

# Chinese young people's diverse experiences with heterosexual romantic relationships in various high school contexts

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## Abstract

Young people's heterosexual romantic relationships is often a popular topic in youth studies and sexuality education. However, the importance of class and educational stratification and the institutional influence is rarely mentioned. Through this article, considering the differentiated expectation of young people in different high school categories and the discussion about sexuality education, young people are understanding and experiencing heterosexual romantic relationships beyond their individual level. Drawing on the fieldwork with 28 student participants and 7 schoolteachers in total at an academic high school and a vocational high school in Tianjin, China, this article unearths young people's considerations, decisions, and doubts concerning their experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships. It argues that young people's perceptions and experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships are highly diverse and complex. It calls for the awareness of intersectional factors, such as social class and gender, in the process of understanding such diversity and complexity.

## Keywords

China, educational stratification, gender, heterosexual romantic relationships, high school

## Introduction

With the implementation of the Opening-Up policy, which was first introduced in 1978, China's society has experienced numerous changes. In Yan's (2003) book *Private Life Under Socialism*, he

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presented the performance and flow of love, intimacy and family change in a Chinese village in the late 20th century, especially after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. This book is inspiring to help re-consider young people's experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships in this article. Social transformation uncontrollably influenced Chinese people's lives and experiences from many different perspectives. Chinese young people's sexuality identity, practice and relationships have significantly changed and experienced challenges in recent decades (Farrer, 2002; Rofel, 2007). Therefore, it is essential and valuable to research young people's experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships.

When exploring these young people's experiences, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of listening to their voices (Checkoway, 2012; Head, 2011; Schelbe et al., 2015). During this process, high school students' understandings and experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships increasingly attract scholars' attention. As will be reviewed in this article, Chinese high schools include both academic high schools and vocational high schools. As argued by Woronov (2015), the coexistence of academic high school and vocational high school could be an outcome of class stratification in China's education system. Therefore, in this article, educational stratification will be used to refer to such class stratification that happened in Chinese high schools. However, previous youth studies in China rarely pay attention to vocational high school students, though few studies have tried to investigate the intersection of sexuality education and educational stratification (Fang et al., 2022; Liu, 2022). Therefore, through interviews with high school students and schoolteachers in an academic high school and a vocational high school in Tianjin, China, this article will contribute to filling such gap by providing information on how Chinese young people deal with their excitement, curiosity and concerns about sexuality and heterosexual romantic relationships in their high-school ages. It is worth noting that heterosexual romantic relationships were a topic that emerged during the fieldwork, raised by the participants, and all student participants of this research identified themselves as cis-gender heterosexual.

Although this article does not focus on class stratification, social class still plays a vital role in understanding these young people's experiences. When social class is academically discussed in China's context, social capital, economic capital and cultural capital are generally seen as three of the most crucial 'components' in social class research (e.g. Andreas, 2016; Goodman, 2014; Li, 2016; Sargeson, 2016). In this article, class refers to these student participants' social class position, which is evaluated by their social, cultural, economic and political status. Although social class is hard to be defined and measured since there is no formula to calculate it (Elley, 2013: 18), to measure social class, researchers have set different criteria for measuring people's class by various theoretical and practical purposes (e.g. Li, 2010; Lu, 2012). In this article's context, it is more defined by institutional stratification, especially educational stratification.

In this article, social transformation is used as the conceptual framework due to its cultural and political legitimacy (Willis, 2019). We will first review gender and sexuality movements in contemporary China and the consequent shift in sexuality education in Chinese schools. We will also introduce the close connection between different types of Chinese schools and embedded class stratification. In the method section, apart from introducing data collection and ethical principles, we will give particular attention to the challenges and dilemmas experienced by the first author of this article during her fieldwork through a lens of reflexivity. Then, based on interview data, we will argue two key points. First, these young people agentively understood and challenged Chinese sociocultural norms about gender and sexuality. For example, some students challenged the commonly constructed link between romantic relationships and sexual behaviour and reconstructed the meaning and functions of heterosexual romantic relationships by adding intimate relationships' importance of benefiting their personal development. Additionally, although these young people live in a similar societal context, their perceptions and experiences of heterosexual romantic

relationships are highly diverse and complex because of the intersectional factors, such as gender and class. We then highlight the importance of paying more attention to the diversity and complexity of these young people's experiences with and understanding of heterosexual romantic relationships, which consequently calls for more comprehensive and evidence-based sexuality education in China.

## **Background**

In China's contemporary history, the development of sexuality education has never been a linear process. It has experienced different opportunities and challenges in various historical stages (Wang, 2006). In China, sexuality education itself is a concept borrowed from other countries, including, but not limited to, European countries, USA and Japan (Wang, 2006). After implementing the Opening-Up Policy in 1978, new ideas, such as the more scientific ideas regarding human sexuality, different to the puritanism ideas, about sexuality education, along with other cultures coming into China's society with foreign capitals. Therefore, since the economic reformation in 1978, sexuality education has attracted some governmental attentions even though its implementation is still insufficient. For instance, in the late 1990s, some universities in China launched sexuality education courses (Pan and Huang, 2011: 72). The development of sexuality education experienced different changes at various stages of China's social transformation. Accordingly, the inadequate implementation of the related policies allowed various possibilities, in specific, different types of sexuality education exist in China's society, such as abstinent sexuality education and comprehensive sexuality education (Aresu, 2009). For example, in the official Chinese 9-year compulsory education system and the follow-up high school education system, only education on reproduction is offered for middle school students in their Biology textbooks (Huang and Pan, 2013). Some schoolteachers also think it is unnecessary to impart sexual knowledge to students because, in examination syllabi, this would not be tested (Xiong et al., 2020). As a result, generally, young people in China only get limited comprehensive and evidence-based sexuality education from schooling. For instance, there is no national-approved evidence-based sexuality education curriculum (Liu, 2022). Abstinence sexuality education and similar programs only focus on some specific topics directly link to sexual and reproductive health. However, evidence-based sexuality education includes more comprehensive and culturally sensitive topics beyond the scientific facts, such as intimate relationships (Ponzetti, 2016). In this case, young people, when trying to gain related knowledge about sexuality and relationships, are easily influenced by the surrounding institutional factors embedded in China's cultural and political circumstances. The popularisation of evidence-based sexuality education in China has confronted with many barriers. For example, many the key providers to young people's formal sexuality education have been significantly impacted by conventional values towards sexuality developed during conservative era. They believe that once children and young people receive knowledge about sexuality, they will engage in sexual activities (Pan and Huang, 2013: 273). To a certain extent, it explains why young people nowadays can still receive mixed values regarding sexuality, even though, at the same time, comprehensive and evidence-based sexuality education is increasingly promoted in China's society (Aresu, 2009; Guo, 2004; Liu, 2011). For example, sexuality education has been added into the newly revised Law of the PRC on the Protection of Minors (Liu, 2022). However, evidence-based sexuality education still has not been included in China's national curriculum. Also, education inequality commonly exists amongst different types of schools in their practices of delivering sexuality education (Woronov, 2015). When education inequality is discussed in China, people do care about the unequal distribution of educational resources. Apart from the inequality caused by geoeconomics and geopolitics all over the country, educational inequality is also broadly an

outcome of economy and politics as Guo indicated ‘inequality is embedded in the CCP’s (Chinese Communist Party’s) ideology and built into the PRC’s political system’ (Guo, 2004: 97, 2016). Hence, regarding the concept of ‘capital’ raised by Bourdieu (2018), it becomes reasonable to reflect on the inequality under the consideration of those capitals, particularly political capital, economic capital and cultural capital. China’s academic and vocational high schools could be a good example. For instance, vocational high schools and academic high schools would teach students different values about sexuality (Liu, 2022). Andreas (2016: 27) summarised that, before 1978, China’s education system, like its social structure, had also been shaped to be a pyramid with limited places at the top and a range of difficulties surrounding social mobilities. Even in the 2010s, educational stratification still played a vital role (Du, 2016: 161). For example, as Woronov (2015) argued, high school entrance exams can be seen as a ‘class sorter’. After 9-years compulsory education, depending on their scores in high school entrance exams, they spend another 3 years in either academic high schools focusing on academic competence or vocational high schools focusing on vocational skills. According to the existing research and statistics, academic school students would have much more opportunities to go to universities (Kipnis, 2011). Compared with their peers following the academic pathway, students from vocational high schools are less possible to go to universities; they would enter the job market and become workers in domestic labour-intensive industries or the lower end of the service sector (Kipnis, 2011; Woronov, 2015). People’s perceptions and experiences of their everyday lives are highly contextualised. However, limited studies have explored such topics in the contexts of vocational schools. Therefore, the following sections will introduce interview-based research that unpack both academic and vocational high school students’ understandings and experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships.

## Method

Hanser’s (2008) work *Service Encounters*, which explores class, gender and the market for social distinction in urban China, primarily influenced the research design of this research. However, in contrast to Hanser’s emphasis on ‘difference’, the word ‘diversity’ is used in this research to describe young Chinese people’s complex sexuality education experiences, echoing Lareau’s (2011) words (p. 256) ‘[e]ach person’s life also unfolds in a unique way’. Therefore, in this research, there was no intention to set any criteria to measure and judge young people’s experiences and we are not intended to make any generalised conclusion to describe young people’s experiences. Instead, the research aim is to paint a vivid picture of young people’s diverse experiences from both personal and institutional perspectives.

This article is developed from qualitative research which explored Chinese young people’s experiences of sexuality education and their understanding of sexuality practice, identity and relationships. The fieldwork was conducted in 2019 in two high-school settings, one vocational high school and one academic high school in Tianjin, China, with students, aged between 16 and 18, and schoolteachers. The complexity of social transformation in Tianjin is the most significant reason behind the research site selection. In her book *Hygienic Modernity*, Rogaski (2004) used Tianjin’s specific historical and political context as an example to critically revisit the argument about the cultural influences in China. Therefore, Tianjin became an ideal place to understand the long-lasting diversity as well as the interrelation between individuals and society in contemporary China.

This research particularly valued the voices of these student participants as an excellent opportunity to explore young people’s subjectivity (see Allen, 2009) and to have a better angle to explore their sexuality education experiences and educational stratification. Since this research’s student participants are from different backgrounds, their various views and experiences are valuable for the public to understand the diversity of their everyday sexuality and relationships experiences.

From March to September 2019, the first author of this article (referred as ‘the researcher’ in this method section) carried out 35 semi-structured interviews with 28 students and 7 schoolteachers. Among the 28 student participants (14 young women and 14 young men), 15 were vocational school students and 13 were academic school students. As mentioned previously, class plays a significant role in this research. When evaluating student participants’ social class, their families’ consumption level was evaluated as economic capital, their parents’ educational qualification as cultural capital and their parents’ occupation as social capital. Accordingly, amongst 13 academic high school student participants, 7 were from middle-class backgrounds, 2 were from an intermediate-class background, and 4 were from a working-class background. However, amongst 15 vocational high school student participants, 6 were from an intermediate-class background, and 9 were from a working-class background. As deciding when to stop sampling is a significant issue during fieldwork, especially in such a dynamic and interactive context (Mason, 2017: 74). Although many potential student participants showed interest in taking part in the research, the researcher kept the selection criteria in mind to balance participants’ backgrounds in relation to class and gender. During data generation, the researcher took Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame’s (1981, cited in Mason, 2017: 70) suggestion to see if the sample size and the generated data met the theory-saturation point and address research questions. Therefore, data generation and sample selection became a ‘dynamic and ongoing practice’ (Mason, 2017: 70) during the fieldwork. Since the fieldwork was conducted in Chinese, Chinese-to-English translation was carefully managed to ensure the accuracy of expression. Particular attention has been paid to ensure information about participants’ ‘feelings, hope, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of the person, whether inquirer or participant’ and ‘the existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise, that from the individual’s context’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 480) are well kept and respected.

Considering the sensitive nature of this topic, this research has paid serious attention to its ethical rigour. This research’s ethics plan was approved by the University of Leeds. One of the challenges of researching with young people is to ensure they can adequately understand and feel confident about the research process (Åkerström and Brunnberg, 2013), such as how their privacy and the research data would be protected (Alderson, 2003). Because sexuality is constructed as an ‘inappropriate’ topic for children and young people in schooling ages in China, some student participants were afraid of the researcher being the informer and telling their ‘secrets’ to their schoolteachers (Zhu, 2022). In this case, particular attention has been paid to building trust with these participants through various strategies, such as sharing the researcher’s memories about her feelings of being a student. Because the researcher also grew up in China, there was a kind of ‘shared’ experience between the researcher and student participants, such as their teachers’ discouraging and conservative attitudes towards sexuality and relationships in pre-adulthood. In addition, the most frequent question these student participants asked was usually about the researcher’s attitude toward young people’s heterosexual romantic relationships to see if the researcher was on the same side as their teachers. Through ‘ongoing tests’, a strong rapport between the researcher and student participants was able to be established, and these student participants were very passionate about talking about their sexuality and sexuality education experiences. Also, all the participants were given pseudonyms. Furthermore, the actual name of the schools was replaced by schools’ categories (the academic high school and the vocational high school) to help the readers understand students’ backgrounds and protect schools from being recognised.

Another ethical concern was the possibility of disclosures of sexual abuse, self-harm and suicide that had happened to participants. There is no policy or law related to this problem in China, but there has been a heated debate about this issue within academia. Pan and Huang (2011) suggest that scholars researching sexuality in China can consult other researchers on similar topics. Issues

around confidentiality from this perspective are referred to in Elley's (2013) research, which investigates the interrelations of young people's sexuality, gender and class in the UK. Therefore, echoing Elley's research, with support from the University of Leeds, local school staff and charities that focus on child protection, the researcher was able to build up a solid backup support network to convey information about sexual abuse and harm.

## **Academic expectations and tolerance for heterosexual romantic relationships in academic versus vocational schools**

Studies indicate that young people's desire for intimacy and heterosexual romantic relationships is common and natural (Farrer, 2014; Zhu et al., 2022). However, in China's context, for a long time, establishing heterosexual romantic relationships has been recognised as something unacceptable and unrespectable (Aresu, 2009; Liang et al., 2017) for children and young people in school ages (Zhu et al., 2022). Although children and young people's behaviours could resist adult education and restrictions on their behaviours in their everyday lives, they could also enforce some adult-sanctioned values (Zhu, 2022). For example, most student and schoolteacher participants commonly claimed that students' most crucial mission was to study. They also believed that students' energy was quite limited and that if they wasted their energy on sexuality, namely romantic relationships, they would have no chance to achieve their life goals and live respectable lives. In an interview with Yangfan, a 16-years-old, middle-class male academic high school student, he firmly said:

It is not the right time to be in a romantic relationship. I also have never imagined when I will be in a romantic relationship, maybe after my high school graduation? My number one goal now is to go to a good university. To me, it is the most significant thing. All other things, compared to going to a good university, are not important at all.

Yangfan's response was very similar to his teachers; they all believed that nothing was more crucial than the University Entrance Examination (UEE). He was from a middle-class family. Both of his parents were working in the private sector. They bought a property and moved to Tianjin from another province just before he entered the academic high school since they believed Yangfan could go to a better university with higher quality education and friendly policies in Tianjin. It was more like a default mutual agreement in his family that a romantic relationship, no matter whether it is heterosexual or not, should not happen. Meanwhile, it does echo the long-lasting practice of abstinence sexuality education among young people in China. Among all the student participants, Yangfan was the person who had the best academic performance during the fieldwork time and was given the highest expectations by schoolteachers. Through the interview, it could be noticed that he set a clear boundary between going to a good university and being in a romantic relationship.

Moreover, concerning young people's heterosexual romantic relationships, due to the inadequate evidence-based sexuality education, in the Chinese discourse system, many adults usually use 'early love' (*zaolian*) to conclude romantic relationships among young people (Shen, 2015). 'Early love' is a word that is derogatory in tone. It usually refers to behaviour that is seen to be problematic (Shen, 2015). 'Love' is a common and usual human emotion. However, in China's context, through Yangfan's interpretation, which can be easily found amongst other academic high school students; it seems that 'love' should also be planned beforehand, or it would be too 'early' to be good. It is worth mentioning that this trend can also be linked to China's social transformation in recent decades. Pan and Huang (2013) indicate that in the Maoist revolutionary era, the government believed that people's energy was quite limited. For example, if they wasted their energy on sexuality, they would have no passion for revolution. In an interview with Songli, a female Mental Health teacher and moral education officer in an academic high school, echoed that the social

transformation in China is not a linear process but with steps forward and steps backwards. According to Songli's comments, this Maoist idea is reproduced culturally and socially concerning the examination-oriented education system in China nowadays.

Our school do not wish students to be in romantic relationships. It is majorly because we are afraid that their futures would be ruined if they split up before the UEE due to the mood swings and the examination result [. . .]. Besides, it might also endanger their safety. What if they get pregnant and make others pregnant? How could we explain it to their parents?

Songli's words highlight the importance of the UEE. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce the term 'suzhi' to explain this situation. Since the 1980s, the word 'suzhi' has gradually been introduced into the discourse system among Chinese people (Anagnost, 2004). In 1994, 'suzhi' education was first mentioned by the Chinese central government (Kipnis, 2006). The English translation of 'suzhi' has been contested for several decades. So far, there is still no unified understanding in this regard (Goodman, 2014), although some people use 'quality' to explain 'suzhi' (e.g. Lou, 2011). According to the official discourse, 'suzhi' education refers to the overall development of moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetics and labour education. However, this requirement is tightly embedded in China's political context. In 2018, Xi Jinping, the President of the PRC, urged conducting 'suzhi' education to train socialist builders and successors (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018). However, 'suzhi' education still seems somewhat unrealistic to many educators in this field. For example, Dongfang, a male schoolteacher and moral education officer in an academic high school, in an interview, used sexuality education as an example to refer to quality-oriented education and indicated the difficulty of achieving the goal of quality-oriented education as '*quality-oriented education is a kind of desire, just like Communism*'. The conflict between exam-oriented education and quality-oriented (*suzhi*) education thus became relatively apparent.

The conflict between exam-oriented education and quality-oriented (*suzhi*) education shows how young people are unavoidably involved in the 'class sorter' (Woronov, 2015), namely the school types and how these expectations have influenced young people's practice of heterosexual romantic relationships. Lulu was a female student participant at the vocational high school. She was in a heterosexual romantic relationship during the fieldwork. It was observed that she and her boyfriend held hands and kissed on campus, and Lulu told the researcher that they had already visited each other's family, and their parents accepted their relationship. According to the conversation between Lulu and the researcher, schoolteachers at her school knew about her relationship; they also had not commented anything negative in front of her. Thus, Lulu believed that at the vocational high school, being in a heterosexual romantic relationship would never be a problem.

Similarly, Hanlong, another male student participant at the vocational high school, said that he and his family were considering marriage between him and his girlfriend. His girlfriend was also a vocational school student when the fieldwork was conducted. Lulu and Hanlong mentioned that their parents did not give them high expectations regarding their academic performance. For example, Lulu said during the interview that she would like to work in a local kindergarten in her neighbourhood directly after graduation, as it was what her parent suggested. Hanlong's dad owned a small shop selling second-hand mobile phones in their village. As Hanlong said, he could join his dad's business. Lulu and Hanlong thus could park the expectation of going to a good university which is seen as an ideal amongst their peers in the academic pathway. Lulu's and Hanlong's cases were quite representative amongst student participants from vocational high school. For example, in this research, amongst 15 vocational school student participants (8 boys and 7 girls), only 2 of them (1 boy and 1 girl) had never been in a romantic relationship. As students studying at the vocational high school, to some extent, a release from the academic is linked to a more tolerant attitude towards heterosexual relationships in pre-adulthood in China's context. Student participants at the

academic school, generally expressed their uncomfortableness of telling their parents about their heterosexual romantic relationships because of the academic pressure and their parents' high expectations. For example, amongst the other 13 academic school participants (6 boys and 7 girls), the number of those who had never been in a romantic relationship was 5 (3 boys and 2 girls). It can also be understood by relating the phenomenon to the academic school's view on students' academic performance, abovementioned by Songli. In sum, without the pressures and expectations of high academic achievements, unlike their peers in academic high schools, vocational high school students could feel more comfortable telling their parents about their heterosexual romantic relationships.

## Gender double standards in narratives about heterosexual romantic relationships

In student participants' narratives about heterosexual romantic relationships, gendered expectations played another critical role. Although, in the above examples, both Lulu's and Hanlong's families show relatively supportive attitudes towards their heterosexual romantic relationships, a gendered inequality could be noticed. For example, during the interview, Lulu illustrated the conversation between her dad and herself regarding her heterosexual romantic relationships:

- Researcher:* Have they ever given you any suggestions?  
*Lulu:* Not so specific. Only my dad told me something like I should not do something 'too far'.  
*Researcher:* What did his 'too far' mean?  
*Lulu:* Ha, he did not say it directly, but I understand it in my heart.  
*Researcher:* So what is this?  
*Lulu:* Emm. . . let me think about how to construct this sentence. It is about. . . about body contact.  
*Researcher:* How do you think about your dad's suggestion?  
*Lulu:* I think he is right, my dad would not do anything harmful to me [. . .], and I think girls are at a great disadvantage in romantic relationships.  
*Researcher:* Why?  
*Lulu:* Because of the loss of my body and other perspectives.  
*Researcher:* Loss of your body? What does it mean?  
*Lulu:* Sex. . . I mean.  
 (17 years old, working class, female, vocational high school student)

Lulu's boyfriend, Jiahao, was also interviewed. He was one year older than her and from an intermediate-class family at the same vocational high school. However, when the researcher asked him how he felt about their relationship, he said he was '*just for fun*'. Moreover, the deep-rooted gendered expectation was also shown through his words:

- Researcher:* How do you see your relationship with Lulu?  
*Jiahao:* It is just for fun. You know, in this school, we have relationships for fun. Life is so boring here.  
*Researcher:* Lulu mentioned that you had already met each other's family?  
*Jiahao:* Yes, but it does not have a very particular meaning. My mom also told me that she did not find Lulu beautiful. She wished me to marry a person who could be more pretty.



*Researcher:* How do you see Lulu?

*Jiahao:* She is not a virgin anymore. I think I will eventually marry a virgin. Marriage should be serious.  
(18 years old, intermediate class, male, vocational high school student)

Lulu's and Jiahao's cases suggest that, even in the same school, their perceptions and experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships could be different because of the embedded gendered requirements in their attitudes. In Jiahao's view, his future wife should be beautiful and be a virgin. Jiahao's and Lulu's words created a muscular tension regarding chastity. Jiahao told the researcher that they had had sex with a careless tone. Being sexually active was also shown off by Jiahao in front of his male peers because 'Jiahao and Lulu have had sex' was also mentioned by Jiahao's male classmates in interviews. However, during the interview with Lulu, she stressed that she was her father's 'good daughter' and was still a virgin. As researchers, our aim was not to figure out who told the 'reality' about their existing or losing virginities. Instead, the focus is placed on the reason behind the ununified ways Lulu and Jiahao talked about their chastity. Specifically, gender separation can be discussed in relation to China's civilised sexual morality (Farrer, 2002; Shen, 2015). Evans (2007) claimed that in China, sexual morality is usually gendered. To be specific, men's privilege plays a significant role in young people's heterosexual romantic relationships, with a particular focus on female chastity (Farrer, 2002).

Similarly, it was notable that the negative aspects of heterosexual romantic relationships were highlighted under heteronormativity in China, specifically for girls. Like the suggestion given by Lulu's father, all schoolteachers had demonised boys in heterosexual romantic relationships, warning girls against 'early love' (see also Zhu et al., 2022). In the interview with Dapeng, a male homeroom teacher and moral education officer at the vocational high school unpacked this situation:

*Researcher:* What do you think about your students' romantic relationships?

*Dapeng:* From the bottom of my heart, I approve of Chairman Mao's quote, 'it is indecent to start a relationship which is not aiming at marriage'.

*Researcher:* So, how did the quote direct your attitude and practice in your work?

*Dapeng:* I think to girls, sex should not be like entertainment. Having sex is irresponsible. Many boys and men think they have an advantage in sex. It generally exists among Chinese men [. . .] When boys are still in high school, they may just think it is interesting. They want to do something cool but not aim at marriage when they start the relationship. They might be off the track, specifically, have sex with others. I believe that girls would be at a significant disadvantage in relationships. Because when they get married, men should still have requirements for virginity. I will warn girls and tell boys that wealth and beauty can be gained through diligent study.

The demonisation itself is a convincing piece of evidence of institutional gender inequality. The male is more powerful and can easily ruin everything, while the female can only be ruined. None of the interviewed schoolteachers had provided their female students with a positive perspective of a heterosexual romantic relationship. Still, nearly all male participants, including male schoolteachers and students, claimed that they believed that boys would be in an advantageous position and girls would be at a significant disadvantage. The gendered dilemma appears again here – it is between male students and female students and male teachers to female students. Represented by Dapeng and other schoolteacher participants, many adults and decision-makers in the education

sector link heterosexual romantic relationships directly to pregnancy, ignoring education about contraception and interpersonal relationships and trying to stop young people from establishing heterosexual romantic relationships in pre-adulthood.

However, it is impossible to suppress young people's romantic adventures (Zhu, 2022; Zhu et al., 2022). Also, it was noticeable that these young people actively negotiate with various norms about sexuality, which they have learned from adults, peers and other resources, such as social media, to give meaning to their perceptions and experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships. Yan (2003) illustrated that the concept of 'romantic love' was introduced to China's society during its opening-up and social transformation. The trend of globalisation, as well as informatisation, have also played vital roles in the spectrum, echoing Yan's (2003) argument in his research about love and intimacy in rural China:

Young people have indeed been heavily influenced by the media and pop culture as well as by urban lifestyles [. . .] The expression of love and intimacy is a learned behaviour, and if it can be learned by American youths it can certainly be learned by their counterparts in rural China or elsewhere (p. 83).

Therefore, the conflict then also expands to different generations and different spaces. Bingbing was a 17-year-old middle-class girl studying at the academic high school. Before sharing her experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships, she disclosed that during one session about reproductive health in the Biology class in her middle school. She did not even dare to look at others in the class because she thought this session was '*so shameless, and only unrespectable people would listen to it*'. As described by her, her reaction was rooted in how surrounding people, such as her parents, her schoolteachers and some of her classmates, told her about sexuality. She thus buried her head in her arms and then made a show of sleeping. She further explained her strong repulsion regarding sexuality-related content in the class as a result of witnessing how her homeroom teacher openly shamed girls who engaged in heterosexual romantic relationships in front of other classmates by forecasting these girls' ruined futures and called them shameless girls. Therefore, she found it particularly uncomfortable because, at that time, she actually had a 'secret' boyfriend. But she highlighted that she did not feel she did anything wrong because she did not interfere with the two most important rules about academic performance and pregnancy. Bingbing claimed that her relationship did not bring any negative impact on her academic performance and that she had not 'gone too far' (refer to sexual intercourse by her) with her boyfriend. To some extent, Bingbing drew a solid line between the 'acceptable' relationship and the 'unacceptable' relationship by using sexual intercourse as the key filter criteria (see also Zhu et al., 2022). It was because Bingbing understood kissing and holding hands as 'acceptable' intimate body contact, whilst sexual intercourse was unacceptable since it could cause pregnancy and consequently interrupt her attendance and performance at the UEE. Without comprehensive and evidence-based sexuality education, young people, including Bingbing, would rarely have opportunities to talk about safe sex and contraception. So, according to Bingbing, when her boyfriend proposed to have sex, she told him she was not ready yet and said maybe they could try after the UEE to avoid any possibility of interrupting her UEE result.

In addition, through conversations with most student participants in both the academic school and the vocational school, sexual abstinence in heterosexual relationships became the most secure way for them to avoid trouble. Resonating with such insufficient knowledge about sex with the above discussions about the ideal of quality-oriented (*suzhi*) education and the fact of exam-oriented education, it is thus not difficult to find out that tokenistic quality-oriented (*suzhi*) education could only offer minimal support to these Chinese high school students about sexuality.

## Redefine and challenge mainstream perceptions about romantic relationships

Although most of the above cases suggested these Chinese young people's compulsion to the norms and rules about heterosexual romantic relationships set up by adults, some other cases also suggested their active roles in challenging and giving meaning to such unencouraged relationships. As discussed above, almost all schoolteacher participants and many student participants believed that heterosexual romantic relationships would directly lead to heterosexual sexual behaviours. However, some students thought differently. For example, Bingbing excluded sexual intercourse in her relationship with her boyfriend. Shangfu was another 17-year-old working-class boy interviewed at the academic high school. He was highly expected by his family, schoolteachers and himself to go to one of the top universities in China. He said he was uninterested in any romantic relationship in recent years. However, when he was asked about the general attitude towards heterosexual romantic relationships delivered by schoolteachers in his school, he commented that:

I sometimes find those adults very funny. They all believe students have romantic relationships because they only want sex. In those schoolteachers' view, students would not have any intellectual connection? Students sometimes also have platonic love. Who knows? But, definitely, not everyone is up for sex.

Similarly, Momo, a 17-years-old female student participant at the vocational high school, also expressed her point of view about heterosexual romantic relationships and shared her communication between her ex-boyfriend and herself with the researcher:

I am not so very interested in sex, and my ex-boyfriend respected my decision. [. . .] He helped change me a lot. He was like an angel. [. . .] He taught me, comforted me, and guided me. [. . .] Many people think a girl can then turn into a woman once she has [heterosexual] sexual intercourse. But because my ex was very good to me, even if we eventually broke up, he taught me how to be independent and live my life without him. Now I think I can say I am an independent woman. I would thank him.

Not just Momo, there are some other students who also mentioned the positive impact on their personal development bought by their boyfriends/girlfriends, such as stronger motivations to achieve better academic performance to be able to go to the same university with their boyfriends/girlfriends. Through challenging the mainstream belief about the direct link between heterosexual romantic relationships and sexual behaviours and adding the importance of appreciating the support and benefit to personal development provided by intimate relationships and interactions with boyfriends/girlfriends, these young people reconstruct the meanings and functions of heterosexual romantic relationships and locate such relationships in their life course.

Therefore, although Chinese young people's school experiences have been shaped by a series of external factors, their agency should not be ignored. Children and young people's agency have been well discussed in the Western context in recent decades because of the increasing awareness of their capability and active role in constructing and reconstructing their own everyday lives and the lives of others (Punch, 2016). However, children and young people's agency have not been widely discussed in China's context, especially about sensitive topics, such as sexuality, though their agentic interactions are commonly noticed in many studies of their everyday lives. As a sensitive topic in China, children and young people's agency is even rarely discussed under the topic of sexuality because it might cause some conservative concern about the romantic construction of their innocence and role as human and sexual becoming rather than human beings and sexual beings (Liu and Su, 2014; Shen, 2015). Such concern could be further strengthened by Chinese conservative sociocultural norms about sexuality (e.g. chastity and sexual morality) (Aresu, 2009).

However, like children and young people in other societal contexts (Renold, 2004), as agentic human beings, these Chinese young people, such as Shangfu and Momo, challenged the link between romantic relationships and sexual behaviour and risky future constructed by adults. During the negotiation process, they could simultaneously accept and challenge some values and rules set up by adults (Zhu, 2022). Such negotiation is always a two-way approach, which also involves others, such as adults, constructions of sexuality and relationships in the world of children and young people. Therefore, a further understanding of Chinese young people's agency in terms of managing their heterosexual romantic relationships in their everyday lives could contribute to a better understanding of how agentic young people negotiate their positions in changing norms and education pathways of sexuality and relationships in China.

## Conclusion

Resonating with Wonorov's (2015) argument saying the educational system in China is a 'class sorter', this article accordingly investigates how educational stratification as an outcome of class and gender inequalities influences Chinese young people's experiences of sexuality education and heterosexual romantic relationships. Due to the severe division between the academic and vocational educational pathways, the communication between young people in these two routes is fairly inadequate. Nonetheless, focusing on 'diversities' instead of 'differences' has enabled us to pay attention to individuals' lived experiences and to construct 'reality' by re-telling their experiences. It argues that these young Chinese people not just well understand mainstream sociocultural norms about heterosexual romantic relationships in high school but also could challenge such norms to give meaning to their unique and diverse experiences in their everyday lives. These young people choose to compromise and resist mainstream norms simultaneously, which actions show their capability and power to redefine their own and others' lives, as strong evidence of their agency. As individuals living in a similar broader Chinese context, these young people's thoughts and experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships suggest both similarities and diversities. Therefore, we need to pay more attention to these inequalities and diversities because they could not only unpack the complexity of sexuality and relationships in young people's lives but also remind the importance of developing comprehensive and evidence-based sexuality education. In the current stage, the discussion regarding sexuality education is still limited and over-simplified to echo adult-centred norms and regulations that rule young people's behaviours and relationships. Also, for future research, there could be more discussions about the diversity of school types, such as schools in remote mountain areas and elite international schools in China, so that young people's experiences and educational stratification could be explored more dimensionally.

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