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A Sociological Exploration of Intimate Relationships among Chinese International Students at the College of William and Mary

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A Sociological Exploration of Intimate Relationships among Chinese International Students at the College of William and Mary

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology Department from The College of William and Mary

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** .......................................................................................................................... 3

**INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................................................................... 4

**LITERATURE REVIEW** ........................................................................................................................... 6
  Governance of Gender and Sexuality in Socialist China ........................................................................... 6
  Social Changes in the Reform Era ........................................................................................................... 9
  An Ongoing Sexual Revolution ............................................................................................................. 11
  Sexual Revolution Complicated ............................................................................................................ 17
  The Emergence of a New Generation: Chinese Students Abroad ............................................................ 21

**METHODOLOGY** ................................................................................................................................... 29

**FINDINGS** ............................................................................................................................................... 44
  Chapter 1: Untangling the Myth of the Ideal Partner: Creating the Ideal Selves in Intimate Relationships .... 44
    Romantic communication through intellectuality ...................................................................................... 45
    Sanguan: Three fundamental values ........................................................................................................ 47
    Mutual support and independence/autonomy ........................................................................................... 49
  Chapter 2: Masculinity and Femininity: The Negotiation of Power Dynamics ........................................... 56
    The stories of gender egalitarianism: a consensus across genders ......................................................... 57
    Unequal power relations: Female experiences ......................................................................................... 61
    Unequal power relations: Male experiences ............................................................................................ 64
  Chapter 3: Constructing a new Sexual, Generational and National Identity ................................................. 68
    Rejecting chunü qingjie, embracing sexual freedom ................................................................................. 68
    Sexual freedom and autonomy: Instrumentality vs. pleasure ................................................................. 72
    Struggles within: sexual agency/autonomy and patriarchal upbringings ................................................. 74
  Chapter 4: Transgressions: Casual sexual relationship & Same-sex experience ......................................... 80
    Casual sexual relationships and the construction of sexual subjectivity .................................................. 82
    Same-sex experiences and sexual fluidity .................................................................................................. 85
  Chapter 5: Identity at crossroad: Navigating Multiple Borders ................................................................. 90
    The crucial role of study abroad experience ........................................................................................... 92
    Tension between identification and dis-identification ............................................................................ 95

**CONCLUSION** ....................................................................................................................................... 99

**REFERENCES** ........................................................................................................................................ 101

**APPENDIX A. RECUITMENT FORM** .................................................................................................... 105

**APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT FORM** ......................................................................................... 107

**APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW GUIDE** ....................................................................................................... 109

**APPENDIX D. POST-INTERVIEW SURVEY** .......................................................................................... 116
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INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, China underwent a series of fundamental structural changes, hoping to both recover from the traumatizing Cultural Revolution period and to modernize the society. The Chinese government decided to shift to a market economy, and established a set of policies that welcomed the influx of Western ideas and technologies. Along with the economic reform, an ongoing sexual revolution has taken place in Chinese society. Consistent with the new liberal market logic, the party-state relaxed its control over people’s gender expressions and sexuality. The influence of dominant Confucian ideas in the Chinese society also diminished. The Chinese young generation has therefore started to enjoy more sexual freedom and autonomy than their parental generation of the socialist era. As a result, the young generation has more agency in constructing and enacting new gender and sexual identities.

Among the Chinese young generation since the reform era, students attending colleges in foreign countries are a unique group to study. Today’s Chinese students abroad were mostly born in the 1990s, when the Chinese Economic Reform has reached its heyday. This post-1990s student group has enjoyed the boom of economy and information technology since their birth, and is the first generation to benefit from a free universal basic education in China. More importantly, these students were born in an era marked by its openness and increasing global communication in China. More than any prior generation, these Chinese international students are intensively subjected to globalization, in which they actively participate as global actors rather than merely experiencing the effects of globalization.

It is sociologically vital to study how these young Chinese students, under the influence of various cultural forces, reconfigure their ideals about gender and sexuality in their intimate relationships. Previous studies (Yan and Berliner 2011; 2013) have revealed that such process is
not simply adopting one set of cultural values and practices and rejecting the other. It is rather a more complicated, non-linear process which involves critical examinations of different cultural perspectives and practices, during which Chinese international students often experience the deconstruction and the reconstruction of self-identity.

Specifically, I have framed my research orientation around these broad questions: How do Chinese international students negotiate among various cultural forces to reformulate their own ideas about gender relations and sexual practices in intimate relationships? What are the dominant cultural resources that guide them in their romantic and sexual lives? In what manner do they translate their ideals regarding gender relations and sexuality into practices? How do they position themselves within the patriarchal or liberal discourse related to gender and sexuality? How might they reshape not only their gender and sexual identities, but also national and cultural identities when reconciling different cultural values?

In order to explore these questions, I conducted a qualitative research project. Backed with grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998), I used semi-structured, in-depth interviews in my study. The sample were drawn from the Chinese international student population at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, US. This study seeks to critically explore and deepen the understanding of the romantic lives of a significant segment of Chinese youth. These Chinese international students are not only important subjects of sociological research; they are also the strongest and most active force in shaping Chinese gender norms and sex cultures in the near future.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Governance of Gender and Sexuality in Socialist China

The sexual governance by the state was heavily influenced by the traditional Confucian ideas in Socialist China. Confucianism consists of many patriarchal ideologies regarding gender and sexuality. In Confucianism, sexuality is considered as a moral concern. Failure of controlling sexuality and the institutions associated with it, such as marriage and family, will lead to the potential moral corruption and instability in the society (Zarafonetis 2017). Influenced by traditional Confucian values, there existed a special form of patriarchy, that Kandiyoti (1988) refers as “classic patriarchy,” in Socialist Chinese society. Such classic patriarchy justifies the subordination of women to men, and of the young to the elderly in the name of filial piety. In addition, classic patriarchy constructed a set of double sexual standards for men and women in the Socialist China. Female sexuality was regarded as the standard in “measuring sexual behavior and morality in general” (Evans 1997:22). In another word, the corruption of female sexuality, such as promiscuity or loss of chastity, represents the demoralization of the whole society. As a result, female sexuality became a subject to strict regulations, while male sexuality was not bounded by the same requirements. For example, female virginity was a highly valued virtue and in fact a prerequisite for marriage.

It is ironic that although the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tried to dismantle the feudal social order, it preserved the Confucian ideas closely associated with feudalism. Combining Confucian ideas with party ideologies, the CCP practiced strict “moral control and intervention” on gender and sexuality in the Socialist China (Evans 1997:22). Throughout the Maoist and post-Mao era, the idea of collectivism and social solidarity was highly promoted by the CCP. Individual expressions of sex and love were therefore deemed as an unspeakable topic.
in Chinese society, as they were closely related to “bourgeois individualism” and are “detrimental to collective welfare” (Evans 1997:2). Instead, the only available materials on sex and love in the 1950s and 1960s merely focused on the official discourse, which was mostly dedicated to promoting the normative gender and sexual ideologies constructed by CCP (Evans 1997).

The Marriage Law in 1950 is an example of how the party-state constructed and promoted the ideal gender relations and sexuality in Socialist China, thus restricting and unifying individual expressions of sex and love. It established a set of normative, ideologically sound sexual behaviors, while condemning other “deviant” sexual conducts (Evans 1997). For instance, the Marriage Law in 1950 dismantled the feudal tradition of arranged marriage and polygamy, and made the heterosexual, monogamous marriage the only legitimate form of marriage, and sexual relation recognized by the state. In this way, as Evans (1997) argues, “marriage and sexual relations [became] virtually synonymous” (113).

Besides legitimizing normative sexual relationship, the CCP also legitimized the sexual difference between men and women in its official discourse. Consistent with patriarchal Confucian understandings of the gender roles, men were considered as the “breadwinner” in the family, while women were mostly viewed as the wife or mother confined in the domestic sphere. In addition, the CCP also adopted the traditional masculinity and femininity to its official discourse. In classic Chinese culture, there existed a binary between masculinity and femininity, which was known as the distinction between “yang” and “yin” (Evans 1997). The ideal masculinity/“yang” was associated with a set of traits such as being proactive, assertive, confident, courageous, etc. While ideal femininity/“ying” entailed being docile, submissive, and sexually passive. Masculinity and femininity also consisted of certain physical characteristics.
For example, masculinity entailed being physically tall and strong, while femininity was associated with youth, slenderness, and beauty. The harmony between “yin” and “yang,” or between masculinity and femininity, is not only important to the family, but was also crucial in maintaining the stability of the whole society. Therefore, the CCP set the normative standard for sexual relationship, gender roles, masculinity and femininity, and controlled Chinese people’s behaviors to conform to these ideal models, in order to achieve the harmony of the Chinese society.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the idea of conformity was elevated to an unprecedented level in the Chinese society. Besides the continuation of previous construction of the normative gender and sexual relations, the gender expression was now highly unified and even desexualized. For example, the choice of hairstyle and clothing was “coerced into a monotonous uniformity” (Evans 1997:2). Through removing the individual agency in practicing sexuality and expressing different gender identities, the CCP successfully created an almost “genderless” and “classless” socialist ideal of gender and sexuality within the Chinese society.

Such strict control on the discourse of gender and sexuality in Socialist China in fact reflects what Zhang (2015) refers to as “official Occidentalism” (90). Zhang (2015) argues that in Socialist China, gender relations were subjugated to class struggle, and the discourse of sexuality constructs a “socialist superiority [over] capitalist inferiority” (90). In unifying Chinese people’s gender expressions and sexuality, the CCP contrasted the socialist notion of gender and sexuality of the Chinese proletariats with that of the Western capitalist bourgeoisie’s. By promoting the former and denouncing the latter, the CCP fulfilled its goal of class struggle. Any sexual conducts or gender expressions that deviated from the heteronormative standard set by the state were associated with the Western capitalist individualism. Therefore, sexual minorities in
Socialist China were not only sexual outliers, but also political and class enemies as they challenged the CCP’s party ideologies. The suppression of people who do not conform to the normative gender expressions and sexual behaviors reflects the party’s political ideology against capitalism, individualism, and Western antagonists.

Social Changes in the Reform Era

Recovered from the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, China began one of its most important social transformations, namely the Chinese Economic Reform (gaigekaifang), in 1978. The Economic Reform introduced the market economy and a set of liberal economic ideas such as free choice and rational market into Chinese society. The government’s control and regulation of the national economy was therefore reduced to minimum compared to the highly centralized and collective socialist economy in Maoist and post-Mao era. Following such liberal market ideology, Chinese society has been through rapid changes in many realms, including the transformation of the discourse of sexuality. The state relaxed its control over sexuality during the reform era (Evans 1997; Zarafonetis 2017). Gender and sexuality were no longer governed to fit the unified socialist ideal set by the party-state, but rather became “an issue of debate and contestation, responsive to consumer interests and defying official attempts to regulate and control” (Evans 1997:9). Though party-state control and traditional Confucian values persisted in the reform era, the young generation had more agency in constructing a new sex culture (Farrer 2002).

Apart from these “inward” reform policies, the Chinese government also established an “outward” open-door policy, which allowed an influx of Western cultures and ideas. Since then, not only did China enter the global economy, the Chinese society was also increasingly
connected to the international community. Anthony Giddens (1991) argues that due to the high level of globalization and intensified international communication and mobility, many countries enter into a late modernity. He argues that under such late modernity, people have higher level of sexual freedom and intimacy. In addition, gender relations become more egalitarian, so women enjoy more equality within sexual relationships (Giddens 1992). Similarly, many scholars studying Chinese sexual modernization have also argued that it was the influence of the Western cultures and ideas that facilitated an ongoing sexual revolution which granted Chinese people more sexual freedom and autonomy in China since the reform era.

While Chinese society did embrace more sexual freedom and individual autonomy since the economic reform era, it seems problematic to attribute such sexual modernity to simply the influence of Western ideas and cultures. Both these scholars and Giddens fail to acknowledge that such modernization model is often Western-centric. They also fail to recognize the unique Chinese characteristics in modernization. Zarafonetis (2017) critiques that Giddens’ view of Western modernization is homogenous and universalized. For example, Chinese women were in fact encouraged and mobilized to work alongside their male counterparts in Maoist China, in order to speed up the process of Chinese socialist construction. Therefore, the Western standard of measuring gender equality and sexual freedom, such as women’s participation in the workforce, does not necessarily apply to the Chinese context.

Indeed, many scholars have questioned the validity of the traditional/modern binary framework when studying social transformations, since such opposition is often too simplistic to fully capture the intricate process. For instance, in her study of the Turkish rural migrants, Ozyegin (2000) argues that through practicing their own understanding and vision of “tradition” and “modernity,” these workers in fact created a new form of culture that does not fall into such
binary. Therefore, she raises the question of how to address both the “complexities of culture change,” and the significance of the traditional/modern dichotomy to people who are experiencing such cultural change (Ozyegin 2000:25).

Similarly, the sexual modernity in China is a complicated process that involves an ongoing negotiation between individual actors and institutional forces, and between traditional values and Western influences. There is no doubt that the Western influence has played a crucial role in the sexual revolution in Chinese society, but attributing such social change to a single factor undermines the contribution of other forces such as macro-level state power and micro-level individual agencies. Treating the sexual revolution in China as merely a tradition or modernization process from the traditional to the modern assumes traditional Chinese culture and values as primitive and backwards, and ignores the often non-linear and messy nature of the formation of a new sex culture.

Therefore, we need to carefully examine how Chinese people perceive and understand the traditional/Chinese and the modern/Western ideas on gender and sexuality, and how various social forces and actors collaboratively shift the discourse on gender and sexuality in China. It is also important to note that the newly emerged sex culture might not necessarily fall into the binary category of the traditional and the modern. Keeping these principles in mind, I will take a closer look at the process and outcomes of the Chinese sexual revolution in the following sections.

An Ongoing Sexual Revolution

The integration of liberal market values in the economic reform era undermined some party ideologies that have been previously stressed in the Socialist era. The conformity and
collectivism emphasized by the CCP for decades have been replaced by a more individualist ideology. Due to the rise of individualism, the young generation in the reform era was more concerned about their personal interests, success, and happiness rather than the harmony of the family or the society (Zarafonetis 2017). Similarly, the realm of sexuality was also considered as a private matter and an individual choice. In a society following liberal market logic, individual motives, rather than concerns of public morality, were emphasized in the discussion of sexuality (Farrer 2002). In this way, the association between individual sexuality and the solidarity of the society or the stability of the state have diminished in the economic reform era. Thus, the party-state relaxed its control and allowed more public discussion around sex and sexuality in the society (Evans 1997).

Consequently, young people in the economic reform era had more sexual freedom and autonomy in making and enacting new gender expressions, gender roles and sexual conducts. In addition, there appeared to be new practices of sexual behaviors and an emergence of novel sexual culture. Though the Marriage Law in 1950 repelled arranged marriage, it was not until the reform era that a “true peer-governed culture of dating” formed (Farrer 2002:13). With less state regulation on sexuality and a market ideology of free choice, the young generation in the reform era thus developed “more competitive dating practices and more permissive moral codes” (Farrer 2002:14). Indeed, empirical studies show that young people are more permissible towards premarital sex and cohabitation since the reform era (Parish et al. 2007; Zarafonetis 2017). Same-sex relationship has also become more visible and permissible among the young generation, especially in urban areas (Parish et al. 2007; Zarafonetis 2017). In addition, the capitalist market logic terminated the stable and homogenous career and life prospects assured by the state in the socialist period, therefore creating a sense of unpredictability and
precariousness among the young generation in the society. As a result, the young generation became more willing to engage in short-term sexual relationships and delay marriage (Farrer 2002).

Marriage in the economic reform era has also been assigned to a new meaning. The revised Marriage Law in 1980 introduced the notion of love and affection within marriage. In this revised version of marriage law, the “breakdown of affection” became a valid reason for getting a divorce (Evans 1997). Consistent with the capitalist market logic that emphasized on personal choices, motives, and feelings, love and affection were considered as legitimate individual feelings independent of the institution of marriage. In this way, love was officially disassociated with marriage (Pan 2006).

Moreover, the famous one-child policy in 1981 has shifted the meaning of sex within marriage. Since this policy forbade women from giving birth to more than one child, sex in a marriage after having the first child was purely about pleasure. Therefore, the implementation of the one-child policy detangled the conventional association between sex and reproduction, and altered the purpose of sex from reproduction to pleasure (Pan 2006). Consequently, many sexual behaviors that were formerly deemed as immoral, such as “masturbation, premarital sex, adopting unusual sexual positions, and engaging in oral and anal sex,” became more permissible in the reform era, especially among young people (Pan 2006). Moreover, though hardly challenging Chinese women’s traditional role as mother and caregiver, the one-child policy did allow women to invest more time on their own career and personal development (Pan 2006). Thus, this policy to some extent helped the younger women reshape their understanding of femininity and life prospects.
Indeed, the emphasis on work and career prospects was a distinctive characteristic of these young women, which echoed with the rise of individualism in the market economy. Although women were mobilized during the Maoist period to join the workforce and contribute to the socialist construction, the fundamental and foremost expectation for them was to get married and have children. However, in the reform era, for the first time there emerged a group of urban young women, who regarded their personal development and career success as the priority in their lives (Pei 2011). These women saw the importance of being financially independent and secure (Pei 2011; Zarafonetis 2017). Hence, they refused to comply with the patriarchal female role and lived their life as merely a mother or a wife.

These highly career-oriented women break the image of the traditional Chinese women with the socialist ideal femininity, such as being highly family-oriented, nurturing, willing to care and sacrifice for their families, and subsequently confined to the domestic sphere. In rural areas, the story was somewhat similar. Ngai (2005) argues that rural women were mobilized to work in factories in urban cities during China’s transition into a market economy. The common reason for leaving home was to escape the patriarchal family, specifically from either father’s or husband’s control (Ngai 2005). These rural women were aware of their life outlook as the traditional wife and mother if staying in the villages, and thus consciously made the decision to work in cities and stay as long as possible (Ngai 2005). Hence, both urban and rural women in the reform era tried to break the patriarchal constraints imposed on them, and actively formed their new individual identity by committing to personal and career development.

The recent changes in young people’s behaviors in sexual relationships also reflected a challenge to the patriarchal, socialist ideal of masculinity and femininity promoted by the CCP in socialist era. Wang and Ho (2007) note that, some women in urban places like Beijing has
become more assertive and aggressive in their romantic relationships. In their empirical study, Wang and Ho (2007) find that these female participants were able to express their discontent with their boyfriends, and claim more rights and power within the relationship by engaging in certain aggressive behaviors, such as beating their boyfriends. They also report that their boyfriend did not consider their aggressive behaviors as violent nor problematic (Wang and Ho 2007). On the contrary, these young men believed that they should be more generous and tolerant towards their girlfriends (Wang and Ho 2007).

This case study shows that there was a shift in the notion of both masculinity and femininity. First, being assertive and aggressive was regarded as a legitimate expression of femininity rather than a transgression of it. In this way, such behavior was in fact incorporated into and thus constructed a new ideal of femininity in Chinese society. Second, it is evident that some Chinese young men had a very different understanding of masculinity compared to the older generation from the socialist period. Instead of asserting their masculinity and subjugating their girlfriends, these young men in fact favored a more egalitarian gender relation in their intimate relationships. Farrer (2002) also argues that the modern masculinity in Chinese society since the reform era has increasingly emphasized on capability, including not only financial capability, but also the ability to express romantic feelings. One can argue that the newly emergent gender roles and norms are perhaps no less problematic than the patriarchal ones in some aspects, it is nevertheless crucial to note the significance of such value change in the Chinese society, and particularly its implications for women.

Farrer (2002) argues that due to the prevalence of liberal market ideology since the reform era, young people now face a fundamental conflict between commitment to love and freedom of choices. In order to resolve such moral dilemma, young people engage in “sexual
plays,” which they claim as only for fun, as a means of escapism. Such behavior further challenges the traditional association taken for granted between love and marriage. Similarly, Pei (2011) finds that engaging in multiple sexual relationships has become a new lifestyle for many young women living in urban cities like Shanghai in China. These sexual relationships by no means require any serious commitment. These women were proud of their ability to successfully manage multiple relationships at the same time. They reported that they become wiser and confident in this process (Pei 2011). The young Chinese women’s engagement in multiple sexual relationships powerfully challenges the traditional femininity in Chinese society, such as being sexually passive, submissive and docile. It also challenges the monogamous assumption about sexual relationship and marriage embedded in the Chinese society (Pei 2011).

Last but not least, the emergence of the consumer culture accompanying the market economy also leads to drastic changes in young people’s gender ideologies and sexual behaviors. There has been a profound economic growth and technological development since the reform era, which fosters a consumer culture in the market economy. The “commercialization of leisure and entertainment” has increased and diversified “consumer culture activities,” including romantic consumptions (Farrer 2002:12). Zarafonetis (2017) argues that young people in the reform era had more options for dating and other romantic practices. For example, they could easily dine in a restaurant or watch a movie for a date, which might be more difficult to realize in Socialist era when market was not well developed. In addition, the rise of market economy and consumer culture granted women new ways to express femininity through gendered and sexualized products, thus challenging the highly unified and desexualized socialist ideal of femininity promoted by the CCP before the reform era. At the same time, although strongly opposed by the state, the commercialization of leisure also facilitated the proliferation in
commercial sex industry, including the increase in prostitution and pornography (Zarafonetis 2017). Moreover, the liberalization of the media, along with a relaxed state control over on sexuality, allowed the emergence of more materials such as books, magazines, and TV programs to include contents about sex and love, which aroused more diversified public discussions on these topics (Farrer 2002).

The advancement of technology in the reform era also modified the younger generation’s sexual behaviors and attitudes. With the emergence and popularization of the Internet, the Chinese young people could easily obtain information from all over the world, including more egalitarian ideologies of gender and sexuality. More importantly, similar to the economic growth, the popularization of Internet enabled the young generation to practice their romantic relationship in ways that were not available or highly restricted in previous socialist era. For instance, Farrer (2012) finds that the Internet has become an important site and source for young people to engage in casual sex.

Sexual Revolution Complicated

The sexual revolution has altered many socialist ideologies regarding gender and sexuality and introduced new liberal ideas to the Chinese society. Such process, however, did not happen in a simplistic and linear fashion. Some liberal ideas were well embraced by the Chinese public and merged smoothly with former socialist ideas into the Chinese culture. While others provoked heated debates in the society. Therefore, in reconciling these new liberal ideas with those familiar socialist notions, many Chinese people have experienced intensive internal conflicts (Farrer 2012; Zarafonetis 2017). Even for those who have adopted more liberal ideas, such as being permissible towards premarital sex, their belief did not always translate into
corresponding behaviors, because they often faced enormous social pressure caused by the stigmatizing connotations associated with such behaviors (Zarafonetis 2017).

Chinese people expressed such unease and weariness only not towards the sexual revolution, but also towards the economic reform in general. Many people were concerned that whether the transition to a liberal market economy was too fast and if it has dismantled some traditional cultural virtues in Chinese society. The frugality promoted during the Socialist period was replaced by a booming consumer culture in the reform era, which resulted in “moral panic over the cultural consequences of the market transition” (Farrer 2002). People were worried that such transition would result in a proliferation of vices such as “greed and avarice” (Farrer 2002:17). The rise of individualism, which emphasized personal interests and desires, was also thought to weaken the “sentimental bonds” that prevailed in previously highly collective socialist society (Farrer 2002:17).

Due to these moral concerns risen from the market transition, there has been an increasing return to traditional Confucian thoughts (Zarafonetis 2017). Zarafonetis (2017) argues that, being unable to resist the influence of Westernization and globalization, people believe that the solution to materialist vices like greed and avarice lies in traditional Chinese culture, though in a modified form to better fit current social conditions. Kang (1996) notes a rise in the government’s promotion of “traditional and national culture,” and a new stream of “National (Confucianism) Learning.” Similarly, ideologies of gender and sexuality have also started to shift back to a more traditional patriarchal model. The party-state also condemned the Western liberal and individualistic ideas of sexual freedom or women’s rights (Evans 1997). Therefore, it is important to note that, although people did enjoy more sexual freedom in the reform era when
compared the Socialist decades, the party-state still had the power to dominate the public discourse of gender and sexuality and shift it back to the more patriarchal socialist ideal.

The Marriage Law and the one-child policy are examples of how the state still maintained a high level of control over individual sexuality and reproductive bodies. In addition, the promotion of a “Harmonious Society” since the reform era encouraged the revival of traditional Confucian values on gender roles and relations (Zarafonetis 2017). In 1990s, due to the incompetence of State-Owned Enterprises within the context of the expansion of global capitals and foreign businesses, many people have lost their previous stable jobs secured by the state. In order to maintain solidarity and stability in the society, the state promoted the traditional female role as mother and care-giver in the family, and thus encouraged the unemployed women to return home (Zarafonetis 2017). The idea of sex segregation and separate spheres invoked the revival of patriarchal understanding of masculinity and femininity. Contrary to the desexualized, genderless “Iron Girl” image in socialist period, the official conceptualization of femininity in the reform era was closer to the traditional Confucian understanding of being docile, submissive, and inferior to men. The idea of female inferiority also prevailed in the workforce. There was an increase in discrimination against women in employment practices (Ngai 2005; Zarafonetis 2017). For example, women suffered from sexual harassment in workplace, and lacked protection and compensation for their pregnancy and maternal leave. In this sense, gender equality in fact worsened in the reform era compared to the Socialist period.

The revival of conservative understanding of masculinity and femininity also reflected in sexual practices. There continued to exist a “double standard” for women and men in terms of sexual conducts (Farrer 2012; Zarafonetis 2017). Although both young men and young women in China experienced more sexual freedom in the new era, the former were liberated to a much
greater extent (Parish 2007). Because the norm of female chastity persisted in Chinese society, women tended to face more moral restrictions and sometimes condemnations when engaging in sexual behaviors (Farrer 2012). Virginity was still highly valued in evaluating a woman’s “marriageability” (Zarafonetis 2017). Since penile-vaginal sex is the end of virginity and can potentially harm a woman’s chastity, women were expected to be extremely cautious about engaging in premarital sex, preferably only with their to-be husbands. As a result, sexual passivity was prevalent in women even for the young generation since the economic reform. The traditional gender roles and expectations were also reflected through the mating preferences of Chinese people, including the young generation. Studies of Chinese college students reveal the continuation of patriarchal notion of male superiority underlying their mating choices (Higgins et al. 2002; Higgins and Sun 2007).

A more disturbing change is the change in attitudes towards more egalitarian gender norms and practices through generations. Pimentel (2006) finds that across generations, women consistently tend to have more egalitarian gender ideologies than men. However, contrary to what one would suspect due to the ongoing sexual revolution in China, that both men and women should increasingly support gender equality over time, Pimentel (2006) reveals in her study that the percentage of men who hold more egalitarian ideas about gender in fact decreases significantly across generations. Such result suggests that there might already appear to be a cultural backlash, specifically among male population, against gender equality in China.

Such attitudinal imbalance exists not only between men and women, but also between urban population and rural population. Zarafonetis (2017) argues that urban population in China generally have a more open attitude towards more liberal sexual behaviors and gender ideologies such as premarital sex than the rural population. Higgins and Sun (2007) also find that young
people in urban cities with highly educated parents tend to believe in more liberal values than their rural counterparts. In addition, the newly emerged revolutionary behaviors of women, such as maintaining multiple sexual relationships at the same time and being aggressive in romantic relationships, were both found in mostly urban women (Pei 2011; Wang and Ho 2007).

Last but not least, all of the discussions above are under a heteronormative assumption, which is still taken for granted in Chinese society nowadays. Chinese people, even the younger generation in college, are still hesitant towards same-sex desires and conducts and other non-normative sexual behaviors and relationships (Higgins 2002). In conclusion, the sexual revolution in China is neither a linear nor a straightforward process. Instead, it often involves contradictions and tensions between competing and merging social forces in establishing a new hegemonic order in gender and sexuality. Consequently, the outcome of such sexual revolution is often mixed and sometimes limited. On the one hand, some liberal values have been integrated into the Chinese culture. On the other hand, there appear to be revisiting and reviving of patriarchal values which were more prevalent in the past.

*The Emergence of a New Generation: Chinese Students Abroad*

Among the young generation who has witnessed the emergence of sexual revolution since the reform era, Chinese international students form a unique group to study. During the socialist China, Chinese migration policy is strictly limited, only allowing people to migrate to other socialist countries (Poston and Luo 2007). There was very little opportunity for Chinese young people to study abroad, especially in Western capitalist countries during this period. However, since the economic reform in the 1980s, there has been a drastic change in China’s migration policy. Economic reform not only welcomes the influx of Western cultures and ideas
into the Chinese society, it also encourages Chinese young people to step outside (“走出去”) to
study more modern and developed ideas and technologies.

During the first few years of the economic reform, the Chinese government financially
supported students and scholars to study abroad, hoping that these young people can help restore
the nation with the knowledge that they learn from other countries (Yan and Berliner 2011).
Since 1984, there has also been a rapid increase in the number of non-government sponsored
Chinese international students (Yan and Berliner 2011). Consistent with the rise of individualism
in Chinese society, these students are increasingly driven by individual motives such as personal
development and future career prospect, rather than by collective and nationalist idea for the
betterment of the society (Yan and Berliner 2011). These non-government-sponsored students
usually come from wealthy, urban, middle-class families. While this group has been mostly
comprised of males, there is an increase in number of female Chinese international students in
recent years (Yan and Berliner 2011). Among all the foreign destinations of Chinese
international students, the United States has become the most popular over the years (Yan and
Berliner 2011). China has become the “top two or three countries sending student immigrants to
the U.S. since 1983,” and Chinese students have exceeded 10 percent of the total international

Today’s Chinese international students were mostly born in the 1990s, when profound
economic and social changes took place in Chinese society. In his classic essay “The Problem of
Generations,” Karl Manheim (1952) defines a generation as a group of people experiencing same
historical events in a similar social position. These students share a collective consciousness as
the post-1990s (“九零后”) generation because they have experienced unique social changes
during the reform era as a group in their childhood. Compared to the first decade of economic
reform, the economic reform in the 1990s has reached its heyday. Responding to the fast pace of globalization, the CCP speeded up the transition from socialist economy to a more liberal market economy. Lots of previously state-owned enterprises were privatized, and more foreign enterprises were welcomed into the Chinese market. In addition, children born in the 1990s were the first generation to be directly affected by various social reform policies. For instance, the one-child-policy was much more strictly enforced in the 1990s, making most Chinese international students now the only child in the family and receive all the family resources and investments. The basic education reform in 2001 made the post-1990s children the first group to enjoy a free nine-year mandatory education. More importantly, the post-1990s generation was also the first generation to be born in the midst of the information technology revolution in China. They were familiar with novel technologies such as the Internet or the cellphone from a very early age.

Manheim (1952) argues that these early impressions and experiences of childhood are essential in constructing one’s world view, and that all later experiences are perceived and understood based on this value system. Indeed, compared to the older generation, today’s Chinese international students have enjoyed the economic boom and social prosperity since their birth. They grew up in an era distinguished by its openness and frequent global communication. Therefore, these students have developed the mindset of global citizens, and form the nexus of the national and the global. On the one hand, they have been exposed to traditional Chinese culture and have experienced the fundamental structural changes in the reform era. On the other hand, they were able to access foreign cultures from a very early age. More importantly, different from other domestic Chinese students who only have mediated perception about Western culture
through media and internet, Chinese international students have direct contacts with norms and values of the foreign culture.

My research investigates how Chinese international students in the United States perceive and react to these different norms and values regarding gender and sexuality under the “determining influence of [their] early impressions” and world views (Manheim 1952:298). Do they find these values conflicting and incompatible, and thus experience a culture clash and feel compelled to choose one? Do they find the norms in different societies in fact share some similarities and thus accept and merge the new values into their existing value system? Do they engage in a more complex process that neither simply accepts nor denies either culture, but rather critically examine the advantages and weaknesses of both cultures and then construct a new and more globalized value system that draws from both sides? To answer these questions, it is important to first explore the social and structural forces that Chinese international students experience in the United States.

Yan and Berliner (2011) argues that due to immigration policies in the United States, Chinese international students are marginalized in American society. Structural obstacles associated with immigration status, such as visa issues, restricted access to job opportunities and financial aid, limited opportunities to become permanent resident, etc. have been identified by Chinese international students as their biggest source of pressure when studying in the United States (Yan and Berliner 2011; 2013). In addition, Chinese international students also experience various personal obstacles, such as academic pressure and financial burden. Studying and living in the United States usually costs a great fortune for middle-class families in China. Chinese parents who send their children to study abroad in the US often have extraordinary academic and career expectations for their children, who are often the only child in the family, thus placing a
lot of pressure on Chinese international students. Therefore, some Chinese international students feel that they are in debt to their parents so they should be filial and respectful to their parents. They often feel the need to consider family ideologies and their parents’ views in the negotiation of different norms in American society. Besides the pressure from parents and the difficulty of adjusting to a new academic setting, Chinese students also suffer from being the “model minority” in American society. Preconceived stereotypes of Chinese international students in the US regulate and restrict Chinese international students’ possibilities in both academic and social lives, and add to their stress and anxiety.

Chinese international students in the US also face special difficulties in terms of dating and forming intimate relationships. Besides being the “model minority,” Chinese students also face negative stereotypes in relation to gender and sexuality (Huang and Uba 1992). Specifically, Chinese men are viewed as nerdy and socially awkward, while Chinese women are often sexualized and thought as docile and submissive (Huang and Uba 1992). These racist images of Chinese students make it harder for them to find potential partners, especially American and other foreign partners, in the US. In addition, many Chinese students complain about the limited Chinese candidates for romantic partners (Yan and Berliner 2011; 2013). Even for those who are already engaged in an intimate relationship, they often suffer from long-distance and long-term separation from their partners (Yan and Berliner 2011).

In addition to facing various obstacles in the American society, some Chinese international students experience a “culture shock” when first come to the American society. Yan and Berliner (2011; 2013) points out that the source of such culture shock is in fact rooted in the discrepancy between Chinese students’ preconceived ideas about American culture and the reality, rather than the actual cultural differences between China and the United States. Many
Chinese international students have already developed an image of the American society, culture, lifestyles, ideologies, etc. through various sources like the media and internet before they come to the US. However, these perceptions are often limited and do not necessarily reflect the reality in American society, if there were to be such a clearly-defined “American” culture or set of values. Consequently, it is especially easy for Chinese students with high expectations for American academic and social lives to experience such “culture shock,” as they are more likely to be frustrated by the inconsistency between their impression and the reality.

Chinese international students report a transformation in self-identification after studying in the United States (Zhang 2016). They appreciate the experience of studying and living in a different culture that makes them become more aware and tolerant of different cultures (Zhang 2016). However, such transformation is not always smooth. Yan and Berliner (2011) argue that many Chinese international students “end up ambiguous in their cultural existence, vacillating between Chines culture and American culture, identifying with neither, nor, for that matter, being accepted by either” (178). More precisely, they also find that many Chinese international students have a higher level of assimilation in “extrinsic cultural traits” such as behaviors and lifestyles, but their “intrinsic cultural traits” such as “religious beliefs, ethnic values, and cultural heritage” hardly change even when immersed in another culture (Yan and Berliner 2001:178).

Chinese international students thus develop what DuBois (2004) refers to as a “double consciousness,” which describes the sensation of two different identities and mindsets striving and competing within oneself. For Chinese international students, they are both Chinese citizen and long-term resident and participant of American society. On the one hand, Chinese international students are often critical of Chinese culture and values, and even disassociate themselves from certain “Chinese” characteristics that have stigmatising connotations in
American society (Valdez 2015). On the other hand, they sometimes feel conflicted about certain American values, and worry that sometimes they become too “Americanized” in the process of acculturation (Valdez 2015).

For example, Huang and Uba (1992) find that some Chinese international students enjoy the more permissive attitude towards premarital sex in American society. However, Matsui (1995) finds that many Chinese female students have concerns about the gender roles and expectations of women within an intimate relationship in the American society. Many Chinese women question whether the “American” femininity is truly liberating, since it usually entails what Chinese women would refer as “traditional” femininity, such as being young and dependent on male partners (Matsui 1995). Therefore, it is clear that Chinese international students in the United States never simply reject or adopt either set of cultural practices regarding gender and sexuality. Instead, they often go through a more complicated process of constant self-questioning, critiques of both cultures and their values, and reconstruction of self-identity.

Unfortunately, the nuances of such processes are not well studied in previous empirical researches. Particularly, there is little research on the process of negotiation between different cultural ideals regarding intimate relationships for Chinese international students, and the manners in which these students translate their ideals into practices. In addition, many existing studies on Chinese international students are conducted almost a decade ago. There is an urgent need to gather more contemporary data on this issue, as more and more Chinese students come to the United States for higher education within the context of fast changing Chinese society. Moreover, though literature shows that homosexuality and other non-mainstream sexualities are more visible in Chinese society nowadays, there is little effort to investigate the experience of
such population in China, let alone LGBT+ Chinese international students abroad. My research intends to fill in these gaps in the existing literature.
METHODOLOGY

My research is guided by grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998) which aims to develop theories from examining the empirical world. In order to achieve my research goals, I employed semi-structured, in-depth interview method. Using such method, as Esterberg (2002) argues, “allow[s] interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own word” (87). Since my research looks at the nuances of how Chinese international students negotiate between Chinese and American ideals of gender and sexuality, and how they put their re-conceptualized ideals into practices, it was crucial to obtain details about their experiences, attitudes, and feelings. Using in-depth interviews helped reveal such complexity and the specific and fine-grained dynamics in romantic and intimate relationships. In addition, due to the complicated, private, and sensitive nature of my research topic, it was unlikely that other methods such as participant observation and survey would have reveal the same amount of rich data as interview did.

The participants were recruited from the Chinese international student population at the College of William and Mary, and specifically, the undergraduate Chinese international students. Born in the 1990s, these students are the first generation that has fully experienced the social and cultural changes brought by the economic reform since their birth. I constructed my ideal respondents as sophomore, junior, and senior undergraduate Chinese international students because they are exposed to the American culture for a relatively long time, and are therefore more likely to have experienced tensions and contradictions of navigating a new cultural landscape. Thus, they have a more thorough reflection of the ideals and practices of gender and sexuality that my research aims to reveal. Furthermore, they are more likely to have developed a certain way to negotiate cultural clashes or found the possibility of merging different cultural
values and norms. I exclude graduate students and exchange scholars in my research because they come from a different birth cohort than the undergraduate students. Many of them have already married and had children. Thus, they were not ideal research subject for my project.

I used both theoretical sampling and snowball sampling during my participant recruitment process. Considering the attitudinal gaps between men and women, and potential differences in the experience of straight and LGBT+ students, I balanced the number of students from each group to make sure that no group is underrepresented in my study. Using such purposive strategy (Esterberg 2002) ensured that variations within the population is addressed and that different perspectives are represented. In addition to theoretical sampling, I also utilized snowball sampling in which I used my personal networks to send out information on my study to LGBT+ students. Snowball sampling is especially helpful when interviewing the “hidden” population, because it not only offers researchers access to an unfamiliar group, but also makes them trustworthy to this group (Esterberg 2002:93). Due to LGBT+ students’ small population and their often unwillingness to reveal their non-heteronormative identity, snowball sampling was crucial strategy in my study to recruit adequate number of LGBT+ students.

Initially, I posted the recruitment information of this project (see Appendix A) and my personal contact information through William and Mary’s international student listserv, which is a mail list service managed by the Reves Center for International Studies at the College of William and Mary. Any student or faculty member can submit their announcements to this listserv, and each week there is an email sent out from this listserv to the subscribers containing all the announcements that Reves Center for that week. My announcement for this project was approved and then successfully sent out to the subscribers. However, I received little response through this method. One possible reason is that the announcements are usually made by
students or scholars who try to sell their furniture or cars, or those trying to find a roommate or an apartment. Due to its “marketplace” nature, students who do not intend to engage in these activities rarely pay attention to the weekly email sent from the listserv. My later conversations with a few of the interviewees proved my guess. Despite their subscription from the listserv, none of them discovered my recruitment information. One participant even mentioned the fact that after receiving the weekly email, he would immediately archive it without clicking on it since he assumes there would not be any useful information for him.

With my failure in using the international student listserv, I wondered if there was a more direct and effective way to send my information to the Chinese international student body. I then turned my eyes to the chat groups of undergraduate Chinese international students on a Chinese social media app, WeChat. Each year, a new chat group is created by the current Chinese students at William and Mary for the newly admitted students. Newly admitted students would usually join this chat group even before they come to the US. They can find important information regarding study and life at William and Mary in the group chat, make new friends, find roommates, and so much more. The group chat remains active in the next four years, and there are frequent discussions about essentially everything happens on campus, including classes, professors, events, etc. There are currently four active group chats for class of 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022, respectively. Although these group chats are named after each class, they are not mutually exclusive. It is not uncommon for students to join more than one group chat to promote their events or seeking advice from more senior students. The group chat of class of 2019 has 145 members; the ones for class of 2020 and 2021 each has about 235 members; the group chat for 2022 has 295 members. In addition to all these group chats designated for different classes, there is another group chat containing many undergraduate Chinese student users, which is the
“Trash and Treasure” group managed by the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) at William and Mary. I omitted this group due to its similar nature as that of the international student listserv.

I then posted the edited recruitment information, which has been translated into Chinese and a more concise and reader-friendly version for app users, in all the group chats mentioned above, except the one designated for freshman. Almost immediately I received inquiries from students who were interested in my study. By utilizing the group chats, I was able to find nine participants. Most of them are seniors and volunteered because they personally knew me. The male-female ratio was surprisingly balanced, with five male students and four female students reaching out to me. However, the biggest problem with this round of recruitment was that only one of these volunteers identified as non-straight, which confirmed my initial concern of not being able to recruit enough LGBT+ students.

Therefore, I used my personal networks to recruit more LGBT+ students. Thanks to my personal involvement in the LGBT+ community, I was already friends with two female Chinese students who identified as lesbian, and one male student who identified as bisexual. I reached out to them and invited them to participate in my study. All three of them agreed without hesitation and were in fact excited for the project. In addition, I asked them and my other friends if they knew any other LGBT+ Chinese students. Fortunately, I was introduced to two more female students who both identified as bisexual, and they willingly agreed to be interviewed. However, one of the last two students is in fact a freshman. I decided to include her in the study despite her being a freshman because of the difficulty to find additional LGBT+ Chinese students.

Through multiple rounds of participant recruitment and adopting various strategies, I was able to interview in total of 14 Chinese international students stratified by gender, sexual
orientation, and academic class. Six of the participants are male and eight of them are female. Among the six male participants, one identified as bisexual, and the rest identified as straight. Among the eight female participants, three identified as straight, two identified as lesbian/homosexual, one identified as bisexual, one identified as pansexual and one preferred not to label herself in terms of sexual orientation. Therefore, in total there were eight straight students and six LGBT+ students. Among all the participants, nine are seniors, and one of them graduated early in last December. The rest consisted one junior, two sophomores, and one freshman. I did not specifically ask about the socioeconomic backgrounds of my participants. Given the fact that their families could financially support them to study abroad in the US and the fact that Chinese international students were not eligible for financial aid, it is safe to suggest that the participants came from rather financially secured family background. However, I did ask about the participants’ hometowns. Almost all participants came from major Chinese cities like Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou. There was only one participant who used to live in a smaller and rural city in China, but he later moved to a large city with his parents and settled there.

In most cases, the interviews took place in a private individual or group study room in Swem Library which was only accessible to the researcher and the participant. Recruited participants were given an informed consent form (see Appendix B) before the interview started. In addition to the informed consent form, I also explained the nature and procedure of the study to the participants in Chinese and made sure that they had no further concerns. Participants were given the choice to use either English or Chinese to complete the interview. All participants chose to use Chinese because they thought it was easier and more efficient to communicate in the native tongue. However, all participants also used various amount of English during the interview. For instance, they predominantly used English when they referred to concepts such as
“sexuality” or “sexual orientation” as these concepts were relatively unfamiliar and mentioned infrequently in the Chinese society.

During the interview, participants were asked questions about the process of their gender and sexual socialization, their experience within their most significant relationship, and their perceptions and understandings toward the similarities and differences between the sex culture in the US and in China. Specifically, I first asked my respondents about their early experience with regard to gender and sexuality when they grew up in China. I asked about their gender and sexual awakening process and the people, incidents, or other information that they received which contributed to such awakening. I asked how they perceived their parents’ attitudes or the societal norms toward gender and sexuality. I wanted to learn how all these different sources might have influenced their own understandings of more specific topics such as gender roles, masculinity and femininity, sexual orientation, and sexual intimacy.

Next, I asked the participants to briefly recall the history of their romantic relationships. I asked them to describe how their past relationships differed from each other, and particularly how they engaged in different romantic practices, or changed their understandings of romantic relationships as they moved from one relationship to another. I then asked them to identify the most significant relationship and asked more specific questions about gender relations and sexual intimacy within this relationship. I also asked them about their ideal relationships and ideal partners, what they valued the most in them, and how might them be different from their most significant relationship. There was one participant who had never had any committed relationship by the time of the interview, so I instead asked about her unrequited love or other romantic feelings she had experienced towards other in the past. In addition, I asked some value
questions such as participants’ attitudes toward premarital sex and cohabitation, homosexual behaviors, casual sexual relationships, gender equality, etc.

Lastly, I asked the participants to compare their intimate relationships in China and in the US if they had romantic experience in both cultural settings. I also asked all the participants to share their observations regarding the romantic practices or cultures of young people in both countries, and the social norms or attitudes toward often contested romantic practices or more general topics regarding gender and sexuality, such as premarital sex, casual sexual relationships, same-sex experience, gender equality, feminism, etc. I sought to investigate their reflections on what they have experienced or observed in both societies, and how their experience of crossing both the physical and conceptual boundaries of different societies and cultures might have influenced their own ideals and perceptions regarding intimate relationships.

Most of my question were open-ended, so besides those listed in the interview guide, I also employed probing questions to follow up on their answers and reveal richer details. I decided not to design a separate interview guide for LGBT+ students, because most of them identified as bisexual and had also been in a heterosexual relationship in the past. However, I did ask more in-depth questions about their experience of realizing their sexual orientation and coming out (if applicable). In addition, when asking about their same-sex relationships, I was especially careful to avoid assuming dichotomous gender roles and therefore skipped the question about their experience of masculinity and femininity in their relationships, unless they brought up such experience or used these terms themselves.

All the interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ permission. I also took interview notes during all the interviews. Before the interviews started, participants were assured again that their anonymity and confidentiality would be protected. All the audio files were later
transcribed and translated into English with interviewee’s true identities and all identifying information removed. Interviewees also chose their preferred pseudonyms to replace their real names. In addition, I reminded participants of their right to skip or refuse to answer any question that they don’t feel comfortable with, or to terminate the audio-recording or the interview at any time.

I truly appreciate the high level of cooperativeness and patience that all my participants willingly offered. Most of the interviews lasted about an hour and a half. About 4 interviews lasted even over two hours. Researchers who studied similar topics using interviews often found it hard to encourage the participants to talk about their intimate and sexual lives. For example, Pei (2011), who studied Chinese urban women who maintain multiple sexual relationships at the same time, found that her participants rarely talked about such topics, even to their closest friends. I also considered the limitation of the sexual revolution in China, how there might still be some taboos and concerns around sex within intimate relationship and non-normative sexual behaviors. Therefore, I expected certain reluctance to get my interviewees’ responses about their more intimate sexual lives than to more general attitudinal questions. However, to my surprise, all participants were very open to share their experience and opinions with me. None of them rejected any question that I proposed during the interviews, even those more sensitive questions regarding their sexual lives. However, there was indeed a lack of in-depth engagement in these more sensitive questions, and some participants expressed certain level of awkwardness through verbal or physical signs when answering these questions. These issues will be discussed in greater details in following chapters.

There is no doubt that my own positionality as an “insider” offered me great advantages in gaining access to the research population and building rapport with them. “Presenting the
appearance of similarity” helps build rapport with interviewees, which is particularly important considering the sensitive nature of the topics in my research (Esterberg 2002:90). As a Chinese international student myself, it was relatively easy for me to approach my participant. I already had access to the chat groups of Chinese international students long before the study started. Since the Chinese international student community at William and Mary is relatively small, there was a fair amount of students who already personally knew me, especially seniors. Because of my insider position, I was able to get the majority of my respondents very soon after I posted the recruitment information in those group chats. In addition, my identity as pansexual also helped my recruit LGBT+ participants. Although there is no designated LGBT+ Chinese student community on campus, I was fortunate enough to use my personal networks to locate more LGBT+ students besides my own LGBT+ friends.

My insider position also allowed me to better understand the cultural contexts in which the participants’ experiences were based. Our shared identities and experiences also made it easier for my respondents to be open about their ideas during the interview. From a feminist perspective, it is essential for the researches to be willing to share their own personal experiences with the interviewees in order to build rapport, so that the interview can yield more details (Esterberg 2002). This tactic has been used and proven in many researches investigating similar topics. For example, in his research about mating preferences in China which utilized both guided and open-ended interview, Jankowiak (1989) found that sharing his own experience of sexual practices and relationships with his partner made his participants more willing to reciprocate and engage more actively in the interview. During the interviews, I was able to respond and relate to some common experiences that Chinese international students share.
During these moments, my respondents were clearly more uplifted and interested in sharing their stories. In addition, my interviewees sometimes referred to some terms which must be understood in very specific Chinese context, and I was able to grasp the deeper cultural meanings and even origins of these terms, thanks to me being a Chinese international student. For instance, it might be difficult for an outsider to understand the cultural significance of 直男癌 (Zhanan’Ai), which should not be translated from its literal meaning as straight male cancer. Instead, it is an emotionally charged term used to condemn a certain kind of sexist macho men who possess toxic masculinity. Moreover, both my respondents and I had the privilege to use Chinese and English interchangeably in different occasions to best express our ideas and thoughts.

However, insider positionality is a double-edged sword which also brought disadvantage in my study. Due to the similar backgrounds that my participants and I share, I had more advantage in understanding certain cultural contexts. However, it was also easy for me to make assumptions and inferences about the responses, such as the meaning of a familiar term, or the reactions to a shared experience, thus missing potentially novel findings. Therefore, I had to constantly remind myself of this problem throughout the interviews. For instance, I asked my participants to clarify terms and ideas that I was familiar with and to provide specific contexts in which these terms are situated before sharing my own experience with them. Additionally, when I shared my own experience with my interviewees to build rapport, I tried to keep my experience as a factual level, and avoided making judgmental comments or expressing personal feelings toward shared observations or experience.

After transcribing and translating all the interviews, I performed open coding and focused coding on both interview transcripts and interview notes. The analysis was based on an inductive
approach as I was interested in allowing research findings to emerge from the significant themes in raw data. I performed thematic analysis on the interview transcripts to identify salient patterns among different respondents.

A few concerns regarding the analysis and report of the interview data should also be addressed. First of all, participants’ internal confidentiality, which refers to the “ability for research subjects involved in the study to identify each other in the final publication of the research,” will be protected in my research (Tolich 2004:101). Participants might be potentially harmed if the sensitive information regarding their intimate behaviors is recognized by someone within their social network. Since the Chinese international student population at the College of William and Mary is relatively small, the possibility that interviewees’ responses being identified by their friends is relatively higher.

Indeed, some of my respondents already knew each other before the study, and they knew about each other’ romantic lives at various degrees. There was a male student who requested reassurance during the interview that his girlfriend would not be able to recognize him from the details offered in my final thesis. Therefore, in this case it is extremely difficult yet vital to ensure participants’ internal confidentiality. However, there is no simple way to guarantee such internal confidentiality. Tolich (2004) argues that the key is to spend time to learn from the respondents themselves, that what kind of information is innocuous or detrimental, if identified by another insider. During the interview, I was able to identify certain information provided by my respondents which was already widely known within their friend circle. I was also able to understand my respondents’ concerns regarding a particular part of the information that they offered. In my findings chapters, I used extra caution to remove or alter additional details regarding these more sensitive pieces of information.
Due to the small sample size of the study, my research is incapable of generating any generalizable conclusions. However, the purpose of my study is not to find any generalizable results. Instead, I try to capture the detailed nuances during the process of negotiating different cultural ideas on intimate relationships. Though my research does not aim for the generalizability, it still strives for the representativeness, which was reflected through the theoretical sampling and snowball sampling process. However, as much as I tried to achieve the representativeness, I understand that due to time and other feasibility reasons, my sample is not a perfect representation of the entire Chinese international student body at the College of William and Mary. Since the majority of my respondents volunteered to participate in the study, there might be potential participation bias in the sampling process. Students who reached out to me might already have an interest in issues on intimate relationships, gender and sexuality and thus had a more thorough reflection on these topics. These students on the one hand could be a major strength to my study as they revealed greater details. On the other hand, however, they might overrepresent a certain type of student in the Chinese international student population. Such effect was in some degree mitigated by the fact that some students participated the study only because they were asked by their friends or they personally knew me and tried to help me out. These students did not necessarily have a genuine interest in the topic of my study and thus could cancel out the effect of participation bias.

Besides generalizability and representability, the issue of validity is often debated in qualitative research as well. Weiss (1994) suggests that while rich details are likely to be trustworthy, it is highly possible for respondents to provide inconsistent information. However, he argues that such inconsistency should not be deemed as invalid, as people do “act in inconsistent way or maintain inconsistent feelings” (Weiss 1994:150) Based on different
contexts or coming from different perspectives, participants are likely to give inconsistent responses. Weiss (1994) argues that the best way to ensure validity is “careful, concrete level, interviewing within the context of a good interviewing partnership” (150). It is therefore essential to carefully develop interview questions, use appropriate interview strategies, and build a good rapport with the respondents to increase the validity of the interview.

Indeed, during the interviews, I noticed that multiple interviewees gave conflicting answers to my questions. However, these contradictions should not be understood as the respondents trying to conceal their true feelings or reactions. Instead, these answers often revealed deeper conflicts within participants’ own understandings of issues being asked during the open and willing dynamics of the interview process. In these occasions, I would always ask more probing questions on different aspects of the larger issue and encourage respondents to recall more details about their experiences. For instance, during the interview with a self-identified straight male student, William, I asked him questions about his sexual orientation. He talked about his previous same-sex experience, but he was not able to construct a consistent narration about how his feeling changed over time. In fact, he realized the inconsistency in his answers during the interview and felt strange that he was not able to recall his experience in an orderly manner. In this case, the inconsistency in his answer should be evaluated carefully and be coupled with the confusion that he expressed, instead of being regarded as simply untrustworthy.

Social desirability bias is another potential bias during the interviews, as many of interview questions asked the participants to reveal their personal values or attitudes toward sometimes highly contested social issues. In addition, I have been very open about my self-identification as pansexual and a feminist in college, and many of my respondents were aware of my identities as well as my passion in feminist issues. Therefore, it is likely that some
participants might feel the pressure to give out socially favored answers or answers that aligned with my personal viewpoints. In order to alleviate the effect of social desirability bias, I tried to avoid making any attitudinal or judgmental comments to my participants’ experience or revealing my personal standpoint on certain issues. When asking questions, I tried to avoid any leading questions or asking questions in a manner with either explicit or implicit favor toward a certain group or perspective. Moreover, I always encouraged my interviewees to elaborate on their answers and to give more contexts or rationales during the interview. By doing this, I hoped that my respondents would feel more comfortable expressing less socially approved ideas since they had the opportunity to defend their standpoints and to explain their rationales in great details. Fortunately, during the interviews, I was able to see that some respondents did openly express their disagreements toward certain mainstream ideas, even if they were perfectly aware of the dominant acceptance of these norms or ideas in the society.

Last but not least, the issue of power dynamics should also receive special attention during the interview. Feminists critique the traditional researcher’s role as the authority and behavior as “extracting information from passive research subjects” (Esterberg 2002:92) Feminists scholars argue that reciprocity during an interview can help alleviate the power dynamics between the researcher and the participants (Esterberg 2002). In a previous study on the similar topic, Pei (2011) also suggested that she tried to present herself as “a real person with concrete interests and desires,” instead of as “a value-free academic” (404). I strived to achieve a more equal power relation with my respondents both during and after the study by being open about my own identities and experiences to my respondents.

The issue of power dynamics between the researcher and the research subject also unfolds in the language that is used to narrate the respondents’ experiences and stories. In her
study on the sexuality of Turkish young people, Ozyegin (2015) stressed the close interrelationship between her theoretical language and her respondents’ vocabularies, and her analytical interpretations and her respondents’ understandings of their experiences. In this way, she represented the voices of her participants through theoretical and analytical perspectives, yet without placing such perspectives in a position superior to her respondents’ everyday experience and vocabulary. In the analysis in following chapters, I will also carefully examine how my academic language can faithfully speak for my interviewees’ experiences, and balance the weights of these two different perspectives.
Chapter 1: Untangling the Myth of the Ideal Partner: Creating the Ideal Selves in Intimate Relationships

In his study of the cultural value shifts in different societies, Inglehart (2018) found that as the economic security increases in a society over time, the younger generation tends to embrace values related to self-expression and individuality over materialist and survival values than the older generation. Specifically, young people are more likely to be in favor of individual choice, self-expression, gender equality, equal rights for sexual minorities and be less likely to support ideas such as conforming to what they consider as dominant traditional values in the society or give priority to economic status.

My interviewees’ responses about ideal partner and ideal relationships are fairly consistent with Inglehart’s findings. Despite differences in gender, sexual orientation and past romantic experience, these respondents offered surprisingly similar answers when being asked about their ideal relationships and ideal partners. It seems that all my interviewees are primarily concerned with more ideological aspects such as expressions of individual values rather than materialist aspects such as the economic resources one brings into the intimate relationship. Indeed, a male respondent told me that he completely failed to think about any materialist aspects when imagining his ideal relationships, “When you first asked me about what my ideal partner looked like or the things that I valued the most in my ideal partners, I honestly only thought about more ideological stuff.” During the interviews, the participants rarely brought up their preference for materialist aspect within their ideal relationships, such as the socioeconomic status of their partners, for its own sake. When they did mention these material conditions, it was merely because these conditions can influence the more ideological aspects of a romantic
relationships. According to Inglehart (2018), these young students’ silence of economic concerns when imagining their ideal intimate relationships may allude to the fact that they have taken economic security for granted when growing up, which is a result of the rapid economic development in Chinese society since the Economic Reform.

Consequently, it was sometimes hard for the respondents to construct a cohesive and consistent narration of what exactly their ideal partners or ideal relationships look like, which also reflects the fact that the old certainty for ideal romantic relationships accentuating on economic concerns is no longer valid for the young generation. The young generation no longer have rigid and predestined life prospects, and have more freedom for individual preferences and choices in forming an intimate relationship. My biggest challenge in this chapter is therefore to find the common and most salient themes among these often vague and abstract responses.

*Romantic communication through intellectuality.*

Although some of the interviewees only had very rough and abstract ideas about their desired immaterial qualities, others had more concrete ideas and were able to elaborate or name a few specific preferences. For instance, some of my interviewees simply pictured their ideal partners as someone they could “get along with” or “feel comfortable spending time together.” Others mentioned common interests or topics as important elements in ideal relationships. For example, Alex, a male student explained his preferences for an ideal partner:

> It’s okay that we have different opinions or thought, but we should have something that we both like to do or similar hobbies. If we enjoy doing different thing, or our favorite activities are different, at least we should be willing to participate in whatever the other person enjoys doing…We should be able to share this similarity and we should be able to talk to each other.

Alex also touched upon the importance of two people engaging in conversations within an intimate relationship, which is the first common and salient theme mentioned by many
respondents. For some, conversation and communication are necessary in their ideal intimate relationships because of their practical functions which allow the couple to make decisions and resolve conflicts more efficiently and effectively. For others, these conversations mean more than decision making or trouble shooting in a romantic relationship. For them, conversation and communication are essential because they allow the couple to engage in a deeper level of exchange of ideas. These conversations are much more than everyday discussions on banal topics such as where to eat on a Friday night, or who will clean the bathroom this weekend. For example, Mary, a female student said that she wished her ideal partner could not only talk to her about their daily life, but also about “music, art, ideologies, and even philosophy.” Therefore, these conversations need to involve at least some degree of intellectual thoughts and should evoke meaningful and mutually enriching exchanges. Moreover, two people within the relationship should be able to learn from each other during these conversations. A female student, Anne, stressed the importance of her boyfriend being intelligent:

I don’t really have any specific requirement for [my ideal boyfriend’s] physical appearance, but I think he has to be very intelligent, or be at least somewhat comparable to me in intelligence. In this way, we can engage in some deep level intellectual conversations… it’s important to feel that you are on the same page with someone intellectually, like you can truly connect to this person.

Leo, a male student, also highlighted the importance of having intellectual conversations over any materialist or economic aspects within his romantic relationships. Notably, he elevated these conversations to an even higher level by referencing the Chinese concept of spiritual communication, 心灵沟通 (Xinling Goutong). He also mentioned another term, 心灵默契 (Xinling Moqi) which roughly translates into the spiritual coordination or compatibility between the couple. During the interview, he explained, “…relationship to me is like, well, I only need this kind of Xinling Goutong, like I don’t care what we do physically as long as we have this Xinling Moqi. This is also my standard for marriage or fiancée if you ask me.”
Leo perhaps offered the most extreme idea regarding the significance of immaterial aspects within intimate relationships. Completely irrespective of any physical or material qualities in his relationships, Leo seeks to achieve a spiritual transcendence with his ideal partner, or in another word, his soulmate. In addition, Leo also explained how the failure to achieve the *Xinling Moqi* within a romantic relationship can result in unfavorable experience. For instance, he described how his ex-girlfriend, who had absolutely no *Xinling Moqi* with him, has caused him tremendous burden in life, both physically and emotionally, “I just really cannot stand being so tired and exhausted everyday [due to the lack of *Xinling Moqi*], and I think this is not only a physical burden to me, but also an exploitation of me.” By exploitation, Leo signaled the fact that he had to spend an unnecessarily large amount of time every day to interpret his ex-girlfriend’s ideas and emotions, which he considered as jeopardizing his independent and autonomous management of personal time. The issue of independence and autonomy will be discussed in greater details in later section of this chapter.

*Sanguan: Three fundamental values.*

During the interviews, I also offered the respondents with various criteria, such as gender, age, educational level, income, family background, cultural background, race, socioeconomic status and religious affiliation, and then asked them to elaborate on their imaginations of the ideal partners based on these criteria. Among all the criteria, the most mentioned were educational level and family background/upbringing experience. However, their effects are mediated by a vague and ideological factor, 三观 (*Sanguan*). *Sanguan*, which literally means three kinds of viewpoints. *Sanguan* is an intricate Chinese term which translates poorly into
English. It is a collection of three different aspects of a person’s fundamental ideologies, including one’s world view, philosophy of life, and values.

Many interviewees said that their ideal partners should have somewhat comparable education or family backgrounds to themselves. However, in nearly all cases, these interviewees made it clear that they had such preference or requirement only because they thought there is a correlation between one’s education or family background and one’s Sanguan. They held this common belief that similar educational background and upbringing experiences are conducive to more compatible ideologies and values. Therefore, although it appears that many respondents did care about the parental socioeconomic and class position of their partners, they were fundamentally concerned about issues regarding in relation to parental class culture. For instance, William, a male student explained how the educational level is a decisive characteristic in his ideal partner as it influences on Sanguan:

I think educational background is a relatively important thing for me. My partner at least needs to have a college degree, but I don’t really mind if she gets any other higher degree…but Sanguan might be the more important thing, like we should at least have somewhat similar Sanguan. Well, actually educational background is about the same thing, like there is a higher possibility that we share similar Sanguan if she also goes to college.

Similarly, Amy, a female student, also talked about how cultural identity and family background, mediated by Sanguan, have an important influence on her criterion of the ideal boyfriend:

Well I definitely don’t want to find an American American, but if he is Asian American, then it depends on our Sanguan. If his family has moved to the US for many generations, then his Sanguan would be a completely American one, and we would definitely differ a lot in living habits and lifestyles, which can hardly be solved or compromised, so I definitely don’t want to find this kind [of boyfriend] either.

Though Amy might have expressed some overly simplistic understanding of the so-called American value system, there is no doubt that she was aware that different cultural and family background can result in differences in Sanguan, which in turn might cause negative effects on
her romantic relationship. Indeed, many participants talked about how a compatible Sanguan can encourage a better understanding between the couple as it fosters a “common language,” or a commonly shared set of values. On the other hand, the incompatibility of two people’s Sanguan can produce disastrous implications for their intimate relationship. For some respondents, a discrepancy in Sanguan, as Amy has indicated, would result in some unresolvable conflicts between the couple. Interviewees who had thought about long-term plans like marriage also mentioned that the discrepancy in Sanguan between the couple could potentially lead to generational conflicts in families as well. For example, a male student, Logan, explained:

In the long term, [Sanguan can influence] the ideas in educating the children and showing filial piety to parents. If one partner does not show filial piety to parents, then she/she cannot understand why you have to sacrifice the time spending with him/her to accompany parents. I do think this is a huge conflict… and the issue of raising children, like what kind of person do you want your kid to become? Is it enough for your children to be simply independent, or do they have to make some accomplishments in life?…I think all these questions need to be negotiated and communicated.

Based on all these examples, it is safe to say that a compatible Sanguan might be the most important quality that respondents commonly value in an ideal relationship. Additionally, although it appears that there is a continuation of the recognition of the importance of family and class background from the older generation to the younger generation, different generations in fact have distinct rationales. The older generation value socioeconomic or family background because it secures the economic stability of the couple within a romantic relationship. While the younger generation appreciate these class-based values as they can have a substantive impact on future partners’ ideologies and beliefs.

_Mutual support and independence/autonomy._

Besides conversation/communication and Sanguan, another prominent theme which I found from my interviewees’ perceptions on their ideal relationships is the importance of being
mutually supportive but remaining independent and autonomous at the same time within a relationship. “Mutual support” and “independence/autonomy” represent how Chinese international students negotiate and define the delicate boundary between their “rights” and “obligations” within an intimate relationship, between their partners and themselves, and finally between their romantic relationships and other aspects of their lives.

Firstly, many students acknowledged that in an ideal relationship, two people should try to understand and support each other. People should be able to trust and rely on their partners. For instance, John, a straight male student, offered a great description of the dynamics within his relationship with one of his ex-girlfriends, which he firmly believed to be the ideal model between couples:

I think what was the best in our relationship, is that we were mutually supporting each other. I think this is truly important. In a traditional sense, it’s usually the male partner supporting the female partner in a romantic relationship…however, we also see a lot of cases where women support their male partners. Of course, everybody knows how to be happy, but you see, what’s more important is when you are sad. She had a lot of moments when she felt down, and I was able to see all kinds of imperfections in her. Dating someone is like, you see all the good things about her, and you feel that your love for her is reaching a peak. But then you also see many of her shortcomings and annoying aspects, and after a long time, you become willing to tolerate all her weaknesses and imperfections, like you are willing to support her no matter what, and that’s when your relationship reaches an even higher level than before.

John considered this kind of “mutually tolerant and supportive” relationship as “extremely ideal” and should even be applied to other kinds of relationships as well, such as kinships and friendships. Similar to John, many other respondents also recognized that an ideal romantic relationship is not only about having fun together and enjoying themselves, but also about being supportive, respectful, and accommodating. Inevitably, all intimate relationships have ups and downs, and there is no “perfect” human being in the world. Surely all respondents have various preferences for their “ideal” partner, but many of them also acknowledged that it is equally important, if not more, for two people to be flexible with each other in a romantic
relationship. Many respondents brought up the concept of 磨合 (Mohe, which literally translates into grinding and fitting), which means the process of two people in a romantic relationship getting used to each other, adjusting themselves for each other, and accepting and supporting each other as whom they really are. I love the metaphor that John offered in the interview:

> Everyone is like a rock with edges and bumps, and no matter which rock you pick, there is got to be one bump that always sticks out. The only difference is that if you pick different rocks then you will have different dumps sticking out. But there is no such thing as a perfect person…the process of “grinding” is the most important.

Indeed, despite all the criteria for an ideal partner, it is nearly impossible to find the exact “Mr./Ms. Right.” Ultimately, an ideal relationship does not only mean finding the “ideal” or a better partner, it is also about changing oneself to be a more “ideal” partner, thus creating a more mature selfhood in a relationship. Borrowing the words from one of my female respondents, Caroline, an ideal relationship should always be “beneficial to both people inside the relationship,” and that “both partners should be able to become better people” through this relationship.

However, mutual support and understanding does not mean unlimited tolerance without bottom lines. As much as my respondents are willing to support their partners, it is nevertheless crucial to establish boundaries within a romantic relationship, and the most basic and essential boundary is independence/autonomy. However, it is important to note that, within the context of the interviews with my respondents, independence/autonomy is a complicated term which contains multiple levels of meanings. First of all, at a very basic level, many students agreed that both partners within a romantic relationship should be financially independent. For instance, a female respondent, Amy, elaborated on the financial expectations both for her ideal partner and for herself in future relationship:
As long as I can earn enough money to support myself, it’s fine…as to my boyfriend, I think at least he must be able to feed himself, like he should afford whatever he wants. Like you don’t have to buy me anything, but at least you need to be able to afford your own stuff.

It is evident that Amy did not expect her ideal partner to come from a certain social class or in a certain socioeconomic status, but it is important that they don’t need to rely on each other financially. This is one of the very few occasions where respondents directly addressed their economic concerns for their ideal romantic relationships. However, it is important to notice that even within such context, the weight is put on each partner’s ability to become respectively independent and not to impede each other’s personal development, rather than on the pure desire to maintain a certain level of living standard within an intimate relationship.

For other people, independence/autonomy means individual time and space. Many respondents revealed the downsides of having a relationship that it usually costs too much time and effort, especially if it is a long-distance one. Even if it is not a long-distance relationship, being with someone inevitably means sacrificing some personal space and time. A rather extreme case would be Leo, a male student who started to consider the possibility of being celibate for life since he valued his own time and space to an extreme degree that he doubted any girl would find acceptable:

…what I really want is simply my own time and space. So I am starting to doubt if I am a celibate, or if I will eventually become a celibate in the future. I think it is really demanding for any girl to accept this bottom line of mine, like when I lived with my girlfriend in Beijing, I would rarely talk to her during the night, because [I needed some alone time to study and work]…I would prefer someone who values her time and space as I do…

Other participants in the study have also expressed similar frustration when their intimate relationships or partners violated too much of their private time and space. Even though many interviewees acknowledged the importance of being supportive and accommodating to their partners, they also realized that romantic relationships are not the only important thing in their lives, and that they also need time dedicated to their studies, work, or simply to reflecting on and
taking care of themselves. As Anne said in her interview, “normally both individuals should focus on their own work or study, and when they have additional free time, they can spend the time to accompany each other.” Taking time and space for oneself is not being constructed as selfish in these students’ vocabulary, but rather an important measure to make sure that both individuals are able to accomplish their work and succeed in their own lives. John even made it clear in his response that he thought being able to accomplish whatever he wanted to do also gives a positive feedback to his partner, because his partner also wanted the best for him.

Independence/autonomy does not only include material aspects such as financial independence or autonomous management of personal time and space, but also includes immaterial aspects such as intellectual autonomy. To many respondents, an ideal partner should be an independent person who have independent opinions, make independent decisions, and plan his/her own future. For some, being an independent person even means having a life goal or the willingness to search for the meaning and purpose of life, instead of simply “going with the flow” or doing whatever parents or the society ask for. For example, William expressed his concerns regarding his current girlfriend’s future:

I would break up with her permanently…if she becomes someone in the future who has absolutely no life goal or motivation, and would just lie down at home all day and do nothing…Well, now I think more about it, it’s not really about her not doing anything, but more about the problem of personal development…What I absolutely can’t stand is that you don’t really do anything meaningful in your life and just don’t care any more.

In fact, William’s girlfriend is currently working very hard both in her part-time jobs and her college studies. However, William was still concerned about even the slightest chance of her turning into this completely laissez-faire kind of person who does not think for herself and finds no meaning in life at all. Such idea also connects back to the belief expressed by many respondents that their ideal partners must able to engage in deep intellectual conversations with them, which would require their partners to have intellectual autonomy. A few other students
also mentioned the danger of losing independence within an intimate relationship based on their own past experience. In her recall of her previous relationship with a female teacher who was nine years older than her, Jordan, a bisexual student, expressed her deep regret for not being independent enough in the relationship:

…I was too young back then, and I did not know much about how to have a romantic relationship, and I did not really focus on my own study, so I had a really depressive and decadent life back then. Since I did not have any life goal, I was more easily subjected to her emotional manipulation.

As indicated in her words, Jordan’s previous romantic relationship was a truly problematic one because her ex-girlfriend was very controlling and manipulative. By no means should Jordan feel that her lack of independence in some degree exacerbated her being manipulated, but she did stress the importance, if not the necessity, of being independent within a romantic relationship. Although intimate relationships are about the interactions, understandings, and compromises between two people, two people should always remain two separate and independent individuals instead of merging into one entity and losing themselves in romantic relationships.

The idea of being independent/autonomous again resonates with Inglehart’s finding that young people are increasingly in favor of values such as self-expression and individual choice. Finally, it is also important to note that the ideas of mutual support and independence/autonomy are deeply intertwined and contingent upon each other. Thus, they can’t be achieved separately in an ideal relationship. Independence is the bottom line and the fundamental premise of mutual support, and mutual support entails respecting partner’s opinions and decisions which therefore allows both people to grow to their full potentials. These young students’ stress on independence and autonomy also reflects their desire to build non-patriarchal, egalitarian romantic relationships in which two individuals are not bounded by the gender norm of male domination
and female submission in the society. In the next chapter, I will discuss in greater details about how these young Chinese international students think of the issue of masculinity and femininity, and how it affects their realization of personal autonomy within intimate relationships.
Chapter 2: Masculinity and Femininity: The Negotiation of Power Dynamics

Traditionally, masculinity is constructed as being assertive, dominant, calm and protective, while femininity is seen as passive, submissive, emotional, vulnerable and needing protection. During the interviews, both male and female respondents rejected the notions of traditional masculinity and femininity within the context of their romantic relationships. They also disagree with the idea that men should be the breadwinner of the family, while women should stay in the domestic sphere and be the caregiver of the family. In other words, they actively reject the unequal gender dynamics within the romantic relationships and instead highlighting the importance of an egalitarian gender relation. Many students mentioned again the crucial role of conversation. They argue that the best model of gender relation should not be based on the stereotypical understandings of masculinity and femininity, but rather negotiated by the two partners within a romantic relationship. In this way, these young Chinese international students construct a collective identity and vision of gender relations based on the idea of gender egalitarianism.

However, in reality many respondents report that they de facto experience at least certain level of unequal gender and power relations within their own intimate relationships. Many students find themselves adhere to traditional masculinity and femininity within their relationships. Clearly, there is some degree of dissonance between what the respondents consider as the ideal gender relation within their romantic relationships and their actual experiences of gender and power relations. In addition, there is also a very interesting discrepancy between how male and female respondents make sense of and reconcile such dissonance respectively.

Most female respondents argue that their adherence to the traditional female roles and femininity in their intimate relationships should not be interpreted and understood as their
acceptance of these notions. It is rather an unintended and coincidental result caused by factors such as their love for their boyfriends. In this way, they are able to not only resolve the contradictions between their claimed unsubordinated female identity and actual conducts, but also reaffirm their agency which is jeopardized by the unequal power dynamics within their intimate relationships.

Male students’ responses, however, reveal a deeper level of intellectual conflicts on the issue of gender egalitarianism. Many of them attribute the unequal power relation within their romantic relationships to the fundamental physical and psychological gender differences between men and women. It is interesting that these male students on the one hand find the stereotypes regarding masculinity and femininity in the society illegitimate and unacceptable. On the other hand, they agree with the essentialist idea of gender differences, which at least partially leads to the patriarchal dichotomous understanding of masculinity and femininity. These male students’ acceptance and practice of the unequal power relation within romantic relationships suggests a lack of critical thinking and understanding on the roots of gender inequality. Thus, these male students’ embracement of gender egalitarianism remains on a surface level.

The stories of gender egalitarianism: a consensus across genders.

Both male and female students report that their everyday interactions with their partners are not defined by gender. Few of them say that masculinity and femininity have played important roles in their relationships. Moreover, they also reject the imperative adherence to traditional expressions of masculinity and femininity within their intimate relationships. Many students, regardless of gender identity, describe the best dynamics within a romantic relationship by the equal and mutually respectful conversations between two partners. For instance, Sean, a
straight male student described his vision of masculinity and femininity in a romantic relationship:

I think being natural is the best. You would not specifically think about stuff like masculinity or femininity and then change your behaviors based on that. I think the best scenario is like when two people in a relationship would both feel comfortable and there is no need to change.

Sean thinks that two people engaged in a romantic relationship should not be bounded by the traditional notion of masculinity and femininity in the society. They should instead find their own preferred mode of interaction which they both feel acceptable. Indeed, other male interviewees also confirmed this idea. They reject the patriarchal binary thinking that men should always be the dominant one while women should be the submissive one in an intimate relationship. They prefer to hold open conversations which give both partners equal power in their relationships. For example, Logan, a straight male, talked about his experience of sharing different responsibilities in his romantic relationships:

I don’t have a fixed view on the role of men and women in an intimate relationship…I think if one person is able to perform a certain task, then he or she should just do it…Two partners should just talk about it and find the way that both people feel the most comfortable with. I know that some of my friends, they had really traditional values that after marriage, girls should look after the household, and them the guys should go out and be the breadwinner of the family. I know a number of people found such idea very reasonable, but I personally think that this kind of idea is completely unreasonable. Because when I was dating my girlfriend, the reason why I wanted to take care of her in every aspect was because I was willing to do so, instead of being bounded by some sorts of social norms.

Like Logan, many other male respondents also oppose the definitive role of masculinity and femininity in determining their interactions with their girlfriends. They portray their gender relations within romantic relationships as egalitarian and even actively challenge some patriarchal and sexist gender relations. Likewise, female respondents also attest that the traditional norms regarding masculinity and femininity do not play a determinant role in their relationships. For instance, Anne, a straight female described her views toward masculinity and femininity in her own romantic relationships:
Fundamentally, I don’t really agree with the idea of gender binary. But I do think that in everyday life of us, there is no need to especially avoid such thing. Since I was really young, I have always felt that, masculinity and femininity, or some gender self-identification [were not something necessary]. Like I don’t think femininity is something that I must possess, and I don’t feel like masculinity is something that men must have either. I think they are merely different characteristics, so in my most significant relationship, I think we basically did not have any idea about [different gender roles], and we did not really have any distinction between masculinity and femininity.

It is clear that Anne does not agree with the binary thinking of genders at a fundamental level. In a sense, she thinks that the best “gender relation” is “no gender relation.” And both partners should be able to behave in a way that they enjoy without feeling the restrictions of external social norms regarding different genders. Anne’s idea about the “genderless” power relation within a romantic relationship is rather idealistic among all the female respondents. Other female students are more alert to the prevalence of patriarchal idea of male domination and the amount of men who still hold these beliefs in the society.

For example, some female respondents mentioned the term “直男癌” (Zhinan’Ai), which is typically considered as an embodiment of the patriarchal gender norms. Zhinan’Ai literally translates into “straight guy cancer.” It is a popular term in Chinese society nowadays to describe obnoxious, sexist, macho, and usually straight men who possess and practice toxic masculinity. There is a consensus among Chinese women that men who are Zhinan’Ai would strictly follow the patriarchal gender norms in romantic relationships. For instance, they would expect their female partners to stick to traditional femininity, such as being gentle, caring and submissive. Therefore, many female respondents made it clear that they would never enter an intimate relationship with a Zhinan’Ai because Zhinan’Ai would force them to commit to the traditional femininity, which clearly jeopardizes their envisioning of an egalitarian power and gender relation within romantic relationships.
In addition to Zhinan’Ai, many female respondents also mentioned a similar term, “钢铁直男” (Gangtie Zhinan, which literally means “steel straight guy”), which describes stubborn men with unfavorable patriarchal masculine characteristics who are not willing to change these traits. Compared to Zhinan’Ai, the term Gangtie Zhinan is less emotionally charged and less critical. Although Gangtie Zhinan has less negative connotations, it points out a crucial unfavorable characteristic that these men possess, which is the unwillingness and inability to change their patriarchal beliefs and practices within romantic relationships. Since most female respondents consider the gender relations between two people in an intimate relationship should be figured out through open and egalitarian conversations, Gangtie Zhinan evidently fail to meet these female students’ expectation of gender egalitarianism.

Reference to Zhinan’Ai and Gangtie Zhinan are significant because they reflect female Chinese international students’ unanimous awareness of both the problems with traditional construction of masculinity, and their unwillingness to adhere to traditional construction of femininity. The popularity of these two terms also signal the prevalence of men who practice such masculinity in Chinese society. Consequently, young Chinese women face many struggles to form their ideal egalitarian romantic relationships. Moreover, it appears that male and female students have different levels of awareness of the problems associated with patriarchal construction of masculinity and femininity, despite that they are both in favor of gender egalitarianism within intimate relationships. Using emotionally charged terms, female students seem to have a more concrete idea and potentially personal experience of unequal power relation within a romantic relationship caused by male domination.

Despite their vocal rejection of unequal gender relations, both male and female students de facto experience certain unequal power dynamics within their romantic relationships. Such
experience evidently contradicts with these students’ liberated and egalitarian beliefs. Many students, both male and female, did realize such incoherence within their responses during the interviews, and thus tried to come up with explanations to help themselves make sense of such inconsistency. However, there is a very interesting divergence in the mechanisms that male and female students adopted to reconcile their internal contradictions.

*Unequal power relations: Female experiences.*

Many female students acknowledge that they sometimes experience unequal power dynamics vis-à-vis their boyfriends in intimate relationships. However, nearly all of them reject to attribute their experiences to gender factors. They do not consider such power imbalance as a reflection of the unequal gender relation between their boyfriends and themselves. Instead, they use factors other than gender to explain why they had such experience. In this way, they protect their personal beliefs and identity centered on gender egalitarianism from being threatened by these experiences. For instance, Mary, a bisexual female tried to explain why her boyfriend has been in the dominant position within their romantic relationship:

> He had always been in the dominant position in our relationship, but I don’t think that was because of our gender roles. It was mostly because he was older than me, and because of our age difference, he was mostly leading me in doing all kinds of stuff in our relationship.

It is clear that Mary realized the problematic power relation between her boyfriend and her, but she attributed such power inequality to the age difference instead of gender differences. She saw her boyfriend’s dominant role in their relationship as a senior providing guidance to a junior. Similarly, Anne, a straight female student, talked about how her most significant intimate relationship serves as a negative example of the power relations between two partners:

> I think among all my romantic relationships, well I think this one was the most significant because it served as a negative example of how two people should get along within a relationship. I think in my relationship with him, he was in the dominant position. I think the reason why there
emerged dominant and submissive position was because he was older than me. In addition, I did think that he was more knowledgeable than me in some areas, and he did offer me some guidance in my life. That was why there was the establishment of this unequal relationship between us.

Anne offered an intersectional analysis of the unequal power dynamics within her romantic relationship. She attributed her unequal relationship to her boyfriend being both senior to her and more knowledgeable than her. A common theme between Mary and Anne is that neither of them thought that they were acting in accordance with traditional femininity, even though they did both hold an inferior and submissive position within their intimate relationships. Many female respondents find it hard to undo gender within their romantic relationships. They often find themselves adhering to traditional womanhood such as being submissive in power relations to their boyfriends or doing all the housework. However, their rationale for sticking to traditional femininity is not because they identify with such patriarchal binary idea. In fact, we see these female students actively try to disassociate themselves from these patriarchal and traditional female images verbally as a way to preserve their autonomy within unequal romantic relationships.

However, the most intriguing case has to be that of Amelia’s. Amelia is the only Christian respondent among all my participants, and she is the only female interviewee who earnestly felt comfortable with traditional femininity, despite her belief in gender egalitarianism. Amelia was once in a very unequal romantic relationship with a manipulative and controlling ex-boyfriend. Her boyfriend expected her to strictly conform to traditional femininity such as doing all the housework and obeying him. Her ex-boyfriend firmly believed in such patriarchal idea and was not willing to change his attitudes at all. In this relationship, Amelia did conform to traditional femininity as his boyfriend wished, but she denied that her conformity was due to her identification with such femininity or her approval of the unequal gender relations within romantic relationships. She saw her adherence to traditional femininity as a personal choice
rather than a forced decision. For instance, she attributed her practices of traditional femininity to her love for his boyfriend:

[I am willing to adhere to the traditional femininity] not because I am a girl, but because I love you very much, and I wish you can have a good rest today, so I can do these things [e.g. housework]. But I also wish that my partner, when he helps me do some stuff, it is not because of her responsibility as a man or some other social responsibilities. I hope he could do these out of his love for me as well. Like he wants to take care of me, and that’s why he wants to do it for me.

Therefore, it is clear that Amelia rejected the idea that women should adhere to traditional femininity simply because of their gender. She stressed on love and expected certain levels of reciprocity from her partner out of the same reason. Amelia does not want to be seen as being subject to these gender norms, and instead presents her behaviors as a personal choice.

During the interview Amelia also talked about how she wanted to become a traditional mother who puts children and family before her career, unlike her mother who values work over family. It is interesting that Amelia saw her mother as a progressive female figure, but did not see herself, who is the opposite of her mom, as being regressive. She instead stressed on individual choice. By emphasizing personal choice, Amelia is able to secure her individual agency and autonomy, and presents herself a young liberated woman who believes in gender egalitarianism rather than an ignorant and powerless victim of the patriarchal system.

Amelia’s attempt to reaffirm her individual agency is also reflected in the way that she reconciled her ex-boyfriend’s control over her. Amelia mentioned during the interview that her ex-boyfriend used to have some very controlling behaviors such as prohibiting her from going out by herself or talking to male strangers. Amelia said that for one moment she felt like she was “locked up” by her ex-boyfriend, but then she quickly clarified that her ex-boyfriend did these things only because “he was concerned about [her] safety.” She further justified his behaviors as excusable by saying that he did not know about her living environment as a foreigner, and that he did not fully understand her experience. Amelia clearly found her ex-boyfriend’s actions
troubling, but as other female students who experienced power imbalance within romantic relationships, she denied that such problematic power dynamics had anything to do with gender within her relationship. Therefore, we still see many female students struggling from the internal contradictions between their belief in gender egalitarianism and their experiences of unequal power dynamics within their romantic relationships. They go through a series of reconciliatory steps to make sense of their experiences as well as to preserve their liberated ideologies and identity.

*Unequal power relations: Male experiences.*

Many male students also mentioned the unequal gender relations within their romantic relationships. They often find themselves being in the dominant position and their girlfriends in the submissive status. Such experience clearly contradicts to the gender egalitarianism that they claim. Unlike their female counterparts, male students often use gender differences between men and women to justify for the unequal power relations between their girlfriends and themselves. It seems that they do not consider their domination within romantic relationships as problematic or going against their gender egalitarian belief, as it stems from the “natural” gender differences rather than from conforming to the patriarchal construct of masculinity and femininity in the society.

For instance, John, a straight male student, said that when he and his girlfriend went on a trip and had to communicate with local people as a couple, he would always be the one making the conversations and dealing with all the emergency situations. It is evident that John took a dominant position in his intimate relationship as well as in social interactions vis-à-vis his girlfriend. He also felt the need to be protective of his girlfriend. However, John does not
consider such mode of interaction between his girlfriend and him as unequal, because he thinks it
is a natural outcome of the gender difference between men and women. He said that his
girlfriend, “as a girl,” is simply not good at socializing and dealing with emergencies, and that’s
why he felt he needed to step in, take control of the situation and protect his girlfriend.
Moreover, John talked about how he needed to endure his girlfriend’s rage when they had a
fight:

I think girls are just like, like I read something online before, that men and women had different
physical compositions, so it is natural that woman need more time to let their emotions go away
and calm down after they got mad. And you can’t go away during the time when she tried to calm
down, like if you accompany her to calm down then everything would be fine. But if you walk
away, and then she finds out that you are gone after she calms down, she would just get angry
again…when girls are arguing with you, they are usually unleashing their anger, so I don’t really
argue with them, because I am more like, you know, we can have some discussions about these
issues.

It is interesting that John does not seem to realize that he is making some essentialist
remarks about not only his girlfriend, but also himself implicitly. He thinks that his partner can’t
well control her emotion nor be reasonable because she is a woman, while he is calm and
reasonable because he is a man. In this way, he conforms to the traditional notion of masculinity.
However, he does not consider his adherence to traditional masculinity as a conformity to the
patriarchal gender apparatus in the society but rather a reaction to the “natural” gender
differences, so his behaviors as well as the unequal power dynamics in his relationships are
justified. Therefore, in this way John is able to preserve and defend his idea of gender
egalitarianism as his actions are not guided by the patriarchal gender norms in the society.

Like John, many other male respondents sometimes fail to fully recognize that
masculinity and femininity are social constructs. Therefore, they don’t suffer from the same level
of internal conflicts as their female peers because they do not consider their conformity to
traditional masculinity as contradictory to their belief of gender egalitarianism. There is clearly a
discrepancy between male and female students’ conceptual understanding of gender egalitarianism, masculinity and femininity. Perhaps such difference is related to the different experience between men and women under the patriarchal gender norms. As a female student Mary puts it:

I don’t think that they [male students] are entirely unaware of these problematic ideas regarding masculinity and femininity. I don’t think they believe in patriarchal values or they just don’t care. However, I do think as men, they are not as sensitive and resistant towards these ideas as I do as a woman. I am very antagonistic toward someone who has patriarchal values, but I don’t think they feel the same level of emotions as I do.

However, there are also some rather rare moments when male respondents did realize that they are actively perpetuating the traditional masculinity and practicing domination within their romantic relationships. In these cases, male respondents express greater internal confusion and conflicts. For instance, Logan, a straight male student talked about his internal battle between believing in gender egalitarianism and feeling compelled to conform to traditional masculinity:

I think women should be able to work just as men do. However, I also feel a little bit conflicted because, if I make less money than my girlfriend, or if I contribute to the family or the relationship less than her financially, I would feel embarrassed in front of my friends, family and relatives. I would feel that I am useless…but the solution for me is to make more money. Maybe I would talk to my girlfriend because I feel uncomfortable that she is making more money, but I would never, never ask her to stay at home or say she can’t make more money than I do. It’s never going to happen. I would feel uncomfortable [for making less money than her], but I will only work harder.

Logan firmly believes in his girlfriend’s agency and autonomy in her career. He does not want to be associated with those sexist men who do not allow their female partners to work or do not accept the fact that their female partners are more competent than themselves. He feels deeply troubled by the social pressure of conforming to traditional masculinity as well as his uncontrollable emotional reactions resulted from his patriarchal gender socialization in the past. In rare cases like this, we see male students can sometimes be equally conflicted between their belief in gender egalitarianism and their unwilling conformity to traditional masculinity as their
female peers. They sometimes also struggle to defend their egalitarian beliefs and identity in everyday practices.

In conclusion, on a conceptual level both male and female students believe in the idea of gender egalitarianism and have incorporated such belief into their construction of an open and liberated identity. However, in everyday interactions within romantic relationships, these students still experience unequal power dynamics as a result of their adherence to traditional masculinity and femininity. Both male and female students experience internal struggles to reconcile such contradiction despite adopting different rationales.
Chapter 3: Constructing a new Sexual, Generational and National Identity

All Chinese international students who have participated in my study, regardless of their gender and sexual orientation, have a consensus about premarital sex and premarital cohabitation. Almost all of them are clearly aware of the social prejudice against premarital sex and the sexist myth around female virginity and chastity in the Chinese society. They actively reject these gender norms and try to distinguish themselves from those people who still believe in these patriarchal and sexist ideas. In this way, they are able to construct their own identities as being members of a young, sexually liberated and international community as opposed to the older generation or the more traditional and conservative counterparts back home.

Therefore, there is no doubt that the young generation of Chinese international students have broken away from more traditional and patriarchal understandings of sexual intimacy and sexuality. They consciously construct a novel, collective and liberal sexual subjectivity which centers on sexual freedom and autonomy in contrast to the more conservative sexual subjectivity of their parental generation. In this way, sexual intimacy serves as a site for Chinese international students to negotiate not only their sexual subjectivity but also generational identity, for some people even national and cosmopolitan identities. However, these students at the same time are still influenced by those traditional patriarchal ideas and struggle to maintain their newly conceptualized identity under such pressure. Their novel sexual subjectivity remains precarious, and their enactments of sexual freedom and autonomy remains limited.

Rejecting chunü qingjie, embracing sexual freedom.

Nearly all interviewees agree, regardless of their differences in gender identities and sexual orientations, that premarital sex in a committed romantic relationship is permissible. They
are aware of the problematic patriarchal sexual norms which are prevalent in today’s Chinese society. These sexual norms often include a double-standard for men and women in their sexual behaviors. For instance, a woman is expected to remain a virgin until her marriage, and failure to conform to such norm will result in shaming of her. A non-virgin female is therefore seen as not chaste and a sexual deviant. Therefore, these patriarchal sexual norms are used to regulate and police women’s sexual behaviors in Chinese society. My interviewees illustrate an unanimous rejection of these norms. For instance, Logan, a straight male student elaborated on how he viewed the idea of women remaining virgin before marriage and people who still embrace this norm:

Personally, I think the idea of not being able to accept premarital sex is completely unreasonable, so as some guys nowadays who have 处女情结 (Chunü Qingjie, female virginity complex, the wish for finding only virgin girlfriends). I think [sexual behaviors] are entirely based on personal choice, and as long as two partners have consent, any choice that does not cause harm to each other can be accepted. I think being a virgin or not, that depends on the choice of the girl herself before you met her. It only represents what she has done in the past, but says nothing about her personality or belief systems...You can’t judge a girl or define her nature by what she has done in the past. I think there is absolutely no reason for this. Sometimes you hear very bad expressions to describe these behaviors [having sex before marriage], like someone would say that this girl had a very licentious and shameless private sexual life, but I find it [condemning the girl] completely unacceptable.

It is evident that Logan rejects the entire idea of female virginity and how it is used to morally condemn women who engage in premarital sex. He is also very much against the idea of “slut-shaming” as he believes that virginity status should never be considered as a defining factor of a woman’s characters. Instead, he considers “premarital sex” as an entirely personal choice and should not be exploited by social norms to police women’s sexuality and sexual behaviors. Similarly, Amy, a straight female student also talks about how Chunü Qingjie does not make sense to her. She especially points out how the sexual double-standard for men and women is fundamentally problematic as it creates an unequal power dynamics between the two partners in a relationship:
If my boyfriend has *Chunü Qingjie*, then I will definitely break up with him. The thing about virginity is that, if you are a male virgin, and you want to find a girl who is also a virgin, this is totally acceptable for me, and I am willing to break up with you if I am no longer a virgin. However, if you are not a male virgin, and you have slept with numerous girls, and you still want your girlfriend to be a virgin, then I think there is something wrong with your character or personality.

It is clear that Amy is not against the idea of virginity, if it can be applied equally to both female and male partners. However, she recognizes that in most cases it is the male partner who makes this kind of unequal and unreasonable demand of their girlfriend’s sexuality. Therefore, the essential reason why Amy has trouble with the patriarchal sexual norms such as *Chunü Qingjie* is because it places additional moral and sexual restrictions on women than men.

In addition, many respondents also express the idea, either explicitly or implicitly, that these traditional patriarchal sexual norms and beliefs are only held by an older generation or other more conservative peers in China. They try to distinguish themselves from these people who still believe in these patriarchal values. In this way, they actively construct a collective identity as a new generation of liberal and open-minded international students who welcome sexual freedom and autonomy. For instance, Mary, a bisexual female, mentions one of her conversations with her mom during the interview:

> My mom would talk to me about sex in my intimate relationships and she would warn me that I must be careful with my choices [about sex] in my relationships. Like she would discourage me from having sex with a guy before marriage because [it would hurt] my virginity. She was from the really traditional generation in China, and when she told me about all these I was already in high school and has already formed my own ideas and values around sexual intimacy. So I really didn’t like her ideas, like you are giving away something precious and valuable to others. I really hate such idea, and it’s just awful, really awful.

Amy clearly finds her mother’s ideas about premarital sex and female virginity illogical and incompatible with her own values. She also brings up the idea of female sexual autonomy in her answers. She disapproves the idea that her virginity is a valuable “object” that can be taken, lost, or given away to someone else. Therefore, she actively rejects the objectification and commodification of female sexuality and female body. Additionally, she also emphasizes on her
mother’s identity of being a member of an older and more traditional community in China. In this way, she is able to draw a clear boundary between her mother and herself: in contrast to her more traditional and conservative mother, she is a young, open-minded female of the new era of globalization who rejects objectification of her body and embraces positive female sexuality and sexual autonomy. In such process of identity construction, Amy constructs her sexual subjectivity in relation to her other identities such as gender identity, generational identity, and even national identity. Such process also reflects the important role of intersectionality in constructing one’s sexuality and sexual subjectivity.

Indeed, many respondents share very similar sentiments toward their parents and other more traditional people from the older generation. In addition, there are also a few respondents who mention the difference between Chinese international students like themselves, and other Chinese students who have not studied abroad for an extensive amount of time. Some students, regardless of gender and sexual orientation, claimed that compared to their peers back home in China, they are more similar to American peers in their values and ideas on the issue of sexual freedom. In this way, some respondents also try to add their international or global identity as another layer in their sexual subjectivity (See Chapter 5 for further discussion of cultural influences). Therefore, the young Chinese international students navigate through their multifaceted identities and formulate a consistent narrative of their beliefs on sexual intimacy as well as their sexual subjectivity, which are marked by characteristics like liberal, open, international and egalitarian.
Sexual freedom and autonomy: Instrumentality vs. pleasure.

Not only do many respondents oppose traditional, patriarchal beliefs about premarital sex and sexuality in Chinese society, they also vigorously stress the importance and even necessity of having premarital sex in a committed romantic relationship. For instance, Jordan, a bisexual female student elaborates on why she considers premarital sex as necessary for her in an intimate relationship:

I always think that premarital sex and premarital cohabitation are permissible. I even think that people should have premarital sex. Because if you don’t, and then you get married and find out that your sex life is not good, then you are basically screwed. In general I think it’s just a normal and reasonable thing to do…I was really surprised to find that some of my friends still cannot accept premarital sex, but since that’s not my business, I did not say anything to them about it.

It is evident that premarital sex is a natural thing for Jordan. She seems to suggest that the de-stigmatization and normalization of premarital sex have already reached a rather high degree in the society, or at least among the young generation. She appears to have this assumption that her friends who are from the same generation as her should possess similar open and liberal ideas regarding premarital sex, which is why she was shocked when the reality contradicts with her expectation. Her words allude to the fact that the expanded sexual freedom compared to the older generation in China might be available to a limited population within the younger generation.

Jordan also suggests that premarital sex is an important and integral part of her romantic relationships, which is also attested by many other interviewees. However, she seems to say that premarital sex is crucial in her relationship only because it serves a function, which is to diagnose any potential problems with her sexual life before she moves to the next stage of her relationship, namely marriage, too fast without knowing these problems. Although she insinuates that sexual intimacy can produce pleasure, she mostly focuses on the practical aspect of it. Highlighting the instrumental function over pleasure and delight is a common theme which also
appears in other respondents’ answers. Jenniviens, a female student who prefers not to label her sexual orientation explains her viewpoint on premarital sex in her romantic relationship:

I have always had a pretty permissive attitude toward premarital sex and premarital cohabitation. When I think of premarital sex right now, I think it is a necessary process that you need to go through before getting married, just like premarital cohabitation. I think it’s necessary because it’s a process of mohe between two people…I would prefer to mohe with this person before finally deciding that I want to spend the rest of my life with this person and entering marriage with this person.

Jenniviens considers premarital sex as important in her romantic relationships because it offers the opportunity for both partners to mohe, which is the idea of adjusting to each other in a romantic relationship referenced by most respondents (for more discussion on mohe, see chapter 1). There is no doubt that Jenniviens thinks that sexual harmony between two partners are important, but similar to Jordan, she exclusively accentuates on the practical and functional aspect of premarital sex.

In addition, most respondents report that they rarely have open discussions about what they enjoy and what they don’t enjoy in sex with their partners in their intimate relationships. They often find such discussion too “awkward.” Even if they have done it on rare occasions, it was usually very brief and informal chats which make the topic seem less serious. Moreover, very few of them said that they have actively expressed their sexual needs and desires to their partners. Considering how most interviewees think open conversations are crucial in an intimate relationship (see Chapter 1), their lack of communication with their partners on the issue of sex is therefore truly remarkable. Being away from the Chinese society allows these students to be free from the embodiments of the patriarchal values in the society which restrict their free expressions and enactments of the new liberal sexual subjectivity. However, the unease to open up discussions about sex even within a more open social environment suggests that these students might still have some difficulty being honest with their own sexuality and sexual
subjectivity. They still face some internal struggles when translating what they conceptually comprehend or believe into everyday sexual practices. Thus, the clear distinction that these students draw between themselves and the older Chinese generation might in fact be less definite than what they thought. We see a continuation of silence surrounding the topic of sex from the older generation to the younger generation, even if the young people have broken away from the more conservative social and cultural environment. Hence, there might exist a continuity of some traditional ideas or negative sentiments associated with premarital sex across generations.

However, there is one unique case which stands out among all the respondents. John, a straight male student, particularly emphasizes the pleasure of sex. He was very vocal about his opinions about sex during the entire interview. I also feel that he has thought about the nature of sex very thoroughly before the interview and has integrated his values on sex into his core value system and personal identity, which is very different from the rest of the respondents who have expressed little deep intellectual thinking about the nature of sex. Although his case is truly remarkable, it is hard to say his experience and ideas are by any means representative, even within such a small sample of my study. I can only say that there might have already appeared some Chinese international students who have invested significant amount of effort into thinking about the question of sex in a more intellectual manner. But generally speaking, these cases are very rare and the degree to which young Chinese international students have liberated themselves from the traditional sexual norms is still an open question.

*Struggles within: sexual agency/autonomy and patriarchal upbringings.*

The understanding and experience of female sexuality and sexual autonomy of Chinese international students also provide evidence that while these students enjoy more sexual freedom
and autonomy than the older generation, they are still greatly influenced by many traditional patriarchal sexual norms, even if they sometimes consciously transgress them. Moreover, gender plays a crucial role in the experience of sexual intimacy, sexual agency and bodily autonomy. Indeed, female Chinese international students often face additional challenges to maintain their newly formed sexual subjectivity and suffer from severe internal conflicts between their sexual socialization in China and their newly established belief system.

Although nearly all male interviewees reject patriarchal sexual norms like female virginity and chastity which regulate and police women’s sexuality, they still perpetuate the idea of female as the “gatekeeper” of sex implicitly in their responses. Therefore, they not only in some degree ignore women’s sexual autonomy, but also reinforce the binary thinking of male and female sexuality as active and passive respectively. Specifically, men are constructed as the active “penetrators” in sex, while women are the passive “penetrated” who can only reject sex but not initiate sexual behaviors. Therefore, their understanding of female sexuality reflects that their rejection and criticism of the traditional sexual norms is still very limited. For example, Leo, a straight male student talks about his understanding of female sexuality during the interview:

Before, I used to think that premarital sex was not okay for me. But right now I feel that as long as the girl agrees to premarital sex, then it’s okay with me. I changed my mind mainly because I used to think that girls would hate premarital sex, but then later I found that girls can also have sexual desires…yeah I found that girls can also be sexually active and demanding.

It is clear that Leo subscribed to the patriarchal ideals about female sexuality in the past. His former ideas resonate with the typical patriarchal belief about female sexuality that women simply don’t have sexual desires and can only be the passive receiver in a sexual relationship. Although Leo has clearly changed his ideas over the years, he is still not able to fully get away with the influence of these patriarchal perceptions and understandings. For instance, Leo never
questions his own sexuality. He seems to suggest that he is sexually available at any time, but the girls on the contrary can turn him down, and that they are the decisive factor of whether he can engage in sexual behaviors or not. Leo illustrates the internalization of patriarchal construction of male sexuality. Such construction is problematic because it not only perpetuates the stereotypical image of women as the “gatekeeper” of sex, but also reinforces a stereotypical image of men as being always sexually available.

Similarly, some other male respondents also report that their girlfriends are the only “barrier” in their sexual lives. They have attempted to initiate penile-vaginal sex with their girlfriends, but sometimes they failed because their girlfriends “were not ready” or “were too scared of sexual intercourse.” A few of them even report that when they had intimate sexual behaviors with their girlfriends, their girlfriends would “freeze” in bed and would not give any responses to them. In these cases where they detected fear or lack of response from their girlfriends, all of them would stop the sexual initiation because they “fully respect their girlfriend.”

Therefore, it is evident that these male students still consider themselves as the initiators of sex while seeing their girlfriends as the ones who can only accept or reject their sexual attempts. Getting rid of the patriarchal myth around female “sexual gatekeeper” is crucial since such myth fosters a stereotypical understanding of female and male sexuality respectively and thus restricts the full sexual autonomy and freedom of not only women, but also men at the same time. However, from the words of my male respondents, clearly there is still a long way to go.

I can only infer that these male interviewees might still be influenced by some traditional and patriarchal sexual norms from their responses and the interpretation of the underlying messages. Female students’ responses, on the other hand, offer much more direct and explicit
evidence of how they not only experience but also struggle from the pressure of those traditional patriarchal sexual norms, especially those directly target women and their sexualities. For example, Mary, a bisexual female, explains in great details how she feels conflicted internally on the issue of sex:

Frankly, I think sex is only a normal behavior of our everyday life. But what’s weird is that, sometimes there is still something in my mind that prevents me from engaging in discussions about sex. I definitely think that I am still very much influenced by the societal norms. Even though I think we don’t need to hide this thing [sex] at all, but I will do it anyway sometimes…like I know there is nothing to hide, but I just have this kind of uncontrollable idea and behavior, and I sometimes feel subtly awkward [talking about sex]…I just really can’t control myself. Although rationally speaking there is nothing about sex that I can’t talk about, and sex is a very, very, very normal behavior, I still have some strange feelings and thoughts emotionally.

Mary well explains above how she feels this intense yet irresolvable internal conflict between the values that she was taught from her upbringing and those she truly identifies with after her own personal navigation in forming her sexual subjectivity. She also highlights her inability to identify the exact cause of her inner conflicts, which alludes to the fact that patriarchal values are deeply embedded in the society and have been normalized into the discourses of sexual intimacy. Though invisible, these values are omnipresent in the society and it’s impossible to be free from their influences. While Mary identifies as an open and liberal young woman who feels completely comfortable with sex, she cannot help being affected by the stigma and silence around sex in the society, which negates her enjoyment of the newly formed sexual subjectivity and autonomy. Mary attempted but failed to preserve her own sexual subjectivity and sexual autonomy from the presumptuous patriarchal social norms around sex. As a result, she feels that her natural feelings have betrayed her beliefs. Mary’s experience shows that the full embrace of sexual freedom and autonomy might be a much more complicated process than simply realizing the problems with patriarchal sexual norms in theory, which does not resolve the deeply psychological pressure caused by these patriarchal sexual norms.
Similarly, Amelia, a straight female student, also talked about her internal conflict after having the first sexual experience:

I think I have always been open-minded growing up in China, and I never had the idea of protecting my virginity and save it for marriage. But after having sex for the first time, I felt that I am a used good or damaged good. I did not tell my true feelings to anyone after having sex for a really, really long time…This is how my brain was telling me. Maybe I have received information like this before, but I did not realize it [until then]. Maybe this is why I had those ideas and feelings.

Both Mary and Amelia appear to have experienced enormous internal tensions and have even questioned their own belief system. It is evident that their enactments of liberated female sexuality have been greatly challenged and even sometimes defeated by the uncontrollable feelings caused by the implicit patriarchal sexual norms. Their stories reveal that the construction of one’s sexual subjectivity and sexuality takes place on multiple levels. The young Chinese international students’ construction of an open and liberal sexual subjectivity involves not only the rejection of traditional patriarchal sexual norms on a cognitive level, but also correspondingly appropriate emotional reactions to these liberal values as well as physical behaviors which are consistent with these values. Any dissonance taking place between any two levels in this identity-constructing-system will result in a question for the validity and authenticity of such identity.

In conclusion, although the young Chinese international students have challenged many aspects of the traditional patriarchal sexual norms in the Chinese society and constructed a new collective sexual subjectivity which centers around more open and liberal ideas, it is evident that both male and female students are still influenced by some traditional patriarchal sexual norms in the society, either explicitly or implicitly. Such influence might result in some internal contradictions within the identity constructing process as it often creates discrepancies between cognitive, emotional and behavioral levels. As a result, the newly constructed sexual subjectivity
of the young Chinese international students is in fact very precarious. The achievement in sexual freedom and autonomy might not be as stable and expansive as what they expressed during the interviews. In addition, it must be noted that the entire discussion of premarital sex in this chapter is solely set in the context of a serious and committed (and often heterosexual) relationship, which is considered as a legitimate form of romantic relationship in Chinese society. In the next chapter, I am going to discuss how gender, sexual intimacy, sexuality and sexual orientation unfold and influence each other in less accepted forms of intimate relationships such as casual sexual relationships and same-sex relationships.
Chapter 4: Transgressions: Casual sexual relationship & Same-sex experience

Nearly all Chinese international students who participated in my study accepted and practiced premarital sex within a committed and serious relationship. Although sex might have served more as a practical function in intimate relationships more than as a means to seek pleasure for these students, it has become an integral part of their romantic relationships and a fairly common practice. However, many of the interviewed students made a clear distinction between the meaning of sex in a committed relationship versus in a casual sexual relationship. Most participants agreed that sex in a casual sexual relationship is merely about satisfying physical desires and thus requires almost no emotional attachment or commitment as premise. Casual sexual relationships are therefore trouble-free, entanglement-free and sometime even “loose.” However, sex within a serious and committed relationship is more about the expression of love and the deepening of intimacy. Therefore, many found it necessary to wait at least a certain amount of time for the emotional attachment to form before having sexual intimacy, especially sexual intercourse, in a serious relationship. In these serious relationships, sex seemed like a special celebration of the development of two people’s romance. Since a significant amount of commitment to romance is usually involved in a committed relationship, participants in them often treat sex more seriously.

Although most respondents found the practice of casual sexual relationships acceptable, which is consistent with the liberal sexual subjectivity that they identify with, their acceptance of casual sexual relationship is much lower than their acceptance of premarital sex in a committed relationship. Almost none of the respondents have tried a casual sexual relationship before. Some students made it clear that they would definitely not engage in sex unaccompanied by emotional connection, although they did not find it problematic in a normative sense. Others rejected both
the idea and the practice of casual sex completely. Interestingly, it was overwhelmingly male students who expressed more negative attitudes and disapproval toward casual sexual relationships, while female students usually expressed more positive attitudes and willingness toward experimenting with these relationships.

These students’ attitudes toward and understandings of casual sexual relationships confirm again the idea from last chapter, that Chinese international students might lack an association between sex and pleasure and merely see sex as a functional practice. In addition, they might still be influenced by the implicit prejudice against casual sexual relationships in the Chinese society. Most importantly, the gender divide among Chinese international students is particularly intriguing. Perhaps in construction of one’s sexual subjectivity, female students are more willing to explore their own sexuality in multiple ways with more flexibility that their male counterparts.

There is also a similar phenomenon in the respondents’ attitudes toward and experience of non-heteronormative relationships. All students, regardless of their gender and sexual orientation, underscored that non-heteronormative sexualities and sexual minorities should not only be tolerated but also respected just as heterosexuality and cisgender straight people are in the society. In addition, many students, including straight students, had been exposed to same-sex relationships or homoerotic contents before they came to the US for college. Interestingly, female students seem to experience more flexibility with their sexuality in terms of same-sex experiences or relationships. Both straight and bisexual identifying female students had actively explored their sexual orientation. In contrast, a much smaller number of male respondents had thought about the issue of sexual orientation. Although many of them have experienced seemingly homoerotic behaviors in high school, they rejected labelling these behaviors as sexual.
In addition, they denied the association between these experiences and their own sexual orientation. In fact, many claimed their identities as “straight men” and argued that homosexuality did not have anything to do with them.

_Casual sexual relationships and the construction of sexual subjectivity._

Many respondents distinguished sex in a casual sexual relationship, such as hook-ups, “friends with benefits,” open relationships, etc. from sex in a committed romantic relationship. They found that the former is purely about the satisfaction of a natural urge and therefore does not need to be taken too seriously. However, the latter serves as a landmark of the formation and development of two people’s emotional attachment. As such, one can express his/her sexuality more freely without concern in a casual sexual relationship because there is little expectation for any kind of emotional commitment or the continuation of such relationship in the future. For instance, Caroline, a lesbian student explained how she thought sex was different in her committed relationship with her girlfriend and in a casual sexual relationship,

I think in a committed romantic relationship, sexual intimacy should need at least some levels of emotional attachment. Although my girlfriend and I already had sex before we officially got together, I had feelings for her and she was not like completely having no feelings for me. I think I would not want to have sex with my partner unless we have already established certain levels of emotional attachment. But when I am single, I can simply [have sex with another person] as long as she is attractive.

Similarly, Alex, a bisexual male student, also said that he decided to wait for some time before having sex with his girlfriend because “after all, our relationship is not like a hook-up…I need to be more serious about it.” Therefore, it is evident that for Chinese international students, the realm of casual sexual relationships exists exclusively for exploring one’s sexual desires and gaining pleasure, and is free from the concern of developing emotional attachment or commitment.
When only thinking about casual sexual relationships, but not in practice, most interviewees found such relationship acceptable. However, they did not actively incorporate their approval of casual sexual relationships into the formation of their new sexual subjectivities. For instance, many of them stressed the prejudice and negative stereotypes of casual relationships in the society. However, unlike how they reacted to the social norms against premarital sex in committed relationships, most students did not earnestly disassociate themselves with these traditional and conservative ideas regarding casual sexual relationships in order to assert their open and liberal sexual subjectivity. Instead, many admitted that they were influenced by the social norms against casual sexual relationships. For example, Cassie, a lesbian student described her perspective on casual sexual relationships in these words,

If you ask me, I would definitely say that I don’t really care, like people should just do whatever they want. But I also sensed that, when gossiping about other people, my friends, or even myself, we might still judge these casual sexual relationships…like in China everyone agrees that these relationships are not normal.

In the last chapter, we saw that female respondents feel deeply troubled when they find themselves unwillingly adhering to traditional sexual norms such as female virginity complex. However, Cassie and many other female respondents show that there is not the same level of internal tension regarding casual sexual relationships as there is regarding premarital sex within a committed relationship. They openly acknowledged that their attitudes toward casual sexual relationships were affected by societal prejudice against casual sexual relationships. The respondents associated absolutely no guilt or shame with identifying with these traditional sexual norms against casual sexual relationships. Therefore, unlike premarital sex within a committed romantic relationship, casual sexual relationships are by no means important to the respondents, nor to the construction of their new and liberal sexual subjectivity.
Moreover, there was hardly any strong opposition among the respondents toward the negative stereotypes of casual sexual relationships. Indeed, some male students were even very vocal about how they could not imagine themselves engaging in one of these relationships. For instance, Sean, a straight male student said that he was “okay with these relationships,” but he would not “do it himself” because he thought he “maybe still [had] some negative stereotypes against casual sexual relationships.” A few other male students even rejected the idea of casual sexual relationships entirely, however without clear reasons. For example, William, a straight male student said, “I am opposed to these relationships, and I can’t picture myself doing it. I don’t know why, but I have always thought like this.” Leo, a straight male student also made a very similar comment, “Personally I can’t accept casual sexual relationships at all, and I always can’t…I just can’t.”

In contrast to male respondents, there were few female respondents who expressed such negative attitude toward casual sexual relationship. Most of them had a quite open mindset about exploring such sexual acts. For instance, Amy, a straight female student expressed her interest in potential casual sexual relationships in the future,

I think for me it’s like, so far I haven’t had these kinds of physical needs…so I would not [engage in casual sexual relationships] right now. But if I do have these kinds of needs, I will probably consider it in the future.

Although nearly none of the female respondent had tried casual sexual relationships in the past, most of them expressed a great deal of interest and curiosity in these relationships, and wanted to keep their options open for the future. The different attitudes and responses between male and female students suggests that female students might be more willing to enact their new sexual subjectivity and thus explore different kinds of sexual behaviors other than those defined by the patriarchal sexual norms. The more passive and negative attitudes of male students, coupled with their lack of clear reasoning for these attitudes, suggested that male Chinese
international students might lack a willingness to explore their sexual subjectivity and the
curiosity about their own sexuality. Moreover, these male students’ resolute attitudes suggest the
lack of desire to change their existing values and ideas towards casual sexual relationships.

Although casual sex is not considered an essential element to form these young students’
sexual subjectivity, male and female students’ disparate attitudes toward it reveals intriguing
differences in the thinking and performing of sexual subjectivity. Overall, female students
showed a higher level of willingness to enact their new sexual subjectivity and explore their
sexuality, while male students were much less willing to do so.

*Same-sex experiences and sexual fluidity.*

Similar to casual sexual relationships, same-sex relationships are considered as a
transgression to the patriarchal and heteronormative sexual order in Chinese society. In light of
this, it is interesting that all respondents expressed their respect and support for non-
heteronormative sexualities and sexual minorities. Their acceptance for these non-normative
sexualities is even higher than that of casual sexual relationships. All respondents thought it was
natural to have different sexual orientations for different people, and no discrimination or
prejudice based on sexual orientation or gender identity should be tolerated. The words of Logan,
a straight male student, well represent the general attitude of Chinese international students
toward these sexualities and sexual minority groups,

…my first initial reaction was respect…I did not find it hard to accept or anything. I think that
personal choice is personal choice, I don’t think there should be any intolerance due to religious
reasons or so-called physical aversion. I think all you need to do is to respect, and not to make
any derogatory remarks. It should be a very equal relationship [between these groups and you].

Many respondents reported that they had been exposed to homosexuality or other non-
heteronormative sexualities at an early age. Some of the respondents said that they accessed
information on these issue through online sources and materials. For instance, Amelia, a straight female student explained how she first learned about non-normative sexualities,

When I was in middle school, I realized the existence of different sexualities through reading fictions. After that I realized that boys can like boys, and girls can like girls. I think my initial source of getting such information was quite problematic, because it was like gay romance fiction and I was kind of like a腐女("rotten girl"). But I have to admit that those fictions did help me realize that these groups and sexualities exist in this world.

Amelia’s experience is quite representative of the cases of all the straight female respondents, and even among a few bisexual female respondents. Many female respondents reported that their first access to information about sexual minorities was through gay romance fictions. Amelia brought up the idea ofFunü, which describes a group of women, usually straight and young, who are extremely passionate about gay romance. Amelia realized how gay romance fictions can be problematic because these fictions as well asFunütend to romanticize and idealize homoeroticism and particularly male homosexuality, which not only produces a stereotypical view of male homosexual relationship, but also potentially exploits such relationship and the gay male community.

Besides learning from these indirect online materials, many respondents, both male and female, also reported being exposed to same-sex relationships of their friends in middle and high schools. Perhaps the most intriguing experience was the interaction between male students in middle and high schools reported by many male respondents. For instance, Sean, a straight male student described his experience in high school,

I think in high school, people always express their sexual urges to the people of the same sex. I don’t know if that was a thing in your high school, but in my high school, and also in high schools of two of my college friends’, guys would hug each other in the corridor. One guy would hug another guy in front of him, and a third guy would hug this guy from the back, and they would do hip thrust (an imitation of sexual intercourse) on each other.

Sean continued to say that students in his class did not have much reaction to such same-sex intimate behavior and they thought it was perfectly normal. It is very interesting that
although these sexually-charged practices were possibly suggestive of non-heterosexual relationships, they were not always interpreted in a sexual way. While Sean mentioned “sexual urges” were involved in the interactions between boys in his high school, most male respondents said that these behaviors should not be taken seriously as guys were simply “messing around.”

Another interesting example is John’s experience. John identified as a straight male, but had many “homoerotic” experiences in the past. However, he did not think such experiences had anything to do with his sexual identity as a straight male. Here is how he explained his experience,

I am a very feminine guy in personality, and I can be very flirty with guys who I am familiar with. But I know very clearly that I don’t like, and I don’t want to have sex with men, because I like women too much. To guys, I can be flirtatious and I can tease you, but I don’t want to have sex with you.

John’s words are particularly intriguing because he alluded to the performativity of one’s gender and sexuality. John emphasized the playful nature of his intimate interactions with other young men. However, he also made a clear distinction between his behaviors and his identity. No matter how much he flirts with another man or plays around his sexuality, at the end of the day he is still a straight man and only wants to have sex with women. In a sense, John’s behavior is similar to that of those high school boys because they are both merely playful acts clearly distinct from one’s sexual identity.

Indeed, very few male respondents reported that they had thought about the issue of sexual identity or sexual orientation. Instead, they put a lot of emphasis on their identities as straight men. For instance, Sean said that “as a straight guy,” he did not “feel that [homosexuality] had anything to do with [him].” To Sean, his straightness is unquestionable and uncontestable. However, he seemed to express a certain level of anxiety about his own sexual identity being threatened when he was asked the question of his sexual orientation. Therefore, he
seemed to have the need to assert his straightness and his lack of thinking on the issue of sexual orientation. Another example is William, who also appeared to have some anxiety and even discomfort when being asked the question of his sexual orientation. Although he said as a straight man he had never questioned his sexual orientation before, he still wanted reassurance from me during the interview that such conversation would not be found out by his girlfriend. William seemed to possess a similar kind of concern regarding his straightness. He not only needed to defend his straightness in front of me, the researcher, he was also concerned about potentially losing his straightness in front of his girlfriend, who was not even present during the interview.

Female respondents, on the other hand, were much more comfortable with the exploration and experimentation of their sexuality and sexual orientation, regardless of whether they identified as straight or queer. All three straight female respondents had experience of exploring their sexual orientation in the past, and found out they had no physical attraction for women afterwards. For instance, Amy talked about her experience during the interview,

"Because my friend told me that you need to explore, so I went to explore my sexual orientation. I might be bisexual if I am interested in girls. But I found that I did not have physical attractions to girls after exploring. I only thought that she was my really good friend, but I didn't not have any physical interest in her.

Unlike the male students, Amy and other female students actively experimented with their sexual orientation, and did not seem to feel any anxiety regarding being flexible and ambiguous about their own sexual identity. For most female respondents, sexual orientation is not a fixed and unchangeable category or identity. There was an overwhelming presence of fluidity in their choices. Sexual orientation for these women was more about the process of self-exploration and self-discovery, which is why many female interviewees emphasized the
flexibility, uncertainty and possibility of change in their sexual orientation. For instance,

Jenniviens explained why she chose not to label herself in terms of sexual orientation,

I am always thinking about this question [sexual orientation]. We talked a lot about this in Psychology that female sexuality is more fluid. I wouldn’t negate the possibility that I might be bisexual, but so far I haven’t felt really into girls. But I don’t think that I absolutely can’t like a girl, so yeah, I choose not to label myself.

Indeed, many female respondents, especially bisexual respondents, highlighted the sexual fluidity that they experienced. They did not want to unequivocally define their sexual orientation. Instead, they wanted to leave more possibility for the future, which is very similar to their attitude toward casual sexual relationships.

In conclusion, both male and female students have constructed a new sexual subjectivity which is marked by a more tolerant and liberal attitude toward non-heteronormative sexual behaviors. Therefore, the overall majority of Chinese international students find casual sexual relationships and non-heteronormative relationships acceptable. However, male students tend to have more negative attitudes toward casual sexual relationships, and rarely translate their liberal sexual subjectivity into everyday behaviors. Additionally, these male students are less willing to explore their sexual orientation and various sexual acts as the uncertainty and ambiguity involved in such self-exploration and self-questioning might threaten their established identity. While female respondents greatly enjoy the flexibility and fluidity with not only their sexual orientation, but also their options for varied sexual behaviors. Female respondents are much more likely to enact their new sexual subjectivity in sexual explorations and experiments.
Chapter 5: Identity at crossroad: Navigating Multiple Borders

In the previous chapters, I discussed how young Chinese international students constructed a new collective identity which centers on egalitarian gender relations (chapter 2), open and liberal sexual subjectivity (chapter 3), and acceptance of non-heteronormative sexual behaviors and relationships (chapter 4). Although these students are still to some extent influenced by the traditional patriarchal ideas in the Chinese society, there is no doubt that they are becoming more aware and critical of the problems associated with the force of conservative gender and sexual norms. They have departed from these norms and practices, and actively seek to establish a new identity and set of practices of their own.

Many interviewees attributed their departure from these traditional ideals to their experience of studying abroad. Some respondents commented that the American society in some aspects has achieved a greater level of gender equality and sexual freedom compared to the Chinese society. Studying in the US allow many students to be exposed to not only more open and liberal ideas, but also more diverse intimate and sexual practices which still remain invisible in China. Many students also made a clear distinction between their liberal ideologies and the more conservative ideologies of their peers studying in China. Therefore, it is evident that these young Chinese international students are influenced by their experience in the US and are very critical of the sexual conservatism embedded in the Chinese culture. In this way, internationality also becomes a central and integral part of their new collective identity.

However, it is problematic to assume that Chinese international students totally reject Chinese culture regarding intimate relationships and simply identify with the American culture. Such interpretation ignores the nuance and complexity of how Chinese international students form their own identity and ideals when navigating between two cultures. Such perspective also
constructs an oversimplified dichotomous hierarchy between American and Chinese cultures. In fact, many respondents pointed out that gender equality and sexual freedom in the US are not perfect either. They are equally critical of the unique obstacles to achieve a more open and liberal gender and sexual relation within romantic relationships in American society. At the same time, they also acknowledge that in some aspects Chinese society may have achieved more gender equality and sexual freedom within intimate relationships. For instance, they acknowledge that the tradition of women being independent and having their own careers, even after marriage is no doubt progressive.

Therefore, Chinese international students in general are critical of both Chinese and American culture in a way that they are aware of both advantages and shortcomings of the gender and sexual norms in each culture. In constructing their own ideals of intimate relationships and the new collective identity, they try to incorporate what they identify as the positive aspects in each culture. In this way, Chinese international students negotiate their national and international identities in the construction of their new collective identity concerning gender and sex within intimate relationships.

Last but not least, many respondents also mentioned that the so-called American and Chinese culture that they referred to during the interviews are merely biased perceptions and contingent on their own experiences. They recognize that people’s experiences and understandings of intimate relationships are varied based on their location in society. For instance, many interviewees mentioned how urban/rural distinction might have an impact on what is permissible or prohibited in enacting and communicating new gender and sexual identities. Therefore, whenever I mention Chinese culture or American culture in this chapter, I am only referring to the negotiated reflections and narratives of these cultural ideas of my
respondents. I by no means try to argue or present these experiences, perceptions and understandings as the accurate and complete portrayals of either Chinese or American culture, if there were ever to be such a homogenous and singular cultural form of meanings in the first place.

*The crucial role of study abroad experience.*

Many Chinese international students acknowledged the importance of their study abroad experience in crafting their own ideas regarding gender relations and sexual intimacy within their intimate relationships. Although most of them have rather open and liberal ideologies right now, many also pointed out that they might have very different viewpoints which would have been closer to those of their parents had they then been stayed in China. For instance, Sean, a straight male student explained how his study abroad experience makes him a more open person,

I think if I did not study abroad, and simply stayed in the Chinese environment all the time, I would naturally inherit whatever my parents believe in. I think studying abroad definitely makes me more open, and you do meet all kinds of people, so you develop a stronger capability to accept differences.

Sean alludes to multiple important points in his response. He acknowledges that American society is more open than Chinese society as it allows more diverse expressions of gender and sexualities. While Chinese society is still relatively traditional and conservative, which is well represented by the values of people like his parents. Study abroad experience is thus important in constructing Sean’s open and liberal ideas not only because it exposes him to all kinds of people and intimate practices in the American society which might not be necessarily visible in Chinese society, but also because it allows him to be away from his parents and thus free from the influence of their ideologies. Similarly, Jenniviens, a female student who prefers not to label her sexual orientation, explained how Chinese international students are more
conscious and aware of certain issues on gender equality and sexual freedom than their peers studying in China because of their study abroad experience,

I think for a lot of my friends who go to college in China, they are rarely influenced by more progressive ideas such as gender equality or tolerance for sexual minorities. Unless they frequently search online, they would not be able to receive these ideas easily…They are simply unaware…we Chinese international students learned to use those inclusive languages in the US. For example, you should say “partner” when you refer to the significant other of someone [instead of arbitrarily using a gendered term such as boyfriend/girlfriend], because you have to realize that you are perhaps talking to a sexual minority, so you have to be more just when you say stuff. But my friends in China they just don’t have such awareness.

Because of her study abroad experience in the US, Jenniviens is able to learn ways to be more inclusive and just in her language and communication. However, her friends in China lack access to such information and therefore do not have the same level of awareness on these issues as she does. Indeed, many other respondents also mentioned that issues like gender equality or LGBT+ rights are discussed more in public in the US. For instance, it is almost impossible to ignore the #Metoo movement in the US because it has evoked huge public participation in American society, and is even more influential in a generally more liberal spaces like college campus. Similarly, since the issue of inclusiveness, such as the usage of pronounces, has already been debated in the past on college campuses, there has developed a set of norms around such issue. Therefore, it is natural for Chinese international students like Jenniviens to pick up these norms, like “correct ways to say things” when studying at William and Mary. However, because these issues have not received enough attention nor gained discursivity in public in Chinese society, Chinese students who don’t have study abroad experience might not be able to have contact with these more liberal ideas. Therefore, studying abroad plays a crucial role in the development of Jenniviens’ and other Chinese international students’ open and liberal attitudes toward issues like inclusions of LGBT+ population as well as the construction of their new identity which centers on these issues.
Study abroad experience is not only important to Chinese international students’ construction of a more open and liberal identity as well as ideologies regarding intimate relationships. It also allows these students to enact such identity and explore more possibilities with romantic relationships and practices as they are away from their more traditional parents and conservative sexual norms. Many students talked about how they are able to enjoy more sexual freedom and gender equality in some aspects in the US. But most notably, for many lesbian and bisexual students, they can be more comfortable about their sexual orientation and are able to express their sexuality more freely in the US. For instance, Caroline, a lesbian student, explained her different experience as a result of the different societal attitudes toward LGBT+ groups and non-heteronormative sexualities in China and in the US,

I think I can truly be myself here in the US, but I need to be careful about a lot of things when I go back to China, like I would wear more girly or feminine clothes. In China, I would still feel uncomfortable even when I was coming out to my childhood friends, but here I don’t really feel that. I have only come out to some of my close friends in China…I did feel more conscious and cared more about this [sexual orientation] when I was in China. But after I came here, I am pretty reckless, and I just don’t care about this anymore. But when I return to the Chinese environment, I still feel different.

Caroline talked about how she became not only more self-conscious about how she presents herself in terms of gender expressions and behaviors, but also troubled by her lesbian identity in China because of the unfavorable environment and social norms toward sexual minorities and people who transgress traditional masculinity and femininity. In contrast, she did not need to intentionally change her behaviors to conform to more heteronormative sexual norms in the US and thus enjoyed more freedom in enacting her gender and sexual identity. Study abroad experience is particularly crucial for sexual minority students like Caroline because it allows them to not only express their true identity, but also be more honest to their identity.

Caroline, and a few bisexual students, also talked about how it’s easier for them to find a partner
and engage in a romantic and sexual relationship in the US because the social environment is friendlier for sexual minorities. For instance, Caroline said,

I think it is easier for me to find a partner in US than in China. First, more people have come out here. And then there are also clubs in the school, and there are dating apps, and people can just be themselves. So when you walk on the street, you can actually tell who is gay and who is not. I think in China for some people you cannot really tell if they are gay, and due to the social environment. Even if I liked someone back in high school, I might still not be able to be with that person, because we would feel ashamed in China, but in the US things are much easier.

Caroline mentioned that since people in the US are more open about their sexual orientation, she is able to find a LGBT+ community on campus, which is not available or not visible in China. Such community not only provides opportunities for her to find a potential partner, but also offers her a sense of belonging, which is vital to her own well-being. Moreover, since Caroline senses that homosexuality is a “normalized” identity and practice in the US compared to in China, she no longer has negative feelings associated with her own identity.

_Tension between identification and dis-identification._

Many Chinese international students admitted that their study abroad experience, and to some extent the American culture, have served an important role in the formation of their new collective identity marked by open and liberal attitudes toward issues related to gender and sex in intimate relationships. In previous chapters, we saw that many Chinese students are critical of the traditional Chinese patriarchal ideologies on these gender issues, and try to distance and disassociate themselves from those old values in order to form their own set of liberal values. However, such value and ideology formation is never a smooth process. Instead, it involves “the problem of contradictions between positions, possible identities, identifications and the shaky move between them” (Walkerdine 2003:247). Agreeing with the value system of another culture does not simply mean that one changes his or her own values, it also entails a deep level of self-
identification with the new culture and a dis-identification with the culture of upbringing. Thus, such process always contains a tension between “the promise of pleasure [and] a threat—the threat of…losing all material and emotional connections to one’s past…or, conversely, of not being able to distance oneself enough from that past” (Ozyegin 2015:164).

Indeed, in the case of Chinese international students, they are proud of their identity of being “international” and enjoy being able to distance themselves from their often traditional and patriarchal upbringings. However, there is also a concern among them of becoming too “American” and thus losing all connections from their past, or in another word, their “Chinese-ness.” Such concern is not only personal but also societal. There is a saying in Chinese, 崇洋媚外 (Chongyang Meiwai), which is originally used to condemn people who have xenophilia or cultural cringe. More and more often, this term is now used to denounce Chinese international students who have integrated too many Western values and are too critical of Chinese culture.

Such tension of losing one’s roots is prevalent in many participants’ narratives. They try to resolve such tension by another round of dis-identification (from American culture and values) and re-identification (into Chinese culture and values). They carefully try to avoid presenting Chinese culture as inferior while American culture as superior. Specifically, Chinese international students adopt two strategies: equally criticizing the American culture, and pointing out the progressive aspect of Chinese culture. For instance, Mary, a pansexual female student talked about how gender equality is not ideal in American society either,

I think the US is a place where you also evidently feel gender inequality, such as the dominance of white male. This is so obvious, in no matter what place or occasion. White male’s dominance is especially clear in labs, some social organizations or artist community. It is even implicitly indicated in many popular TV series.

Mary clearly showed her disapproval of the dominance of white male in American society, and she pointed out that gender equality is still in progress in the US, just as that in
China. In this way, she is able to distance herself away from the American culture and avoid presenting herself as fully accepting and integrating American values. Similarly, Logan, a straight male subverted the usual image of sexual freedom in American society,

People often say that Westerners are more open in sexual intimacy, but I think Chinese right now are also pretty open about sex. I even think that the speed of cultural shift to be more open about sex in China is faster than that of the US, because in many Western countries there is the issue of religion. Many religions do not allow premarital sexual behaviors, so there are some unique restrictions and conservative ideas in that. Therefore I think many American families are still very traditional.

Logan challenged the imagined picture of Western countries being sexually open and free, and pointed out the fact that China is in fact catching up in an even higher speed in removing sexual conservatism. By criticizing the religious aspects of American culture and values, he managed to resolve the tension from identifying too much with these values.

Although in previous chapters I discussed how many respondents construct their new sexual subjectivity or other liberal beliefs by contrasting to the traditional and conservative values of the older generation in China like the parental generation, they also acknowledged that there are some desirable ideas in the traditional beliefs or practices. The issue of female education and employment is a central theme mentioned by many participants. For instance, Cassie a lesbian student talked about her conflicting experience in her family,

In my family, I do sometime feel oppressed, but there are also surprisingly liberating aspects... When I was young, my mom encourage me to do whatever I wanted. She had no idea about any feminist thoughts or queer studies at all. She only felt like, as Mao has said, 女女能顶半边天(Funü Nengding Banbiantian, women can support half of the sky), men and women are equal. These thoughts have left a deep impression in her mind... My parents are like, you can do whatever you want. But at the same time, they are also the victims and perpetuators of many rigid gender roles. When I grow up, they would be like, why don’t you wear a dress? And when I say I like girls, well, I don’t need to get into that long speech my mom lectured me.

Cassie well captured the nuance and the complexity of values on gender and sexuality in Chinese society, or in any other given society as well. While she clearly disliked and tried to disassociate herself from the patriarchal ideas regarding gender roles and heteronormative values
of her parents, she also acknowledged that her parents did have some liberal ideas such as women being strong and independence. Other respondents’ stories also resonated with her experience, and it was interesting to find the prevalence of a strong mother figure in many students’ stories. From Cassie’s words and other students’ stories, we see that there is a clear continuation of the gender egalitarianism from the Socialist period into today’s society. Many Chinese international students acknowledged and appreciated the influence of such value on the construction of their own identity and ideologies. In this way, they are able to re-identify with some aspects of the Chinese culture that they have actively criticized and disassociated from.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) brings up the concept of mestiza consciousness in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* which describes the consciousness of one’s ambiguous and complicated identities which emerged from the “continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new [cultural] paradigm” (102). Anzaldúa (1987) argues that “the mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (101). Chinese students in a sense are like the *mestizo/mestiza*, because they constantly cross both the physical border between China and the US, and the psychological and symbolic borders between Chinese culture and American culture. In forming their new collective identity and liberal ideologies, these students reject the rigid duality of these two cultures: they neither fully accept nor reject either culture. Such process, as Anzaldúa (1987) suggests, can indeed be emotional and painful, as it involves resolving the intense ambivalence of cultural (dis)identification.
CONCLUSION

This project provides a glimpse into the young generation of Chinese international students’ intriguing yet complicated romantic and sexual lives. From these young students’ responses, we see that they are very actively and consciously constructing a new collective and liberated identity which is marked by gender egalitarianism, sexual freedom and tolerance of non-heteronormative sexualities. Traveling through multiple cultural and ideological sites, these young Chinese international students also face huge internal conflicts between the past and the present. Yet they have shown an incredible individual agency and intellectuality in critically thinking about all those external influences and have managed to navigate through their gender, sexual, generational, national and cultural identities to form a consistent and unique narrative of their own ideologies.

Using in-depth interviews has granted me an extraordinary opportunity to connect with these young students, listen to their stories and also reflect on my own personal experiences. I started this project not only out of my intellectual and academic curiosity, but also out of a desire to critically examine my own romantic experience from a different angle and to potentially find a sense of belonging in my community. Indeed, I was able to reconcile my own confusion and internal contradictions regarding my romantic life, sexual subjectivity and sexual identity over the years to a certain extent during the interviews. Additionally, I was more than thrilled to learn that some of my respondents also find these interviews both provoking and meditating. Several of them have reached out to me after the interviews and told me that this project has opened up new perspectives for them and made them constantly reflect on their romantic practices.

However, this project never aims to capture every aspect of all Chinese international students’ intimate lives due to limited time and other resources. It is important to note that,
despite my effort to create a sample diverse in gender and sexual orientation, the participants in this project are still highly homogenous in demography. They all come from major developed Chinese cities and at least middle-class family backgrounds. Moreover, due to practical reasons, my research population is confined to the Chinese undergraduate international students at the College of William and Mary, which is a small liberal-arts style university located on the east coast of the US. Future research on Chinese international students’ intimate relationships should look at how class and geographical location—both at home and in the US, can have an impact on these students’ experiences and practices of intimate relationships.

Moreover, the social environment and political climate regarding issues on gender and sexuality are constantly changing in both China and the US. Many respondents have briefly discussed their viewpoints toward various social movements and changes, such as the worldwide #MeToo movement and the legalization of same-sex marriage in the US. Future research should also investigate how these popular social movements and changes in the society might influence Chinese international students’ ideas and practices of romantic relationships, and how Chinese international students might enact their open and liberal ideologies and participate in these movements or change the gender and sexual culture in other ways.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT FORM

Recruitment Form

My name is Xufan Ma. I am a senior undergraduate student at the College of William and Mary. I am currently conducting an Honors project in Sociology under the supervision of Professor Gul Ozyegin. For my Honors project, I am conducting a qualitative research study on Chinese international students’ perspectives and experiences about romantic relationships. Between December 2018 and February 2019, I plan to interview approximately 20 students. Each interview will last one hour to an hour and a half. All interviews will be one-to-one, audio-recorded with permission, and conducted by me in person.

This study is open to individuals who are sophomore, junior, or senior undergraduate students from China at the College of William and Mary. **If you are interested to be interviewed, please fill this short online form by December 15, 2018.**

Please note that there is no anticipated direct benefit to you for participating in this research besides the extent to which you value contributing your knowledge to the better understanding of the research topic. You will not be compensated in any way for your participation in this study. You may benefit indirectly from the knowledge and experience gained from the research after it is completed. I will make sure that all the information you provide is kept confidential. Your name will not be included in the audio recording, written transcript, or my personal notes of the interview session. Only the researcher will be able to access identifiable data. Any identifiable information will not be revealed in any publication or database. The data from the interview will be retained until the project is completed. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.
This project was found to comply with appropriate ethical standards and was exempted from the need for formal review by the College of William and Mary Protection of Human Subjects Committee (Phone 757-221-3966) on 2018-06-01 and expires on 2019-06-01. If you have any question about your rights as a research subject or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact Dr. Jennifer Stevens, Ph.D., the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee at 757-221-3862 or jastev@wm.edu. Questions about this research should be addressed to Xufan Ma at 757-814-8208 or xma03@email.wm.edu.
Research Participation Informed Consent Form
Sociology Department
The College of William and Mary
Protocol # StudentIRB-2018-02-16-12686-gxozye
Title: A Sociological Exploration of Intimate Relationships among Chinese International Students at the College of William and Mary
Investigator: Xufan Ma

This is to certify that I, ________________________________ have been given the following information with respect to my participation in this study:

1. **Purpose of the research:** The purpose of this study is to complete an Honors project. This study intends to investigate the ideals and experiences of intimate relationships among Chinese international students at the College of William and Mary. This study will explore how Chinese international students practice intimate relationships when they move to a new social environment under the influence of two sets of cultural norms that are not necessarily consistent with each other.

2. **Procedure to be followed:** As a participant in this study, you will be asked to answer the researcher’s questions in this in-depth interview. This interview will be audio-recorded with permission from you.

3. **Discomforts and risks:** There are no known risks associated with the interview process. You may be asked to think about questions that you rarely consider, which might cause very minor discomfort to some people. However, you have the right to skip any questions during the interview, and you can terminate the interview at any moment without penalty.

4. **Duration of participation:** Each interview in this study will take approximately 1.5 hours.

5. **Statement of confidentiality:** Your participation is confidential. Once the interview is finished, there will be no way to connect your responses with your personal identity. Your name will be replaced by a pseudonym for the completion of the Honors project. Your true identity will not be revealed in any publication or database. To ensure confidentiality, the interview recordings and transcript will be stored in an encrypted file which is available only to the interviewer/researcher.

6. **Voluntary participation:** Participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. You may refuse to answer any questions during the interview.

7. **Potential benefits:** Your participation in this research will contribute to the understanding of sociological dynamics of intimate relationships among Chinese international students on American campuses.
8. **Questions or concerns** regarding participation in this research should be directed to: Xufan Ma at 757-814-8208 or xma03@email.wm.edu or to Dr. Jennifer Stevens, Ph.D., the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee at 757-221-3862 or jastev@wm.edu.

**Participant’s Statement:**

I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this project.

I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this study to Dr. Jennifer Stevens, Ph.D., the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee by telephone 757-221-3862 or email jastev@wm.edu.

This study has been explained to me. I agree to participate in this study and have read all the information provided on this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions about this study. My signature below confirms that my participation in this study is voluntary, and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Date_________________________ Signature of Subject________________________________________

Date_________________________ Signature of Investigator____________________________________

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 2018-06-01 AND EXPIRES ON 2019-06-01.
APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background/US
First of all, I would like to ask you a few questions about your study and life in the United States.

1. What made you decide to come to the US for college? What attracted you to William and Mary? What is your major?
2. What kinds of on-campus activities do you usually participate in? What are some of the clubs that you are in?
   a. What about some off-campus activities that you usually do?
3. What do you usually do during your free time?
4. Who do you usually hang out with (American or Chinese friends)? What do you usually do when hanging out with your friends? Where do you usually go when hanging out?
5. How did you picture life in the United States before you came here? What were some of the expectations that you had for study and life here?
6. Have you experienced any big difference between your expectation and the reality when you first came to the US? Could you please give me some examples?
   a. What do you think is the biggest cultural difference between China and US? In what ways did these differences personally impact you? How did you react to them?
7. Are there any unique American cultural practices that you have gotten used to? Is there any that you are not able to get used to?
8. What do you think the most central American value is?
   a. What are some of the American values that you admire? What are some American values that you dislike?

Background/China
Next, I want to ask you some questions about your family and the environment when you were growing up.

1. Where were you born/raised? Did you grow up in a nuclear family or extended family environment? Was your immediate family close to your extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles? Were they part of your socialization process?
2. Who do you think had the biggest impact on your socialization about gender and intimate relationships in your family? Could you please give me some examples of some significant moments or incidents?
3. How would you describe the values pertaining the issues of gender and intimate relationship of the important people outside of your family, like your peers and teachers?
4. How would you describe your socialization about gender relations, romantic relationships, and sexual desires and awakening during your adolescence?
   a. In terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?
   b. In terms of gender roles, gender expressions, masculinity/femininity?
   c. In terms of permitted or prohibited sexual behaviors, such as flirting, virginity, pre-marital sex, fidelity etc.?
**Relationships**

For this section, I would like to first know a little bit about your relationship history.

1. Did you have any romantic relationship in China in the past?
   a. If so, could you tell me a little bit about that relationship? If you have had multiple romantic relationships in China before, could you tell me a little about the most significant one?
      a) Did you live in the same city with your partner? Or was your partner living somewhere else?
      b) What attracted you to your partner? How did you get to know your partner and how did you start dating?
      c) How would you describe that relationship? Was it a happy one? What were some of the best aspects? Worst aspects?
      d) How did you usually spend time with your partner? How often did you hang out or go on a date? What did you usually do when you went on a date?
      e) Have you had any kind of sexual intimacy within your relationship, such as kissing, necking, sexual intercourse, etc.?
   b. If not, have you ever wished to have a romantic relationship in China in the past? If so, what are some of the major reasons that you have never had any romantic relationship in China?

2. Have you ever had any romantic relationship after you came to the US?
   a. If so, could you tell me a little bit about this relationship? If you have had multiple romantic relationships after you came to the US, could you tell me a little bit about your most significant one?
      a) Did you live in the same city with your partner? Or was your partner living somewhere else?
      b) What attracted you to your partner? How did you get to know your partner and how did you start dating?
      c) Was it a happy one? What were some of the best aspects? Worst aspects?
      d) How did you usually spend time with your partner? How often did you hang out or go on a date? What did you usually do when you go on a date?
      e) Have you had any kind of sexual intimacy within your relationship, such as kissing, necking, sexual intercourse, etc.?
   b. If not, have you ever wished to have a romantic relationship after you came to the US? If so, what are some of the major reasons that you have never had any romantic relationship in the US?

3. Are you currently in a romantic relationship? If not, do you wish to have a romantic relationship now? Are you currently looking for a romantic partner?
   a. How is your search going so far? What are some of the tactics that you use?
Next, I am going to ask you some details about your most significant relationship so far in your life (among all the past/current relationships in either China or the US).

4. How would you characterize the gender relations in your relationship? What roles do you and your partner usually play in your relationship?
   a. Who do you think usually takes the initiative? Who usually makes the decisions for both of you? How do you share everyday responsibilities and duties such as driving, paying bills, buying gifts, cleaning, etc.?

5. Have you ever had any kinds of conflict or argument with your partner before?
   a. What are some topics, incidents, or people that would usually trigger such conflict? Could you please give me some specific examples of that? What was the biggest disagreement between you and your partner in the past?
   b. How did you and your partner handle the conflicts and disagreements within your relationship?

6. Have you ever thought about breaking up with your partner? If your relationship has ended, what caused the break-up?
   a. Who do you think would suffer more from the break-up?

7. How would you characterize your partner’s world view and general values? How about your partner’s views on issues of gender and sexuality? How are your partner’s values and views comparing to those of your own?

8. Have you had any sexual intimacy with your partner?
   a. If so, how would you characterize your sexual life with your partner in general?
      a) In what ways did your sexual life with your partner change over time? What did you think about these changes?
      b) How do your partner and you express sexual needs or desires to each other? How has your communication changed over time in your relationship?
      c) Do you have intimate behaviors such as kissing, necking, and petting with your partner?
         1. How do you feel about these behaviors? When do you feel comfortable having these practices in your relationship?
         2. How might this be similar or different if you are in China/US?
      d) Do you experience more intimate sexual behaviors such as genital touching, oral sex and sexual intercourse?
         1. How do you feel about these behaviors? When do you feel comfortable having these practices in your relationship?
         2. How might this be similar or different if you are in China/US?
   b. If not, do you expect to have sexual intimacy with your partner in the future? How do you decide when it’s ok to have sexual intimacy?

9. Do your parents know about your relationship? How much do you share your relationship with them? What do they think of your relationship? How do their opinions affect your relationship?
   a. How similarly or differently might your parents and family impact your relationship if your relationship were to take place in China/US?
10. Are there any occasions where you experience conflict between your romantic relationship and other aspects of your life, such as your academic life, or your friendships, or your kinship? Can you give me some specific examples of that?
   a. What do you think are some unique conflicts you experience in the US that probably would not happen in China, and vice versa? How do you deal with these conflicts?
   b. Is your partner aware of such conflict that you were experiencing? What is the role of your partner in dealing with this conflict?
11. Besides dating or committed relationship, have you engaged in casual sexual relationships such as hook-ups, friends-with-benefit, or open-relationship in the past?
   a. If so, could you describe your experience a little bit more? How do you feel about these casual sexual relationships?
12. Have you ever had sexual desires or romantic feelings towards a person who is the same sex with you?
   a. If so, could you please describe the occasion a little bit more? How did you feel about that experience?

General Comparison Questions for Relationships in China/the US
Now I am going to ask you a few questions comparing having romantic relationships in China and in the US. Please imagine if you were to have a romantic relationship in both cultural settings (or based on your previous experience) and answer the questions I am going to pose accordingly.

1. What are some major differences between your romantic relationships in China and that in the US? What do you think are the reasons for such differences?
2. In what ways do you think it might be easier or more difficult to find a partner/have a relationship in US or in China? What do you think are the reasons for such differences in your experience?
3. What do you think is the biggest obstacle in maintaining a committed relationship in the US and in China respectively?

Normative Ideas/Generational Differences
Next, I am going to ask you some questions about your ideal partner and general expectations for your ideal romantic relationship.

1. How would you describe your ideal relationship? What is the element that you value the most within a relationship?
   a. Has your relationship ideal changed after you came to the US? If so, in what ways?
   b. How might your ideals and expectations about ideal relationship be different from that of your parents?
2. How does your ideal partner look like? What do you value the most when looking for a partner?
a. What are some physical appearances or personalities that your ideal partner has? What about some demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race, education, income, national origin, etc.?
b. Has your standard for the ideal partner changed after you came to the US? If so, in what ways?
c. How might your standards for an ideal partner be different from that of your parents? In what ways?

3. How would you characterize the best way to share all kinds of responsibilities and duties between you and your partner in an ideal relationship?
   a. What are some collective responsibility for you and your partner? Are there any unique duties and responsibilities for each person?
   b. Has your idea changed after coming to the US? If so, in what ways? Explain.
   c. How might your idea be different from that of your parents? In what ways? Explain.

4. What does masculinity/femininity mean to you?
   a. How would your partner and you express masculinity and femininity within your relationship?
   b. Have your understandings or performances of masculinity/femininity changed after coming to the US? If so, in what ways? What do you think of such changes?
   c. How might your understandings or performances of masculinity/femininity be different from those of your parents? In what ways?

5. Do you consider yourself as a feminist? What do you think of feminism in general? How would you describe a typical feminist?
   a. Have your self-identification of being feminist or not, and views about feminism in general changed after coming to the US? If so, in what ways?
   b. Do your parents know about feminism? What are their views on feminism and feminists? What do you think of their views?

6. What do you think of premarital sex or premarital cohabitation?
   a. Has your idea about premarital sex or premarital cohabitation changed after coming to the US? If so, in what ways?
   b. Do you know what your parents think of premarital sex or premarital cohabitation? Do you think your parents had these practices? What are your thoughts on their views?

7. What do you think of casual sexual relationships such as hook-up, friends-with-benefit, and open-relationship?
   a. Have your ideas about casual sexual relationships changed after coming to the US? If so, in what ways?
   b. Do you know what your parents think of casual sexual relationships? What do you think of their views?

8. What do you think of non-normative sexualities such as homosexual, bisexual or pansexual?
   a. Have your ideas about non-normative sexualities changed after coming to the US? If so, in what ways?
   b. Do you know what your parents think of non-normative sexualities? What are your thoughts on their views?
Cultural Values
In this final section, I would like to ask about your ideas on Chinese and American norms, values, and cultural practices.

1. In your experience (and based on your own observations), how does the youth in China today define the ideal relationship before marriage? What about their vision of the ideal marriage?
   a. How about the young people in the US? What differences or similarities do you see?
   b. What are some of the significant ideals of the youth in these two cultures that you agree with and don’t agree with respectively?
   c. How is the ideal partner (both male and female) defined in Chinese society and in American society respectively? What are some of the characteristics?

2. Based on your personal knowledge, what are some gender expectations (such as social and occupational roles, gender expressions, etc.) for men and women in Chinese and American society respectively? What differences or similarities do you see?
   a. How do you feel about these norms? What are some norms and values that you agree with/don’t agree with from these two cultures respectively?
   b. What do you think are the general attitudes of young people in China and in the US towards behaviors like premarital sex, extramarital sex, and premarital cohabitation?
   a. What are some ideas and attitudes about these topics that you agree with/don’t agree with from these two cultures respectively?

3. What do you think are the general views towards gender equality and feminism in Chinese and American societies? What about towards LGBT+ groups and non-normative sexualities and sexual behaviors?
   a. In what ways or aspects might people experience more gender equality and freedom in sexuality in one society than the other?

4. What do you think of some traditional values such as Confucianism in Chinese society? How do you view Confucian values such as filial piety and patriarchal family order?
   a. Do you think these ideas might have an impact on your socialization of gender and sexuality?
   b. Have your understandings and views on these ideas changed after coming to the US? If so, in what ways?

5. What do you think of the one-child-policy during the economic reform in China? What do you think of the recent abolishment of such policy?
   a. Do you think the adoption and abolishment of the one-child-policy have influenced your parents’ or other family members’ marriages and sexual lives?
   b. Do you see yourself impacted by such policy? If so, in what ways?

6. Some people have argued that Chinese society is more conservative in terms of sexual freedom and gender equality, while the American society is more open and liberal. In what ways do you agree or disagree with such a claim?
   a. Since you are now intimately familiar with both societies, can you give me one or two specific examples that you have seen or experienced in both societies that would support or undermine such claim?
Closing Questions
Thank you so much for taking time to participate in this study. Before we finish the interview, are there any other information or suggestions that you would like me to know?
(The interview is now complete. If you don’t mind, please answer this very short survey about some of your basic demographic information. Thank you.)
APPENDIX D. POST-INTERVIEW SURVEY

1. Year of Birth:
2. Gender Identity:
3. Sexual Orientation:
4. Academic Year:
5. Major(s)/Concentration(s):
6. Minor (if applicable):
7. Parents’ Year of Birth:
8. Parents’ Occupation:
9. Parents’ Education:
10. Social Class: