoxiao Wan: Yes! It's true and this happens a lot in No.9 Middle School.*

*Guanlan: Is No.9 Middle School a junior high school?*

*Xiaoxiao Wan: Yes and it's my mother's school and she teaches there.*

*Guanlan: You said a lot. Do you mean a lot of students go to* kai fang*?*

*Xiaoxiao Wan: Yes, a lot. Younger generations are [sigh]...that time I went to...there is a milk tea shop near No.9 Middle School and I went to buy some milk tea and I heard the owner say those junior high school students are doing much more than we can imagine [sigh]…*

Xiaoxiao Wan did not clearly show her attitude towards the young generation's intimacy, but from the two sighs in this conversation I could perceive that she did not accept the younger generation's behaviour of *kai fang*. The action of *kai fang* is similar to getting a room in a love hotel, but slightly different. A love hotel is a Japanese-oriented term and, as its name implies, it is a by-the-hour hotel mainly for customers to fulfil their sexual needs. The basic operation of love hotels is an affordable love place that is rented by the hour. As the concept of love hotel is not so popular in

[39] Literally 开房 (*kai fang*) means to get a room in a hotel, but its popular meaning these days is that couples who have sexual needs get a room in a hotel to address that need. Basically, *kai fang* is always accompanied by intercourse.

mainland China, *kai fang* here means to get a room in a hotel either paid by the hour or staying overnight, but by whatever method, the main focus is on carnal pleasure. Clients of love hotels vary from married and unmarried couples to prostitution. The young couples mentioned by Xiaoxiao may simply be seeking a place to experience sexual encounters, while married couples may be finding a discreet location, and married couples may find that love hotels provide something 'out of the ordinary' and at the same time help to provide legitimacy for the love-hotel industry (Basil, 2008).

Jiuzhe, who stated that he is very traditional, is also an exception among the interviewees in refusing to show tolerance towards the younger generation.

> *Guanlan: I don't think you'll approve of* zao lian*, as you said that someone needs to wait till he/she has a stable job or economic basis to have a …*
>
> *Jiuzhe: Yes, yes, that's true. That's true. I don't approve.*
>
> *……*
>
> *Guanlan: What do you think when you see teenagers hugging and kissing these days?*
>
> *Jiuzhe:* Kan bu zhong *(I don't agree with their behaviour and would not do this myself). I* kan bu zhong*, truly* kan bu zhong. *I think...um...(in this situation) boys and girls should each take 50% of the responsibility. First, girls should have self-respect, right? People say that in ancient time women should do this, this and this... and a woman couldn't even meet her future husband before they got married. I think even now we don't need to do it like that, but you should...if it can't be forbidden…um...you can date...you can be with him, but you should have a bottom line. You need to keep the bottom line.*

Jiuzhe, from Linyi, was the only interviewee who was not forgiving on issues of early relationships among the younger generation, but he gave way by saying ‘keep the bottom line’ which I took to mean that he could accept an early relationship with difficulty as long as they did not have intercourse.

On the topics of past romance and early relationships, school stages—primary school, junior high school and senior high school—were frequently used by both the interviewees and me. No one gave an exact age, even when I asked them what age they think is appropriate for an early relationship. This is probably because most Chinese teenagers’ lives are filled with school study, and school stages composed their youth memories. This situation is not exclusively China related; in narratives of self, especially youth life, school stages are frequently applied as turning points, because young people tend to map their lives through institutional stages (Jackson, 2010).

The generational changes can also be identified in parents’ love stories and marriages. While the sexual attitudes of the post-millennium generation seem to be more ‘liberal’ than those of ‘80s and ‘90s generation, the marriages of most of our parents’ generation took a more traditional form. One interesting aspect of the topic of parents is that most parents in both Linyi and Houma either met on blind dates or were married through arrangements made by their parents, while most parents in Chongqing married because of freely-chosen love. Lingjun’s parents from Linyi were the only exception among all the blind-date marriages in those two cities, and both her parents had obtained a bachelor’s degree. Both Qing Jia from Houma and Wei Zhao from Linyi certainly thought that marriages in their parents’ generation were all arranged or introduced. When asked about his parents’ marriage, Qing Jia even told me in an indifferent tone that “*This...should be...their generation were are all introduced (marriage)*”.

Another difference between interviewees in Linyi and Houma on the one hand and Chongqing on the other is that interviewees in Chongqing could tell the whole love story of their parents while some in Linyi and Houma were just guessing about how their parents married. M from Chongqing told me his parents' love story:

*M: It was in the factory, at that time it was a state-owned factory... in the factory...and... I remember that my father attended one of the performances and he played guitar, and my mother knew him from being one of his audience... and... I remember after that they took the same bus together... my father knew her as well. And they... thought each other was good and they...*

*Guanlan: Fell in love?*

*M: Yes.*

Yoshiko was the only interviewee in Chongqing who mentioned that her parents were introduced by another person, but she still thought that they got married because of love.

*Yoshiko: (They were) introduced by others. They fell in love.*

The marriage of Lavender's parents was an extreme case among all the introduced and arranged marriages. Her parents' marriage was arranged by her grandfather during a mealtime when her grandfather was drunk. While some interviewees, like Qing Jia from Houma and Wei Zhao from Linyi, certainly guessed that their parents' marriages had been introduced or blind date marriages, Xiaolü from Chongqing considered arranged marriage or blind-date marriage in her parents' generation to be unbelievable. She commented: '*this only happened in feudal society*'. Knowing about parents' love stories suggests a relatively open communication about love issues

between parents and children in more developed cities.

With the opening up to the rest of the world and rapid economic development in China, a gradual relaxation of the very strict sexual morality in their parents' generation happened among young adults. A generational change of intimate lives in China could be reflected in participants' narratives of and attitudes on different generations. Most marriages of their parents' generation were arranged, and the first date of young adults was expected to happen in a relatively late age, but they were not surprised by sexual behaviours, including intercourse, occurring among younger post-millennium generation. However, my participants' tolerant attitude towards the sexual conduct of post-millennium generation may also be seen as a reflection of the culture of conformity. Being open-minded about younger liberal others, while behaving conservatively in sexual matters is a classic pattern in the culture of conformity. Young adults' ability to be more tolerant of non-conformity elsewhere was also evident from their reaction to BFSU students' advertising of Our Vaginas, Ourselves which is an adaption of The Vagina Monologues. I used BFSU students' advertising photo campaign as a tool to test interviewees' opinions and responses to liberal morals. I did so because the BFSU students' photo campaign seems to be an exception to the culture of conformity in China. Thus, before I go on to my interviewees' reactions to this non-conformist behaviour, I need to explain more about *The Vagina Monologues* and BFSU students' photo campaign.

**The Vagina Monologues: an exception to the culture of conformity**

*The Vagina Monologues* (TVM) was published in 1998 by a radical feminist and playwright, Eve Ensler. It explores women's bodies and sexuality, disclosing vagina stories which are not frequently told, makes people think

how women have been both physically and emotionally abused, and asks what makes women neglect their vaginas, such an important part of their bodies. At the same time, it exposes the unequal power relations between men and women, which was mentioned many times by my participants. Although feminism had existed for more than a hundred years before the publication of TVM, this work still caused shock and sensation. This indicated the difficulty to alter people's attitudes towards women's bodies and sexuality (Yu, 2015). To widen the influence of TVM, it was translated into several languages, and Ensler allows non-commercial stagings of TVM and a few limited changes to make the play suitable for local situations. However, "so possessive of her creation, and so ethnocentric is this playwright that Ensler is unwilling to allow revisions that will translate some very Western concepts (rape, incest, dating, S&M) into culturally relevant material for the foreign countries TVM is performed in" (Reiser, 2010, p.3). At the same time, strict V-Day rules have been set for groups participating in campaigns: the title must remain unchanged[40]; they must only perform specific monologues in a settled order; they cannot add monologues, reword or reorganise any of the monologues; they cannot insert more explanatory text into the play, even if such text arises from the published version or previous V-Day seasons (Yu, 2015; Cheng, 2004). It is interesting to notice that, even though Ensler travelled the world to interview over 200 women, they were mainly from the United States. It is unconvincing to claim that the vagina-related experiences of 200 women, most of whom are American, might stand for women as diverse in origin as Europe, Asia or South Africa. "Different political, social, and economic contexts for women result in differing relationships to their vaginas" (Reiser, 2010, p.3). Cheng (2004, p.3) argues "If bodies and sexualities are socially constructed, there must also be significant differences between the experiences of American women and, as is the case here, their counterparts"

[40] However, both the play performed by the BCome Group and the BFSU students changed the title.

in other cultures. Hong Kong scholar Sea Ling Cheng anticipated the impossibility of communicating the mostly American-based ideas in TVM to a Hong Kong audience when she attempted to produce the play in Hong Kong. At the same time, she was also frustrated by Ensler's mandate against altering any of the content of the play. As Cheng never received a response to her inquiries from Ensler, she conducted interviews and produced a culturally appropriate adaptation called Little Sisters. Creating culturally appropriate products has become a recent phenomenon in other cultures and communities: in Holland, The Veiled Monologues, which spoke to the experiences of Dutch Muslim women; and Our Vaginas, Ourselves by BCome Group in Mainland China. As a result of its unalterable form and lack of diversity, TVM has been re-arranged many time. Yet, there are no monologues dealing with bisexual or disabled women or menopause (Reiser, 2010). TVM also demonstrates an ignorance of abortion, which is fairly important in social and sexual context. Writing a monologue about abortion would have been too controversial for Ensler and would offend the Christian majority in a way that rape and incest do not; while exposing the inequalities surrounding issues like sex work would probably divide her audience and decrease profits (Reiser, 2010). With only one monologue about a lesbian and one optionally performed monologue about a transsexual, the play was classified as 'unapologetically heteronomative' by Reiser (2010, p.3). "The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could" is a monologue about a lesbian woman who drew the scene of how she discovered her sexual orientation from memory. In that monologue, a black child from a broken family is raped by a friend of her father. This monologue contains the racist stereotypes that incomplete family, rape, incest and sexual violence are African-American issues. Another feature worth noticing is that most performers and audiences in the Western productions of TVM were young, white, and heterosexual. "This is probably because the play is tailored to their interests and identities" (Reiser,

2010, p.4). At the end of her article on *The Vagina Monologues*, Cheng (2004) states: 'It is only when the core recognizes the possibility of learning from the periphery that there could be a more mutually beneficial partnership' (Cheng, 2004, p.333). Meanwhile, campus and public productions, such as the BFSU students' vagina monologues and Our Vaginas, Ourselves by BCome Group in Mainland China, in which local monologues are often added, have revealed that the restrictions of the V-Day rules barely work. If TVM could become a cross-cultural site with a less restricted mandate, it would generate more ideas about sexuality and women's rights.

Even people in Western countries, who seem to be more liberal about feminism and sexuality, still witnessed resistance to TVM, and its translation and adaption in a Chinese context is potentially much more difficult. Even though TVM is not laboratorial in language, words and phrases that highlight the female body and sexuality still produce shock among Chinese readers and audiences. Jeffreys (2006) reveals that sexuality has been liberated and repressed by turns in Chinese history. The literary work 金瓶梅 (*The Plum in the Golden Vase*) from the Ming Dynasty, which contains very vivid sexual descriptions, is a reflection of the sexual liberalism at that time. Yet, the authorities during the Qing Dynasty perceived sex as threatening to the centralisation of authority and banned the representation of sex in literature and culture. Sexual matters remained taboo in the Maoist era, but in the Reform era situation began to change. Evans (1997) noted that, during the open policy in the 1980s, China diverted liberating conversations on sexual matters and the sexologist Pan Suiming declared that sex is no longer a taboo subject, but at the same time Pan admitted that it is still a relatively delicate and controversial topic (Sigley and Jeffreys, 1999). Additionally, various slang and area-specific terms for the vagina and graphic descriptions of sexuality make it very

challenging for translators from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Yu, 2015). Among the three different Chinese translations of TVM, the very first one was published in 2000 in Taiwan by Chen Cangduo. However, Chen's literal translation style attracted much criticism in Taiwan. His translated works are always criticised for being only faithful without being beautiful (Yu, 2015). The other two Chinese translations were produced in Mainland China, both for the purpose of staging. Changes were made to the one translated by Yu Rongjun to make it suitable for the stage and for the circumstances in China. He removed sections that are not applicable or necessary for the stage, such as the foreword, acknowledgements, and information about the author and V-Day movement[41]. Similar to Yu Rongjun's translation, Ai Xiaoming's translation omitted some unsuitable monologues as well as the foreword and acknowledgements, but she kept the information about the author and V-Day movement. In addition, she presented the play in a more Chinese way and produced a documentary which recorded their purpose and efforts on the production. She distributed many DVDs to universities in the Chinese Mainland and Hong Kong, which made her translation the most influential one in China.

Our Vaginas, Ourselves in BFSU, as a non-commercial action, was inspired by a BCome Group play of Our Vaginas, Ourselves. Our Vaginas, Ourselves by the BCome Group was first presented on the stage in 2013. It was based on the frame of TVM and reorganised with additional local monologues, adapting and localising TVM in China. Hence the strict V-Day rules do not really work. All the heated discussion started when the Gender Studies Group at BFSU posted 17 photos (Figures 3-7, below) of students' statement about their vaginas on a social media platform called Renren as a promotion of the play Our Vaginas, Ourselves at BFSU. These photographs were used as a tool to test interviewees' views and reactions to liberal others by explaining, showing and asking interviewees' views

[41] V-Day, February 14, is a global activist movement aiming to end violence against women and girls started by author, playwright and activist Eve Ensler.

on what the BFSU students did. It is intriguing to notice that since then all the reports and debates have focused on those photos rather than the play. Unlike most of the press, Souhu focused more on discussing TVM and analysed the reasons for such a hot debate:

> *Student groups in both Guangzhou and Wuhan have performed this play, but none of them has had such an impact as BFSU. This is mainly because BFSU students posted their feminist advocacy on the internet in the eye-catching form of photographs.*


**Figure 3 It says on the white board 'My vagina says: I want! I want it!'**


**Figure 4 It says on the white board 'My vagina says: I'll allow people who I want to enter**


**Figure 5 It says on the white board 'My vagina says: don't treat me as a sensitive word'.**


**Figure 6 It says on the white board 'My vagina says: first night is bullshit!'**


**Figure 7**
**Source of photos: http://page.renren.com/601824180?checked=true**

The publishing of the BFSU students' photos on the internet led to heated debates. An outsider who had not participated in the photo shoots of *The Vagina Monologues* might easily hold views of either approval or disapproval. Approval does not necessarily mean being willing to take part in such a photo session.

**Situating the self in opposition to modern and liberal/liberated others**

When commenting as outsiders, most of my participants considered the BFSU students' photo campaign to have more positive effects than negative, and the rest had neutral opinions towards it, except Qing Jia, who considered their actions to be radical. Among all the interviewees, Qing Jia, Xuepiaoguo and Yoshiko were the only three who already knew about the BFSU students' photo campaign, and Qing Jia gave a more in-depth analysis compared to other participants. Qing Jia clarified his point of view in detail and explained why he considered the BFSU students' actions to be radical and said that he was taking a negative attitude when saying radical:

> *Qing Jia: I know this, but when I noticed it there were many criticisms online… at that time I remember clearly that there's this article which said that the feminist movement in China was actually a modification or we can say even a totally different thing from the feminism in Western culture. People have changed the nature of feminism here. For me, I think when we mention a word or a phrase (like vagina) there will be much more attention paid to it in China than in Western countries. I think it would be normal for us to say a word like vagina in Western countries, but here in China it'll be a hot issue with public concerns. I think the original purpose of people who advocated this kind of activity was not just leading to a hot discussion on the internet. However, now the situation is that this activity became a media hype. It was just those*

*media that wanted to benefit from it that were working on it, making all kinds of eye-catching news. It now has nothing to do with the feminism advocated by the BFSU.*

*Guanlan: You mean it was just media hype?*

*Qing Jia: Yes… I don't think it should be presented in the form of photos… if it was in this form it was like just giving you a strong visual impact and impairing your capacity for rational thought. If they do it in this way they're just like other cynical youth and what they want is only eye-catching.*

*Guanlan: Do you mean that they deviated from the normal processes of the feminist movement in China? Before that, feminism in China was developing slowly but regularly, but they suddenly jumped up to the next step?*

*Qing Jia: Yes, it feels like they destroyed the normal development process of feminism in China. Whatever they (Chinese feminists) do, they need a certain process. However, what they did was like… er… let me make a metaphor: like in a fiction film, one person has purposely been made to grow up rapidly, but he/she is not psychologically mature at all. This means his/her psychological age does not fits his/her biological age. This would make him/her devastated.*

By saying this, Qing Jia indicated that what the BFSU students did does not fit the actual situation in China. Qing Jia was not the only person who considered that feminism in China has deteriorated. Many comments on social media criticised feminism in China as only mimicking the Western mode without considering Chinese circumstances. Articles on Qiluwang, the official internet press of Shandong province, disapproved of what the BFSU students did:

*Chinese culture is different from Western culture, there is a distance between using sexual liberation in research on feminist theory and actual respect for women. Moreover, using the photos of women's statements about vaginas as a promotion of Our Vaginas, Ourselves gives people an impression of speculation. … the promotion of relevant art and culture by professionals should pay more attention to how to make it 接地气 (*jie di qi*, down to earth), how to make the public accept it… otherwise, it would easily create the misconception of trying to fool and insult the public.*

Just as TVM needs to be adapted to fit into different cultures, feminism from Western cultures cannot be simply borrowed and applied in China. Yinhe Li's (2006) discussion of the differences between Western and Chinese feminism further argues that Western feminism does not necessarily fit Chinese culture: in Western countries, women are fighting for their rights from the bottom of society, while in China women's rights were given by the government at the beginning of the feminist movement. People who only want to take advantage of feminism without taking any responsibility are called fake feminists in China. A post in Tianya BBS theoretically analysed why the feminism commonly mentioned on the internet by Chinese women is fake feminism. It was mentioned in the post that the nature of fake Chinese feminism is to reap without sowing (*不劳而获 bu lao er huo*).

In contrast to Qing Jia, who did not agree with the BFSU students' activity, Xuepiaoguo and Xiaoyu Liu showed support for the BFSU students' photo campaign, but they regarded it as a health issue rather than a feminist topic:

*Xiaoyu Liu: As China is developing and our minds are opening up, I think this topic could be discussed... China lacks children's sex education, so when it's needed it should be mentioned. Besides, from*

*the perspective of health and physiology we should give more attention [to this topic].*

Commenting on the BFSU students' photo campaign as a health issue rather than a political issue is a safe conformist option when opinions are needed. When answering socially or politically related questions, Chinese people tend to show submissive attitudes towards mainstream expectations (Huang & Pan, 2009). In a situation when mainstream opinions are unknown, some people prefer to choose a neutral position, which would normally protect them from being judged by the mainstream. Lavender presented a neutral attitude by saying '*it has its virtues and its faults at the same time. You can neither deny nor accept the whole thing and I stand in a neutral position here*' without any further explanation. Xuepiaoguo similarly commented '*everything has its positive and negative side*'.

Meanwhile, Xiaoxiao's discussion of the vagina monologues stood out from those supportive comments as she discussed it from a totally different perspective, which paid attention to the BFSU students' educational background:

*Guanlan: How do you judge the students involved in The Vagina Monologues?*

*Xiaoxiao: Like this, if they are highly educated, I would think they are trying to release some kind of signal and I would consider it acceptable (and think) probably we don't need to be that conservative. However, if the same situation happened among people who are not well-educated, like a restaurant waiter or a foot massager, among this group of people, I'd consider it to be vulgar and think how could she do this? However, if they were intellectual with high scores in school, it would be normal and they are just speaking out their opinions fearlessly. It really*

*depends on the groups.*

Sexual liberalism among the highly educated was acceptable to Xiaoxiao which reflected *suzhi* which is promoted by Chinese government. The Chinese governmental authorities are deeply implicated in many areas to create a harmonious society, and public discussion of both sexual behaviour and sexual discourse are included in those areas. At a seminar organised in 2005 in Beijing, community activists discussed harmonious communities. Shu Kexin was one of those activists and he accepted that *suzhi*[42] (quality) is a precondition for the creation of a rational, responsible and harmonious society and only those who possess *高素质* (high *suzhi*) are cable of the rationality and responsibility necessary for civilised coexistence. At the same time, he stated that rational behaviour requires a sufficient level of education and civilisation. "Only those with both wisdom and abilities can act rationally" (Tomba, 2009, p.604). He also argued that peasants are not rational because they haven't received an acceptable level of education and civic education. Xiaoxiao Wan's family's educational background was comparatively higher than those of the other interviewees. Both of her parents have a bachelor's degree and her mother pursued a master's degree while she was working. Her grandfather also received a university education, which was rare at that time, while her grandmother was a mathematics teacher in a primary school. Perhaps it was her family background that led to her positive attitude towards people who are well-educated, and she might possess the same opinion on *suzhi* and education as Shu Kexin.

Although Jing Kou held a neutral view towards the BFSU students' photo campaign, she was among those who said she would agree to take photos similar if asked. Interestingly, Jing Kou explained that she would only agree

[42] Tomba (2009) argues that *suzhi* is essential to the middle class in China.

to take photos if asked as a favour for a friend, but she also mentioned that these photos should be used for the purposes of academic research and she thought the BFSU students' actions might be related to things they had learned, which means that education is one of the factors that influence people's judgement:

*Guanlan: Do you think these photos might reflect that these girls...*

*Jing Kou: I don't think so. This might be related to things she [they] contact, things she [they] learned...*

*Guanlan: Then would you take this kind of photo if you were asked to?*

*Jing Kou: I might be too shy to do so [laugh]. It would be too strange to me, and that's why I said they were very 豁得出去的 (*huo de chu qu de*)*[43].

*Guanlan: So you wouldn't shoot these photos, would you?*

*Jing Kou: Er... I would feel uncomfortable, but if it was a favour for friends and it was for ...like... academia or someone's thesis I might agree. It's just, I would still feel uncomfortable.*

When people's actual behaviour does not coincide with their submissive attitudes towards the mainstream, the culture of conformity applies (Huang & Pan, 2009). While most participants backed the BFSU students' photo campaign, few of them were willing to take similar photos with statements of their vaginas. No matter whether their supportive opinion is a submission to the mainstream value or not, their views are not in accordance with their actual performance. While looking at the photos (BFSU), Ruirui showed her disapproval by using a modal particle, but showed approval when asked:

[43] 豁得出去的 (*huo de chu qu de*) means that people take the risk of doing something regardless of judgements from others.

*Ruirui: 'I need freedom' (reading words from a photo) 我去 (wo qu)[44]..... okay, I think women's liberation... that's right. I think that is good and nothing is wrong. I think Chinese ideology is imprisoned. If you are a man you can do anything...*

*Guanlan: If you were asked to write something and take photos, would you agree to do so?*

*Ruirui: I wouldn't [laugh]. I don't criticise them. I can accept anything, but I wouldn't do it myself.*

From the context and Ruirui's mood, I could tell that she disliked these photos, but she stated agreement towards the BFSU students' actions. Ruirui's reaction might be a result of the culture of conformity and was to protect herself from any potential risk or judgement. Amongst people who consider the BFSU students' vagina monologues to be a positive activity, Rongrong was the only one who agreed to have her statement about vagina shot. Others, like Jing Kou, said they would agree only in certain circumstances and Xuepiaoguo would not care whether his future spouse took these kinds of photos. Both Jiuzhe and Xiaomeng have a medical background and have relatively open attitudes towards sex education and sexual organs. Even so, only Xiaomeng said that she would consider taking photos of her vagina statement.

Agreeing with someone is different from doing it yourself was the common view among people who were not willing to take photos. In addition, when I asked Yoshiko if she would agree to take a photo, she thought I was asking her to take nude photos. Although Yoshiko explained that her interest in taking photos had led her to consider it in that way, the tight relation between the BFSU students' photos and sexualised bodies can still be understood:

[44]我去 (*wo qu*) is a modal particle which shows a strong mood like surprise or shock. It could reflect many moods, but most of the time it means disapproval and disdain.

*Guanlan: Would you agree if you were asked to take photos?*

*Yoshiko: Nude photos? [laugh] I'm interested in photography, so when you say take a photo I think of sacrificing for art and taking some nude photos. Er...Can I write anything I like [as my own vagina monologues]?*

*Guanlan: Yes you can.*

*Yoshiko: Er...I might still not agree.*

Young Chinese can hold positive views on liberal sexual morals of 'others' at the same time maintain their conservative moral attitudes towards their own sexual practices. These two perspectives may seem to be contradictory, but they can be true simultaneously. Young people's neutral or supportive reaction to BFSU students' photo campaign is largely an evidence of conforming to what is expected from them which is to be liberal in current times. Sexual freedom is the modern trend and with the pressure of performing liberalism and not being judged, some interviewees chose to conform to the mainstream expectation by supporting liberal 'others'. However, when it came to being involved in this liberal trend, young Chinese retained their conservative 'self', which reflected the way they chose to present themselves.

**Summary**

Despite the fact that China has come a long way, from arranged marriages to freely chosen love marriages, public attitudes towards love and relationships remain relatively conservative. Additionally, young adults in China are exposed to the pressures of socialist morality as well as the double standard of morality from their peers. This dilemma leads young Chinese people to pursue love and enjoy more than one relationship, albeit concealing some of their past relationships to avoid being judged and to

appear morally decent. Moreover, to cope with the tensions between a sexualised society and socialist morality, to perform ideal gender roles, and to display decent morality, the culture of conformity was applied by young adults.

Even in the age of arranged marriages, in participants' parents' generation, the situation varied in cities with different levels of economic development. Most parents in Chongqing, which has the most highly developed economy among my three research sites, married as a result of love; meanwhile, blind dates and parents' arrangement were assumed to be the major marriage form among parents in both Linyi and Houma. Although all of these seem to show that public concern about love, relationships and intimacy is conservative, most interviewees were very tolerant as outsiders towards early relationships and intimacy for the post-millennium generation. However, at the same time, they were backward-looking when discussing their own early relationships. All of these issues may illustrate generational changes from a conservative parents' generation to the 'liberal' post-millennium generation.

Although many people conformed to mainstream expectations when sex-related issues were discussed, the play Our Vaginas, Ourselves adapted from TVM at BFSU was an exception to the culture of conformity. Young adults reacted in a tolerant and even positive way when commenting as outsiders on the BFSU students' vagina monologues. Yet, when thinking about becoming involved, most of them showed negative attitudes and rejected the idea. Young Chinese people's negotiation between the relatively traditional self and modern liberal others further demonstrates the strain between modern society and traditional gender-role expectations. Young people's contradictory reactions in the discussion of BFSU students' photo campaign reveals that the supposed 'sexual revolution' in China is taking place within a culture of conformity. With the knowledge that sexual liberty

is advocated in the western world as a positive trend, young Chinese at the same time are surrounded by peers who are relatively conservative in sexual conduct. Facing the dilemma between being judged as 'feudal' by liberal others and being labelled as 'licentious' by the conservative older generations in China, young Chinese applied the double expression of conformity in sexual related issues. As a result of the culture of conformity, sexuality studies carried in China might be affected by participants' assumption of mainstream expectation and might further lead to unfaithful understanding of the Chinese sexual landscape.

# Chapter 7

## Conclusion

To reveal the sexual attitudes of young adults in urban China, this thesis has investigated young adults' sexual lives, including their attitudes towards premarital sex, sex education and spousal choice. By using a qualitative approach centred on individual lives, I collected the standpoints of 20 young adults, ten male and ten female, on their intimate lives and on the BFSU students' photo campaign. In addition, opinions on the definition of virginity from two focus group discussions were gathered. Although conducted in three cities with different levels of economic development, all the participants' views on sex-related issues were generally conservative. My findings do not relate to all urban young Chinese, but they may reflect young people's sexual opinions in less developed cities. Studies on gender and sexuality could develop themes on many aspects, but according to my research question and collected data, several themes were extracted from participants' portraits of romantic and sexual lives, and ran through this thesis. These themes cover: the conflict between socialist morality and the sexualised society, differentiated gender roles when it came to spousal choice, a double standard on past sexual experience, and the pressure young adults experienced to conform to mainstream expectations. All these themes provide evidence of the existence of tensions between change and continuity in the Reform era. Moreover, all these together bring further insight into the idea of sexual revolution in China, the discussion of the completion of it and the cultural background of it.

Despite the promotion of gender equality, women's rights and the policy of opening up in China, the sexual attitudes of young adults in my research have remained conservative and their knowledge of sex from school education was confined to information about puberty. As well as the lack of comprehensive sex

education at school, interviewees also experienced silence about sex education at home. Parents of male interviewees scarcely touched upon the topic of sex and rarely placed any restrictions on their intimate lives, whereas many female interviewees received strict prohibitions on premarital sex from their parents and a few of them were reminded about contraception by their parents. Although individual desire and pleasure were absent from sex education both at school and at home, it cannot be assumed that they are not present in young adults' choice of partner and marriage. Conducted in Shanghai among young women, Zarafonetis's (2014) research noted a non-appearance of individual desire and pleasure in respondents' narrative of sex, partner choice and marriage. Hence, she contended, "this lack of desire was part of the general privileging of male heterosexuality and the limited sexual autonomy available to women in the reform period" (Zarafonetis, 2014, p.228). Nonetheless, participants of both genders in my study noted sexual pleasure in their narratives of their expectations about future spouses. This discrepancy between my findings and Zarafonetis's may be a result of my specific focus on past sexual experience when future spouses were discussed.

The 'harmonious society' and socialist morality demand the removal of sources of underlying conflict and emphasise individual behaviour, including self-restraint, self-improvement, and responsibility. The conservative governmental attitude towards sex, together with the silence around sex education both at school and at home, clearly reveal that among my participants sex continues to be regarded as a taboo and a personal topic. At the same time, the consumption of sexual services and the phenomenon of keeping mistresses demonstrate a change in the sexual climate in China and show a direct clash with socialist morality and agenda. Young adults thus need to face the contradiction between socialist morality and a changing sexual climate.

The tension between continuity and change, and the conflict between conservative and liberal attitudes were perceptible in young adults' responses.

After examining young adults' perceptions and definitions of virginity, it is obvious that their sexual conceptions are largely framed by ideas of biological difference. In addition to this continuing biologically determined gender ideology, participants held a double standard of morality about past sexual experience. As both genders were studied in my research, it can be seen that the sexual double standard was clearly expressed by both men and women. A prerogative of male sexual experience was articulated by respondents. While men's past sexual experiences were perceived neutrally or even positively by female respondents, the past sexual experiences of young women were not favoured or were even viewed as negative. This finding indicates that the traditional scripts of the sexual double standard, in which men are expected to be sexually experienced and women are not, may still exist.

Despite the changing sexual climate and some participants' endorsement of premarital sex, most young adults in my study held quite traditional views on premarital sex. There was still a linkage between sex and marriage among participants. A marriage plan or a committed future was still a precondition for sex for most female respondents and some male respondents , while the very situational and personal term 'feeling' was employed by many young men in the discourse of sex. Although only a few young men in my research insisted on having a virgin bride, most young men and women viewed virginity as a good point for women. According to my data, the commodification of female virginity was evident in both genders: young women positioned themselves as objects of young men's sexual consumption and female virginity was compared to a cup by a young man in the interview. Young women were also perceived as responsible for the negotiation of sexual encounters and were assumed to take responsibility for the damage to their reputation.

Alongside the negotiation of premarital sex and past sexual experience, traditional gender-role expectations were also found in the discussion of spousal choice. There seems to be a re-emergence of the discourse of 'women returning

home' in Reform China. The virtuous wife who can spend more time at home than pursuing her career was preferred by a few male interviewees. Moreover, feminine beauty as well as nurturing ability were other favoured traits of ideal wifehood. Traditional gender-role expectations were also expressed by young women in their narratives of the ideal husband. Responsibility, a wealthy family background and future potential in his career continued to be desirable features of perfect manhood in the context of family in my interviews. These continuing cultural expectations in spousal choice reinforced the marriage norm and further affected the wider construction of gender.

Despite these continuing traditional gender expectations, young adults today are facing more choices and opportunities in the relationship and marriage market than any previous generation. When it comes to their personal lives, young adults are confronted with conflict between modern others and conservative selves. Meanwhile, they are facing pressure to conform to traditional gender roles in order to display decent morality. When attitudes to marriage and premarital sex were mentioned in the interview for the first time, some participants chose to conform to mainstream expectations in order to avoid being judged. However, later in the conversation, different points of view from their attitudes at the beginning were revealed. The culture of conformity is closely related to Confucianism and the Chinese idea of 'face'. The performing of the culture of conformity may reflect the revival of Confucianism. The frequent references to *da huan jing* (wider social contexts) and young adults' compliance with *da huan jing* also demonstrate the continuing influence of Confucianism in everyday life. The choices that the Reform era brings, together with the remnants of Confucianism, led to pressure and a series of contradictions for young women. To comply with *da huan jing*, display decent morality and respectable womanhood, many young women concealed or were vague about their past intimate lives in their narratives of past love stories.

Generational change in reform China has been recorded by researchers like

Farrer (2002) and Zarafonestis (2014), and it is also evident in my respondents' attitudes to intimate relationships. From participants' point of view, entering college seemed to be a suitable starting point for dating. Dating, especially relationships involving sexual behaviours before college were considered irresponsible and dangerous, and even casual dating was viewed as inappropriate. Yet, young adults in my study showed more tolerance towards the sexual behaviour of the younger generation than that of their peer group. At the same time, descriptions of their parents' love story and marriage revealed a conservative sexual climate among their parents' generation. Their narrative and opinions can be seen as a sign of generational change and different generational expectations. In addition to that, my data also suggested an economic influence on young adults' intimate lives. Young adults in my study who lived in the city of Chongqing, which is most economically developed among three research cites, generally gained more knowledge from their school based sex education, tended expect sexual pleasure, and were less affected by the culture of conformity than young adults who lived in the smaller cities of Linyi and Houma.

While many young adults choose to conform to traditional gender-role expectations, young women at BFSU showed their 'rebellious' attitudes to it by loudly declaring their feminist standpoints. Although these women received a great deal of criticism on the internet, most of my participants showed a supportive attitudes towards the BFSU students' feminist stance. Discussions showed that their approving reaction may be partly due to the educational background of those BFSU women. Highly educated young women taking photographs with a sex-related message was considered liberal and a promotion of feminism rather than vulgar. However, showing support when commenting does not equate with carrying out the same actions or becoming involved. Nearly all of my participants rejected the idea of taking the same kind of photos as the BFSU students did. Only a few students agreed that they would take pictures like the BFSU students did if they were asked, but they had no idea about what to

write to support feminism. This contrast between the attitudes of being an outsider and an insider reflected participants' struggle to situate themselves in opposition to modern and liberated others. Interviewees' conflicting reactions again showed their conforming to the mainstream when sexual related issues were discussed. However, mainstream expectations do not stay the same. In relatively small cities like Linyi and Houma, when premarital sex was first mentioned in the interview, the mainstream was believed to be traditionalism by interviewees. While later in the interview when the BFSU students' photo campaign was discussed, modern and liberal young people were assumed to be the mainstream. What remains unchanged was respondents' conformity to what they deemed to be.

Notwithstanding the fact that I have explored several themes on the topic of intimate lives in China, there are limitations to this study. Firstly, there was a time limitation. Although I carried out two sets of fieldwork in China and in the UK in the years 2014 and 2016, it was still not a long time in the field and four years of research is not long for an in-depth qualitative study. Moreover, despite the fact that I tried to collect diverse samples and conducted interviews in three cities with different levels of economic development and in different parts of China, my target population was special in that they had a relatively high educational background. In addition, my study was carried out among unmarried young adults who lived in urban area and, as a consequence, my sample cannot represent all Chinese young adults. Due to the great differences between urban and rural locations, future research may include samples of young adults in rural areas to do further comparative studies.

Another limitation can be attributed to my sampling approach. In spite of the fact that I avoided interviewing any friends, relatives, or other people with whom I have direct contact, my snowball sampling started from my personal networks. There were participants who were my husband's friends and relatives, and participants who were friends of a friend. All these connections might lead to

them concealing parts of their stories or certain attitudes in order to keep themselves respectable and to stay away from gossip in their circle of friends. This may result in the missing of some potential data, and research in the future could focus on finding better sampling methods. Moreover, to deeply investigate differentiated gender role I would also explore interviewees' own assumptions about their future spouses instead of merely asking parents' expectations of interviewees' future spouses,

Despite these limitations, my thesis presents an original and fresh perspective and contributes to expanding the current discourse of attitudes towards sex and sexuality in urban China. Most studies on sexuality in contemporary China have focused on socialist morality, spousal choice, premarital sex, and gender roles in the family (Zavoretti, 2017; Davis & Friedman, 2014; Wong, 2016; Zhao, 1989). Other research has centred on sex education in reform China (Aresu, 2009; Li et al., 2004; Watts, 2004). My thesis combines and examines all these components and themes as a whole. Although combining different themes and being different from the current literature, my research was built upon key studies of gender in China, including Farrer (2002; 2014), Evans (2008), and Jeffreys and Yu (2015). At the same time, my findings resonate with or contest these studies.

Firstly, several of my findings resonate with Zarafonetis's (2014) study of gender change and continuity in reform China. Both of our samples articulated a silence around sex education both at school and at home. However, while her findings demonstrated an absence of individual desire and pleasure in the discourses of sex, spousal choice and marriage, a few of my participants articulated their need for individual pleasure when discussing past sexual experience. What needs to be noticed is that, even when individual pleasure is mentioned on the topic of sexual experience and spousal choice, it is never a primary condition for their future spouses. Moreover, my participants' attitudes towards early relationships also indicate generational changes. In addition, my analysis contests Farrer's (2014) research on love, sex, and commitment in Shanghai. With Farrer's (2014)

findings proposing a delinking of sexual intimacy from marriage, one would even expect new cultural scripts of intimate lives in China. Probably due to my sampling in less economically developed cities than Shanghai, my data suggests that sex among young adults in China is still closely linked with marriage. Most young adults in my research still considered commitment or a common future as a prerequisite for premarital sex. As my study covered young Chinese lives at county level, prefectural level, and provincial level cites, it may represent more young adults than a study undertaken in Shanghai. And as my sample expressed relatively conservative attitudes, it may be considered as evidence of the continuing pull of traditional gender ideals in reform China. Based on my data, I agree with Wang (2017) that "sexual revolution in China is an unfinished project, because the revolution in sexual behaviour is not equal to a real sexual revolution based on human rights, sexual autonomy, and gender equality" (p.165). Finally, participants' conforming actions may suggest that the supposed 'sexual revolution' in China is happening within a culture of conformity. Future studies of Chinese sexual revolution may consider more about the culture of conformity and think more about how to reduce the effect of people's conformist attitudes and behaviours. Explorations of how to promote the sexual revolution in China, and how to equip people with more sexual autonomy and gender equality are needed.

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