Love, Relationships, and Sexuality

Chinese Young People's Experience of Intimacies during Wuhan Covid-19 Pandemic

Zixi Zuo

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Institute of Education

University College London

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I confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Zixi Zuo

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Impact statement

This research explores the Chinese youth's process of 'becoming' subjectivities and their practices of intimacies, against the complex socio-techno-spatial backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing a feminist posthuman framework, this study seeks to transcend traditional binary distinctions such as human/non-human, online/offline, and Eastern/Western. It aims to challenge the linear, monolithic narratives prevalent in previous studies of Chinese sexuality. This research explores the multiple intersecting dimensions – gender, class, discursive-material and affective experiences – and how these impact the youth practice of intimacies.

This research offers insights into the intricate interplay between political discourses of gender and sexuality, and the cultural-historical specificity of China. Tracing the emergent gendered discourses from higher education courses on love and relationships, this research contends that the prevailing neoliberal ethos is in many ways consonant with 'the regime of sexuality' observed both within and beyond campuses. Through discourses such as self-responsibility, free choices, and personal development, Chinese gender subjectivity is refracted through circulated neoliberalist values and gender-classed aesthetics of intimacies. By foregrounding the ruptures and micro-level transitional of youth subjectivities, the research probes the impact of neoliberalism on individual affective, bodily practices and psychic life on a deeper level. Following this, this research enriches the current educational strategies and curricula, advocating for a gender-inclusive campus culture.

The research makes four distinctive contributions to existing knowledge:

Posthuman Re-imagination of Intimacies: It introduces a posthuman re-imagination of intimacies as affective aesthetics, offering new perspectives on how intimacies are mediated. This approach explores the flow between bodies, materials, and spaces while acknowledging the influence of (hetero)normative

structuring forces.

Analytic Reflection on Youth Gender Culture: The study provides a unique posthuman analytic reflection on youth gender culture, highlighting the tensions between feminist activism, misogyny, and traditional gender norms within discursive-material and technological spaces, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Intra-active Conceptualisation of Gender and Sexual Subjects: It advances an intra-active conceptualisation of youth gender and sexual subjects as a process of 'becoming,' emphasizing the 'in-betweenness' and ruptures of 'normativity.'

Distinctive Methodological Approach: Situating in a ethical-onto-epistemological position, this research foregrounds space-time-matterings that intertwined within the research assemblages in the process of 'knowledge' production.

By mapping out the micro-level dynamics of youth's subject-in-becoming this research raises significant insights for university student welfare and wellbeing practices, including the emerging love psychology courses in China. Intending to broaden the predominant sexology-oriented or woman-targeting content, my findings offer micro-level analysis of heteronormative dynamics, bringing sociological understandings of the discursive and affective dimensions of mediated intimacies at present, and how power relations in these dynamics can be considered and addressed in relation to university policies and curriculum around youth sexual health and well-being.

Abstract

This thesis explores the reconfiguration of gender and sexuality in the everyday lives of Chinese young people, with a particular focus on mediated intimacy. Unlike previous sociological work that emphasises macro-level transformations in intimate relationships driven by rising individualism, this study addresses a gap by examining how gendered subjectivities are constructed and negotiated in daily life, within China's rapidly evolving neoliberal and digital landscape.

The research centres on university-led relationship advice courses, *Love Psychology*, designed for Chinese university students. Using digital ethnographic methods, data was collected over ten months (October 2019 to August 2020) through online observation of three course lectures and interviews with eighteen students from two universities in Wuhan. This fieldwork coincided with the Covid-19 lockdown, a period that intensified mediated interactions and limited physical mobility.

The lack of mobility associated with the pandemic accelerated the merging of the feminist new materialist concept of more-than-human actors – omnipresent digital media — as active forces in young people's everyday lived experience of intimacies. Drawing on feminist new materialism and posthuman theory(Barad, 2007), this thesis reconceptualises intimacy as *affective aesthetics* — foregrounding how affect circulates through assemblages of bodies, technologies, and discourses in ways that disrupt hierarchical gender structures and anthropocentric assumptions.

Drawing from my ethnographic fieldnotes and interviews with young people, the analysis highlights the 'messy' micro-ruptures – affective glitches – that emerge in young people's negotiations with (hetero)normativity. Inspired by queer feminist scholarship (Braidotti, 2019; Renold and Ringrose, 2017; Allen,

2015), this research conceptualises young people's gender and sexual identities as non-essentialist, discursive-material entanglements in a state of continuous 'becoming.'

The research contends the conflicting gendered dynamics and persistent structural forces continue to operate on Chinese youth practices of intimacy. Informed by performativity theory, affect theory and discursive approaches, the analysis couches a series of contradictory gendered struggles and rhetorical egalitarian discourses within the local meaning-making process and the historical-social-political specificity of China. Nonetheless, the research still offers a glimmer of hope for dismantling of structural gender hierarchies and moving beyond the narrow confines of (hetero)normative intimacy. The findings also contribute to the development of sexuality and relationship education in China, offering new pedagogical insights aligned with young people's lived realities.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

March 8th, 2024—International Women's Day, a day that celebrates the feminist movement and advocates for women's rights—marked a quiet milestone in my PhD journey. It was on this day that I began drafting the introduction to this thesis. I found myself drilling into my head, searching for the initial motivations that had propelled me into, and through, this long and often turbulent process. The trajectory of my PhD, which brought as much joy as it did tears, it has rarely offered a clearly lit path. And so, this is where the story begins.

"Why do you want to have a Ph.D. instead of a baby? Aren't you 'anti-social'?'' said a guy I briefly 'hung out with'[1] when I was at university.

"If you were my sister, I would suggest you go dating and *hunt* for a husband as soon as you start college; the later you date, the less value you have," a relative of my family said to me.

"I will not give it (have sex) to him unless we are sure to get married."

"Have you been seeing anyone lately?"

"A woman with a doctorate degree is the third gender[2]".

"Why are you doing this research (gender studies and intimacy)? Are you a lesbian or a feminist?"

"I am so disappointed that you already had sex".

These voices may sound alien to many Western audiences. However, as a young Chinese woman who spent her first twenty years in mainland China, I heard all these voices when I first started to date: when I gossiped in the university dorm, and when I met a family relative for the first time after I finally

[1] The phrase "hang out" in China can imply a tentative romantic interest, but it lacks the explicit intention that the term "dating" carries in Western contexts.

[2] In China, a common saying categorizes individuals into three genders: men, women, and women with doctorate degrees, derisively suggesting that highly educated women are asexual and unattractive.

told my parents that I had had a sexual experience, so they would stop treating as ignorant and threatening me about *the consequences* [emphasis added]. 'Starting from one's own experience', as many early feminist pioneers would say, is a common approach in conducting a feminist research (Reinharz, 1992: 259). As far back as I can remember, I have been immersed in the everyday scenes in which young women's sexualities are highly moralised, gendered, and scripted.

As the only daughter in the family, I have received *almost* unconditional support from my parents for pursuing a higher degree; there have always been underlying expectations - marriage being one of them. All the voices surrounding me were growing on a battlefield where I stand with my 'self', my body, my 'Chinese traditions', and my embodied feelings - the anxiety triggered by the fear of aging and ultimately ending up alone; the shame of falling off the 'right' track of life; and the guilt I felt towards my parents for their considerable investment in my education. However, without the right words to express what was wrong with those voices, my instinct was to turn away and escape from the environment and the people.

My journey of self-discovery continued even after I arrived in a foreign land, thousands of miles away from my hometown. Subsequently, a PhD (read: a battlefield) in gender studies in the U.K. seemed to help me acquire the 'language' to explain my confusion in those uncomfortable moments and grasp my fleeting thoughts. Meanwhile, the distance with my parents and home in Wuhan, and the bonding with my 'chosen family' I established from my first in the U.K., have enabled me to develop a fresh perspective on all the intersecting labels I have—class, gender, sexuality, age, and my Chinese ethnicity. Finally, I came to a realisation that seemingly historical changes in China, such as open market reformation and the one-child policy, accompanied with dramatic economic development and transformative gender ideologies, have imperceptibly moulded who I am, why I feel those ways, and where I am today (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 3). Such a battlefield, Foucault (1982) would define

as a process of 'subjectification', is also how a person (the subject – me, in this case) relates themselves to social contexts. I was on this battlefield before, but almost unaware of its existence, but now I realise I still live on it, like many other young people in China.

As my positions shifted, it has become clear to me how I reconstruct my perceptions of my own gendered and classed identities in a complex relation with my family history and my upbringings. As the only daughter of the family and a young middle-class and seemingly upward-mobile female subject, I have enjoyed full parental attention and educational investment. To some extent, my parents, in their younger days, agile to the changing economic and cultural transformations in China, made decisions from career changes and property purchases to prioritisation of my educational investment. My parents' generation embodied what Yan (2012) calls the striving self—individuals who navigated China's early 21st-century urban intellectual culture through self-discipline and relentless effort. Though my own journey has taken a different path, the legacy of that striving subjectivity has quietly shaped the way I relate to the world. Over the years, and over the sea, those socially specific meanings and local (and global) transformations have subtly informed my positions, everyday encounters and future imagination.

However, I have found little up to date research on young people's constructions of gender and sexual subjectivities through everyday lived experience of intimacies, with which I can resonate. Despite being a burgeoning area of study in social science, studies of sexualities in China have a tendency to fall under a positivist paradigm while continuously searching for the signs of progressions in sexual freedom against backdrops of globalisation and the Chinese modernisation process (e.g. Pan, 2008, 1994; Huang and Pan, 2013). In the social-political and academic atmosphere of the 1990s, open discussion about sexuality was limited. Meanwhile, The early development of higher education in China was accompanied by a pressing need not only to establish disciplinary social sciences but also to understand the lives of contemporary

Chinese people during the post-socialist economic reformation (Evans, 1997). Researchers of the 1990s often approached sexuality through the framework of ‘scientific’ inquiry, treating it as an objective and universal phenomenon (Evans, 1997). Under the banner of doing ‘scientific’ research, the early texts on sexuality in the 1990s – such as those by Ruan (1985, 2013), Ruan and Tsai (1988), Li and Wang (1992), and Li (1998) – primarily focused on the ‘universality’ of same-sex practices across human societies, and the proliferation of sexual behaviours among Chinese people, paying little attention to the historically and culturally specific constructions of desiring subjects. Later, as the first government-funded demographic research on Chinese people's sexual practices and attitudes after the post-socialist reformation, Pan (2018, 2008) believed that Chinese people had undergone a significant shift from 'oppressed' sexuality to a relatively “open and more tolerating” sexual culture. Both Pan Suiming (Kinsey, 2013; Pan, 2018) and earlier figures such as Pan Guang Dan (1946 cited in Guo, 2016) exemplify intellectual efforts to selectively import “advanced” Western ideas in sexology, psychology, and eugenics, responding to contemporary calls for Chinese paths to modernization. While, Pan Guangdan (1946), during the May Fourth period (1919-1924) translated Havelock Ellis’s *Psychology of Sex* (1933, cited in Guo, 2016) t to promote his lifelong advocacy of eugenics (Sang, 2003). Pan Suiming’s translation of the Kinsey Report later contributed to the revival of scientific sexology during the reform era (Guo, 2016). Although these efforts helped fill a major void in Chinese social science regarding the study of sexuality and gender, they also tended to essentialize sexual diversity as a timeless and apolitical “fact,” often abstracted from historical, social, and ideological contexts. As a result, there remains an ongoing risk of overlooking the complexity, historicity, discursivity through which gender and sexuality are produced as socially situated knowledges (see Chapter 2).

Another distinguishable academic trend in the studies of sexualities is the ‘indigenous Chineseness’ and ‘Western influences’. Specifically, in Pan's view

(Pan, 1994), the Chinese sex revolution stemmed from the domestic reformation. Pan (2004) has enthusiastically articulated there is an ongoing ‘sexual revolution’ in China, through which he states that growing sexual openness owes much to government-led initiatives such as the one-child policy and the introduction of conception that freed Chinese women from procreation (Jeffreys, 2007). Contradictorily, other researchers argue that China’s open-market policy has also led to other modern phenomena, such as mass media consumption, individualisation and freedom of love (Farrer, 2008b; Lin, 2018). Much of this scholarship portrays Chinese subjectivities as passive recipients of “Western culture,” whether through the consumption of Hollywood movies, Japanese and Korean television dramas (Farrer, 2014b; Zhang et al., 2002), or the commodification of desires and intimacies (Wang and Davidson, 2006; Parish, Laumann and Mojola, 2007). Underlying this body of work is a linear-progressive undertone, suggesting an inevitable trajectory from “traditional” to “modern” intimacies. Drawing heavily on uneven, selectively curated, and descriptive accounts of sexual and gendered practices in China, these studies often exhibit what Irvine (2003) terms ethnographic voyeurism—an observational stance that renders Chinese subjects as exoticized sites of modernization. Such a political positioning, which legitimates certain behaviours as “progressive” while pathologizing others as “abnormal,” has been widely critiqued for reproducing forms of “just like us” narratives – Eurocentric framework that portray Chinese modernity as a belated mimicry of Western sexual and gender norms, rather than as historically and politically specific transformations (Hershatter, 1996a; Yau, 2010). In Chapter 4, I will further illuminate the potential underlying dichotomous thinking with examples from my research. I will foreground the political stance behind such binary logics that essentialises and ‘others’ Western culture as both sexually open and dangerous, and Chinese' culture as representing tradition and innocence, and therefore in need of protection.

Compared with the decades-old views of the dichotomy of 'Western' and

'Chinese-ness', modern and traditional, progressive and backward, a proliferation of research in English has brought fresh air into the field in the first decade of 21st century (e.g. Bao, 2012; Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013; Martin, 2010; Kam, 2013; Sang, 2003; Ngai, 2005; Zarafonetis, 2014). With explicitly illuminative 'subjectivity', the researchers of this decade, mostly coming from the background of feminist and queer studies, filled the gap with nuanced focus that brought the focus back to people's everyday lives and negotiation with gendered norms. In this period, due to the limitations of their foreign identities (i.e. whether they can speak Chinese or not, their travels in China have mostly been restricted), their research primarily focused on urban professionals in their late twenties to forties in metropolitan cities such as Shanghai or Beijing. Nonetheless, these Western scholars approached the interactions between Western and Chinese frameworks reflexively, constructing and reconstructing knowledge about 'the West' and reconfiguration of Chinese traditions in ways that resisted essentialist understandings of cultural identity (Chao, 2010; Sang, 2003; Martin, 2010; Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013).

Meanwhile, my personal experience of conducting this research on Chinese young people's practices of intimacy has a turbulent journey. First, growing up in China and moving to the U.K. to continue my studies, it has always been a challenge for me to write and analyse in English. In this process, I have to not only think in both Chinese and English, but also struggle with the 'lack' of language in expressing and making meaning of gender, sexuality and love in an authoritative way yet still making sense to my Chinese audience (including my participants). This is particularly true of the stigmatised feeling and abjections attached to the Chinese words 'gender' and 'feminism' against the backdrop of feminist backlash and postfeminist contexts in China. Despite both "*nǚ quán zhǔyì"* or "*nǚ xìng zhǔ yì*", mean feminism, the former indicates power and rights, the latter could be translated as 'women's studies' which has been widely accepted in China as it sounds 'gentler'. Such transliteral confusions make academic discussions and my fieldwork even more difficult

(Butler, 2024; see Chapter 3). Moreover, during many of my interview encounters, although I believe myself to be a firm feminist (*nǚ quán zhǔyì zhě*), there were many times when my participants asked for clarification for the word "*nǚ quán"*. I found myself stumbling over words, trying to explain that I was not 'radical' or 'man-hating'. When I realised that I was not the only one facing these uncomfortable and 'sticky' feelings that haunt the interviews (i.e. Scharff, 2010), This process involves not only critically reflecting on my positionality across different contexts but also translating affective responses into a deeper engagement with the embodied experiences of gendered and sexualised subjectivities, as they are shaped within specific socio-cultural formations (see Chapter 5). Similarly, an increasing number of researchers in Chinese gender studies have brought the intersectional lens into the micro-politics of self and desire, focusing on individual positionality through their negotiations with multiple and completing discourses within the matrix of oppression (i.e. heteronormativity) (Cao, 2018; Wang, 2019, 2022; Zarafonetis, 2014; Wang, 2017). Following this thread of scholarship, with a critical theoretical lens, I will respond to academic calling to help to engage the local meaning making process and link it with the global circulation of theoretical concepts.

Moreover, as if the geographical misplacement and linguistic confusion is not complicated enough for my PhD journey, Wuhan, my hometown and field trip destination, became the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic. When I first received a text message from the Chinese government about the mysterious virus detected in Wuhan, little would I have known that this would change the entire trajectory of my PhD (see Chapters 3 for discussion).

By the time I realised it, I was already frantically booking multiple flights to China, hoping one of them would take me back—even if travelling at this time meant a month-long quarantine in various transfer cities before finally reaching Wuhan. However, all the tickets I booked were subsequently cancelled due to increasingly strict international travel restrictions in March 2020. Soon, I found myself stuck alone in my cramped apartment in London, living amid emotional

isolation intensified not only by the health crisis but also by the accelerated xenophobia towards Chinese and other Asian communities in the U.K., with a growing despair for a family reunion.

Amidst this bleakness and sadness, despite all the constraints and difficulties, I resumed my fieldwork thanks to communicative technologies and completed data collection by August 2020. Despite some limitations, I believe the digital ethnography method positively influences this study (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). Due to the shrinking mobility caused by the global health crisis, my participants and I experienced travel restrictions and isolation. Meanwhile, the ubiquity of media technologies enabled us to engage in digitally intimacies, where we built solidarity, shared anxieties and maintained connections with friends and communities from afar. In this light, albeit geographically scattered, we are connected by communicative media. This forced me to think beyond the conventional definitions of mediated intimacies – such as heterosexual conjugal relationships — to multiple relationalities that shape connection and affective encounters. Mobile media and networked technologies have both transformed the ranges of intimacies that connect us (Lasén, 2010; Madianou, 2016), but also influenced the affective and embodiment process of the practices of intimacy (Pink and Mackley, 2013; Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018) (see also, Chapter 2 and Chapter 6).

Drawing upon theoretical insights from feminist posthumanism and queer studies, Chapter 2 provides a detailed overview of the existing literature and contextualises the analytical focus of this research. The literature review is divided into three parts. In the first part, I introduce post-structural theory of gender performativity, and explore how these theoretical frameworks have been applied in sociological research, noting both their contributions and limitations in studying young people's gendered and sexual identities. Finally, I discuss how scholarship informed by new materialist and posthuman theories unsettles fixed understandings of subjectivity, offering alternative approaches that foreground the entanglement of human and non-human actors in shaping

young people's experiences of sexuality in the Chinese context.

In the second part, I briefly map out the current 'knowledge' formation on the Chinese youth's gender and sexual cultures. I argue that previous sociological research on Chinese gender and sexual subjectivities has centred on a positivist and modernist narrative of sexual 'openness' against the backdrop of socio-economic transformations in China. I also review a small but growing body of empirical literature employing feminist posthuman and discursive approaches to explore young people's sexual cultures. This body of literature has moved away from the binary paradigm of modern/traditional, Chinese/Western, and openness/conservativeness. Then, in order to locate Chinese youth subjectivities, I map out influential themes surrounding contemporary Chinese youth's practices of intimacy and different perspectives on gender performativity against the backdrop of neoliberal and post-socialist Chinese society (Zarafonetis, 2014; Rofel, 2007; Wang, 2019; Martin, 2018). Drawing from previous research on the youth practice of intimacy, Chinese desiring subjectivities are constructed through discourses of responsibilities, while accommodating neoliberal and neotraditional patriarchal norms (see Rofel, 2007; Wang, 2017, p.48). Meanwhile, some sociological researchers of Chinese and Asian studies argue that gender subjectivity entailed epistemic ruptures and continuities due to the complex and compressed modern Chinese history (Chiang, 2010; Liu, 2015). Therefore, it is challenging to apply Butler's theory of gender performativity (i.e. heterosexual matrix) without criticality and reflectivity on the Chinese specificity (Li, 2016; Hershatter, 2020). Therefore, there is an urgent academic need to explore alternative conceptual lenses to situate Chinese youth subjectivities, while avoiding succumbing to the previous positivist paradigm, by capturing the micro-socio movement at a deeper level.

In the final section of this literature review, I locate my analytical focus in response to critical inquiries into the transformation of intimacy and relationships in a postmodern, deeply mediated world (Hjorth and Lim, 2012; Chambers, 2013; Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018). Whereas the global

health crisis broke the neoliberalist fantasy of frictionless mobility, it simultaneously accelerated the mediation of human relationalities in the absence of public space and everyday encounters (Evans and Ringrose, 2025). Drawing from the theory of affect and feminist-inspired posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019a), this section bridges theoretical approaches with emerging digital practices, moving toward a more-than-human conceptualisation of intimacy. I propose reimagining intimate machinery within institutional settings as unfolding through imperceptible micromoments of territorialising forces and deterritorialising becomings — at the fuzzy intersections of digital and non-digital life (Ringrose et al., 2024; Evans and Ringrose, 2025; Charteris and Gregory, 2024). Accordingly, I propose to reconfigure intimacies as affective aesthetics, which refers to a privileged sense of sameness and belonging in the affective experiences of intimacies in the digital and non-digital world. The dynamics of the mediated affective assemblages are not only encoded through semiotic elements such as language, emojis, and the metricisation of emotional responses (e.g. likes, shares, comments), but also shaped by spatial configurations, temporal rhythms, mediated presence, and techno-synchronicity. These entanglements unfold within the aesthetic logics of digital platforms and circulate across wider cultural and institutional domains.

Following this, in Chapter 3, I introduce the methodology used for this research. The research aims to explore Chinese youth's navigation of gender subjectivities in their everyday practices. Informed by a post-structural feminist ethico-onto-epistemology, my research focuses on theorizing 'becoming' and rejects binary interpretations of the body, mind, and emotions, as well as subjectivity and objectivity. This research utilises discourse analysis to explore how realities are intra-actively constructed in the discursive-material spaces (Gill, 1996). I further investigate on how individuals come to inhabit specific subjective positions and how these positions may shift, fragment, or appear contradictory over time (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, 2005). Data collection began with three interviews with lecturers who taught the elective course Love

and Relationships, offered at two different universities in Wuhan, China. Subsequently, I conducted unstructured online interviews with 18 student participants (aged 18–22) enrolled in these courses, supplemented by class observations and participants' digital diaries. In this chapter, I also reflect on my positionality as a researcher — a middle-class woman, the only daughter in my family, currently pursuing a PhD in the UK — and consider how my own affective entanglements shaped and were shaped by the research assemblage.

In Chapter 4, I examine the gender discourses of heterosexual-mediated intimacy which emerged from the Love Psychology courses and interviews with the lecturers. Teaching remotely on digital platforms during the uncertain time of the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic presented lecturers with unexpected challenges when addressing traditionally sensitive topics. On the one hand, my analysis of these gender discourses aligns with the existing educational research in the Chinese context which contends that Chinese universities are heteronormative spaces (Wei and Liu, 2019; Wei, 2020). On the other hand, my analysis also brings to light the niche – the love and relationship advisory courses – by unpacking the dilemmatic positions of these 'love experts' — particularly their vulnerability, limitations as well as flexibility when tackling 'queer' issues on campuses, such as institutionalised LGBTQ invisibility and women's sexuality. The analysis provided in this chapter will reveal how discursive-material agencies, gender and sexuality politics, and young people, are co-constructing gendered cultures on campuses and beyond. Couching youth gender subjectivities in the specific Chinese context and local practices, I unpack how these courses promote self-management, emphasising imperatives such as 'self-responsibility,' 'self-love,' and 'self-respect.' I argue that these imperatives carry distinct moral connotations and regulatory power for young people (especially women) and their process of 'becoming' which are disguised under the discourse of personal development. This chapter joins the broader academic conversations on finding innovative, alternative frameworks for education in sexuality, which are attentive to the social and political

particularities of the Chinese context.

Continuing the analysis of gender discourses from Chapter 4, Chapter 5 delves into young people's construction of gender subjectivities through their narratives of intimacies and considers how the entangled intersection of structural inequalities has directed young people's fantasies and practices of intimacies. Drawing attention to the inconsistencies in their narratives surrounding their gender positions (Hollway, 2008), I trace micro-moments of what I term affective glitches — small ruptures in the normative flow — where young people momentarily queer age, gender, and sexual norms. Specifically, I pay particular attention to how young Chinese people draw from available cultural and material resources to iterate certain heteronormative conventions while simultaneously negotiating, resisting, or unsettling others. Ultimately, the chapter offers a glimmer of hope for structural transformation, pointing toward emergent possibilities for unsettling entrenched gender hierarchies.

In Chapter 6, I explore the more-than-human dimensions of intimacy in the techno-social assemblages. This chapter reconceptualises mediated intimacy as affective aesthetics — an aesthetic training of emotional self-presentation, shaped by the visibility regimes, platform logics, and heteronormative pedagogies embedded in techno-social assemblages. Through digital intimacy rituals and social media platforms, young people engage in performances of intimacy that circulate affect, consolidate belonging, and reproduce normative expectations, yet also generate contradictions and ambivalence, particularly under what I term a *reversible panoptic gaze*. This affective aesthetics, distributed and mutual, governs not only what can be shown, but how intimacy should look and feel, shaping subjectivities in deeply affective ways. I contend that young people's subjective interactions with techno-social-cultural environments intensify and prolong affective flows, which, while dynamic, remain intertwined with the structural forces of heteronormativity.

In the final chapter, I combine the threads of analysis and reflect on various dimensions of Chinese young people's constructions of gendered and sexual

subjectivity through their practices of intimacy. This chapter reviews the main themes discussed in the previous chapters, where I assessed the changing gender discourses and the emergence of individualistic romantic subjectivity. Building upon existing literature on digitally mediated studies and queer studies on mobile intimacy and identity, this research contributes to a broader project of exploring the changing paradigm of intimacy, where the notion of intimacy is shaped by and shapes young people's engagement with social media. I then discuss how this thesis may contribute to knowledge about young Chinese people and offer alternative epistemologies and methodologies for conducting ethnographic research. Finally, I end the thesis with a coda dedicated to the prolonged impact of the pandemic in a deeply mediated world.

To conclude, in many ways, this research's trajectory follows a posthuman and feminist new materialist framework to explore Chinese young people's gender and sexual subjectivity while reimagining the possibilities of mediated intimacy and how it might shape and be shaped by youth sexual cultures. My research diverges from previous studies on young people’s practices of intimacy by not concentrating on the Eurocentric narratives of sexual openness or individualisation, which have been critiqued by both Western and Chinese scholars (e.g., Hershatter, 2020; Wang, 2022) as a process of normalisation. My research, therefore, joins in this ongoing struggle to communicate the 'Western' and 'local' knowledge production of gender. The goal is not to provide any definitive answer but to encourage the production of previously unthought questions, practices and knowledge (Mazzei and McCoy, 2010)

To conclude, for my research, the more-than-human approach provides space for more fluid, intersectional understandings of gender and relationality and addresses both theoretical and empirical questions regarding mediated intimacies. This research expands beyond singular or binary understandings of intimacy and focusing on the micro-level and molecular-level ruptures in the process of 'becoming'. Situated within the broader context of China's drastic socio-economic transformation, this research interrogates how power circulates

around spatial and bodily shifts and fine-tuning according to the specific power structures of the educational context and historical moments. This research raises several research questions:

- In what ways do expert advice from university-led relationship courses reflect various discourses about gender and sexuality in the post-socialist and neoliberal context in China?
- How do young Chinese people negotiate with the 'normativity' of intimacies and ‘becoming’ gender and sexual subjectivities through their embodied experiences and the narratives of intimacies?
- What role do digital technologies play in shaping and transforming young people's practices of intimacies; how can a more-than-human approach be employed in researching emergent forms of intimacies to challenge hegemonic understandings?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the empirical and theoretical literature on youth sexualities and mediated intimacies, outlining the conceptual framework used in this study on young people's sexual cultures on campus. Rather than providing an exhaustive review of the literature on gender and sexuality, I focus on key concepts and theories relevant to this thesis. The chapter is divided into three parts.

First, I examine post-structural performativity and discourse theories that shape current understandings of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity. I detail how these theories have been applied methodologically, highlighting their strengths and limitations in researching young people's gendered and sexual identities. Additionally, I summarize how this body of work, inspired by post-structural performativity, informs the micro-level exploration of young people's practices of intimacy in China. In the second part, I will start with a brief mapping of the current 'knowledge' of Chinese youth's gender and sexual culture. Drawing from Foucauldian discursive theories, I highlight the limitations of previous gender and sexuality literature that centres on a positivist and modernist narrative of sexual 'openness' against the backdrop of the transformation of the socio-economic context in China. I also review a small but growing body of empirical literature employing feminist posthuman and psychosocial approaches to explore young people's sexual cultures that move away from the binary paradigm of modern/traditional, Chinese/Western, and freedom/repression.

In the last part of the literature review, I draw from feminist posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019b; Haraway, 1988) and discourse analysis to shape the conceptual tools for this study. Concepts such as 'assemblages,'

'posthumanism,' 'affect,' subjectivity,' and 'entanglement' engage with the complexities and ambivalences of young people's reconfiguration of gender in everyday life through their practice of intimacy. I detail how these concepts extend beyond previous linear and dualistic narratives on youth practices of intimacy in China and critically trace dominant discourses of mediated intimacy. Furthermore, I outline the limitations of using such theoretical and conceptual tools for my research. I also demonstrate the potential of these concepts to explore complex sexual and gender inequities, alongside mapping feminist figurations of youth sexualities in China.

2.2 Part One: The construction of gender and sexualities through performativity and discursive theories

Drawing from the scholarship of poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and posthumanism, feminist and queer theories have offered emerging perspectives in exploring gender and sexuality in everyday life, highlighting the cultural variability, historical specificity, and multiplicity of the construction of gender and sexuality (Butler, 2006 [1990]; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001; Holland et al., 1998). The following sections outline interactionist and discursive approaches to gender and sexualities, with a particular focus on youth gendered practices and sexual cultures. I will also illustrate the usefulness and limitations of such approaches, thereby setting the stage for introducing feminist posthumanism and new materialist scholarship that informs this thesis.

2.2.1 Approaching gender and sexualities through performativity theory

The understanding of gender and sexuality as socially performed and constructed can be traced to Erving Goffman’s social constructionist theory of

performance (1959). Goffman was a pioneer in exploring social interactions through dramaturgical metaphors. He insightfully argued that social life is akin to a play where individuals perform for each other, acting in ways that convey identities aligned with the expectations of their audience and the social situation (the front stage) (1959). From an interactionist perspective, even though his work does not particularly focus on gender and sexuality, Goffman's work is influential in understanding the disclosure of marginalized sexual identities and managing the expectations and reactions of others (1959). In his now classical reference, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he proposes the concept of 'impression management,' which involves projecting an 'idealized image' of ourselves. This theorisation conceals several aspects of a performance of social identities, which he perceived as the effort which goes into putting on a front, and typically hiding any personal profit we will gain from a performance/interaction (ibid.).

Although most of his work does not particularly focus on gender, in his later work, Goffman examined the social reproduction of gender inequality, thereby highlighting how 'irrelevant biological differences between the sexes' are socially elaborated through 'segregative punctuation' of daily activities (1977, p.319). For instance, he noted that schools offer coeducational classes interspersed with sex-segregated activities like gym and sports and address the cultural matter of toilet segregation (ibid. p316). Goffman understood that these practices do not honour sexual differences but produce them as they unfold in socially conditioned temporal and spatial contexts. Thus, Goffman's work remains salient and relevant in media and communication study particularly (i.e. Marwick, 2005; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Trottier, 2012b).

Another contribution of Goffman’s work (1959, 1977) is on the concept of ‘doing gender’ in ethnomethodology and interactionism (Kessler and McKenna, 1985; Garfinkel, 1967). In Harold Garfinkel’s (1967) case study of the intersex individual Agnes, he focuses on ‘accounts’ — how people describe themselves — to illustrate that gender is an accomplishment through actions and signs. The

term ‘doing gender’ was later expanded by Kessler and McKenna (1978), who argued that gender is not a reflection of biological reality but a social construct that varies across cultures. These scholars inspired West and Zimmerman’s (1987) work on defining gender as 'a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction'. West and Zimmerman suggest that individuals' gender involves everyday performance guided through complex social, cultural, interactional, and micropolitical activities, leading to socially appropriate expressions of masculinity and femininity (ibid.). Their research symbolizes a paradigm shift in understanding gender and now represents a conceptual breakthrough (West and Zimmerman, 1987). This scholarship has produced a convincing argument that gender dichotomy was not so much the foundation of gender practice but its effect – the performative character of gender. Queer scholars criticized this early gender and sexuality scholarship as it entails a rubric and fixed category of doing gender or essentializing gender differences (Connell, 2009). Instead, Catherine Connell’s (2010) research reveals moments of destabilizing gender of transgender people in their workplaces, uncovering the intractable gender orders in which individuals struggle, constantly reinterpret and mitigate disruptions to gender.

The theory of 'gender performativity' has been refined throughout Judith Butler’s work over several decades and was first introduced explicitly in *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 2006[1990]). Butler's main argument is that gender is not an inherent or biologically determined characteristic but rather something performative. This theory challenges conventional 'essentialist' understandings of gender, which assume that masculinity and femininity are naturally or biologically fixed traits, that masculinity should be embodied by male bodies and femininity by female bodies, and that these bodies are naturally attracted to their 'opposite.' Butler’s notion of performative gender underscores that we are born into a world that already assigns specific meanings to gender and anatomy, shaping how we understand ourselves and others in retrospect. Butler has insightfully argued that ‘gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of

agency from which various acts proceeded; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time–an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts […] and must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self' (1988, p.519). Even though, from this perspective, there are limits in discussion on how much agency one can have in doing gender, the Butlerian theory of performativity and the embodiment of gender nonetheless pushes the debate on 'gender as socially constructed' further. Some feminist scholars building on Butlerian theory have extended the conceptualisation of gender and sexuality beyond genital-centric frameworks, shifting attention to the performativity of gender as constituted through the repetition of everyday acts, embodied practices, and lived experiences (i.e. Ingram, 2019; Ringrose and Rawlings, 2015)

Overall, the performativity and interactionist perspectives are particularly helpful in understanding how gender and sexual identity are produced in everyday life through interactions, signs, and speech. These perspectives also provide theoretical tools for the research methods, suggesting that the researcher needs to engage in participant observation to get 'backstage' with the participants, which has inspired later ethnographic research and psychosocial analysis (see Chapter 3). Still, from an interactionist perspective, there are limits to how much agency individuals can have in performing gender. Moreover, for some new materialist and posthumanist scholars, although the theory of performativity destabilizes the fixed understanding of gender and the body, Butlerian theory privileges linguistic paradigm, Butler's framework remains anchored in a linguistic paradigm, making it less applicable to the non-human or to bodily-material processes beyond discourse (Braidotti, 2011; Kirby, 2014; Grosz, 1994). As gender discourse and gender semiotic continues as part of constituting forces at work in social transformation, many Chinese feminist scholars have sought to enlarge the category of gender and establish the gender question as a subject of transformative consciousness of political

activity (Barlow, 1993; Wang, 2005; Hershatter, 2020; Yin, 2022). Yet still, the work of Butlerian performativity theory continues to be an indispensable part of disrupting and constructing the gender-making process of Chinese young people. It is equally important to acknowledge the social and historical specificities that produce distinctive knowledge claims on gender and sexuality and move beyond Eurocentrism (Braidotti, 2014).

2.2.2 Discursive approaches to gender and sexuality

Before I move on to the production of 'knowledge' on sexuality in China, it is necessary to question how this knowledge circulates and functions and its relation to power – the *régime du savoir*, as Foucault proposed (Foucault, 1982, p.781). In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1998) summarises the historical groundwork of the knowledge of sexuality and argues that social, economic, and political forces shaped it over time. Foucault insightfully challenges the 'repressive hypothesis' of sexuality, making a pivotal contribution to the production of knowledge, power, and the subject in poststructuralism. Unlike the interactionist view on sexuality as solely socially constructed, Foucault argues that the concept of sexuality is produced through different systems of knowledge, or discourses, that influence how issues of sexuality have been talked about, regulated and circulated.

Foucault's (1998) arguments on 'knowledge' reconfigure the concept of power by rejecting the notion of power as a purely top-down repressive force. Instead, power is understood as a dynamic and shifting nexus of regulatory forces continually produced and negotiated through institutions, practices, and the materiality of the bodies. Power operates through relations between individuals or groups, involving an ensemble of actions that influence and interact with one another. Specifically, Foucault (1979) divides the concept of biopower into two intertwining poles: the anatomo-politics of the body (disciplinary power) and the biopolitical power of the population. The former,

anatomo-politics, or disciplinary power, as Foucault notes (1977, p.136), produces ‘docile bodies’ through disciplinary sites such as schools, prisons, and hospitals, where human body can be ‘subjected, used, transformed and improved’. On the other hand, biopolitical power operates at the population level, viewing human life as something that can be optimized and administered through techniques of governance and regulation (ibid.). These poles explain how power operates not through overt repression but by shaping, managing, and regulating life.

Foucault’s (1979) notions of power provide a framework in the formation of neoliberal subjectivity, in which power operates via the interconnections of knowledge and the techniques of the self, shaping the self-governing subjects. For example, Foucault defines panopticism as a type of power that is applied to individuals in the form of continuous individual supervision (Foucault, 2006, p.52). In this sense, power therefore, perpetuates in the form of control, punishment, compensation, and the form of correction, to model and transform of individuals to fit certain norms (Foucault, 1979, p.70). Even though the development of modern technology is beyond the scope of Foucault's original framework of power, media scholars have drawn on his work (Foucault, 2002, 2006, Manokha, 2018; Trottier, 2012b). They explore new media technologies as a form of disciplinary power whereby the care of the virtual self produces and reproduces self-restraint and self-censorship through managing their visibility online, and take advantages of the visibility of others (Manokha, 2018; Trottier, 2012b). Crucially, in the Foucauldian definition, power is far more than just a negative, coercive, or repressive thing that excludes, represses, censors, masks, and conceals; it is also a necessary and positive force that produces and recreates. Following Foucault, Nikolas Rose positions 'government' as a particular way of striving to reach social and political ends by acting in a calculated manner upon the forces, activities, and relations of the individuals that constitute a population (1999, p.5). In this sense, subjectivity has become a vital resource in the managing of the affairs of the nation.

Despite Foucault’s work remaining influential today, the major criticism of Foucauldian thinking is his monolithic view of knowledge regimes, which centres on the subject's agency or freedom of action. Specifically, in Foucauldian accounts, the sexual subject has no intrinsic meaning or agency that might be identified, accounted for, or repressed. In the modern poststructuralist thinking, language speakers act as both discursive products and producers in the reproduction and transformation of discourses and in social and cultural changes (Burchell, Gordon, and Miller, 1991; Dreyfus and Rabinow, 2016[1984]).

Another major criticism of Foucault’s work, despite its importance in exploring the historical development of sexuality discourses, is the absence of gender as a category of analysis (Fraser, 1981; Hartsock, 1990). Nonetheless, despite such criticism, Michel Foucault's theory remains powerfully relevant today, particularly in the field of sexual knowledgeabilities in which he questions the methodological premises that strain the bounds of historical investigation. Compared with Foucault’s work which de-emphasizes subjective agency, Judith Butler’s framework of gender performativity carves out more space for the subject's agency (Butler, 2006).

However, both Foucault and Butler have been critiqued for their abstraction, with their theoretical approaches often seen as difficult to apply in empirical practice (Fraser, 1981). Performativity theory and discursive approaches each offer important conceptual tools and methodological pathways for analysing how young people's narratives and practices act as both products and producers of discourse in the context of social and cultural transformation (Dobson, 2014; Holmgren, 2013; Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008; Peng, 2021). While gender performative theory and discursive approaches provide valuable insights into how identities are constituted through repeated actions and linguistic practices, they can still fall short in capturing the affective, embodied, and material dimensions of lived experience—particularly the subtle, contradictory, and often non-verbal aspects of everyday life. These theories

often emphasize broad cultural and social structures at the expense of the intricate, everyday interactions and bodily and affectively entanglements that shape sexual subjectivities within their unique socio-techno-political environments.

2.2.3 From macro to micro (molecular): Subjectivity and the process of 'becoming'

The concept of subjectivity/*zhutixing*, as an embodied and inter-corporeal process, is never fixed, but in some circumstances, falls into patterns and allows some degree of interpretation and could be understood as the 'self'. In the exploration of intimacy and subjectivity, it is essential to recognize that one's narratives on intimate practices reflect on a certain unity of selfhood and subjectivity that constitutes a relative macro-level sociocultural positions and micro-level rupture and resistance of (un)doing and becoming (Braidotti 2002). Braidotti (2014) position the body as a fundamental matter in feminist theory, not merely a biological or social construction but an ontological site of 'becoming.' This perspective challenges us to view bodies as complex assemblages modulated by social and technological infrastructures and as sites of relational and affective experiences. From a new materialist perspective, the embodied subject is both brute materiality and signified sociality, capable of incorporating external influences and unfolding outward their affects (Massumi, 2002; Clough and Halley, 2007; Protevi, 2009).

Feminist posthuman theories, exemplified by Braidotti's work are particularly useful in capturing the micro-movement of 'becoming'. Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivities, rooted in Deleuze's assemblage theory (Deleuze, 2004 [1983]; Deleuze and Guattari, 2004[1987]), captures the fluid and material dimensions of the process of becoming. Her conceptualization of subjectivity intentionally moves away from dualistic divides such as 'self' and 'other,' 'body' and 'mind,' 'inside' and 'outside' (Braidotti, 2014), creating space

for a more interconnected understanding of identity and existence. Braidotti's posthuman nomadic philosophy shifts from broad societal discourses to individuals' flexible uses of available discourses to (re)create and negotiate representations of self and reality and question once-perceived boundaries between bodies, affected and affecting, researched, and researchers (Braidotti, 2014). This approach sheds light on the formation and transformation of selves, thoughts, and emotions through social interaction and its role in cultural reproduction and change. For Braidotti, the body may well be the fundamental matter in feminist theory: the body is not merely a biological given or a social construction but rather an ontological site of becoming (2022, p.113). In this light, bodies are posthuman as they are heterogeneous genetic and bacterial assemblages modulated within social and technological infrastructures. Therefore, returning to the materiality of the bodies and their mediated representation, the posthuman lens enables the sociological research focus to shift from the macro-level to the micro (and molecular) level assemblages of real-life, embodied and embedded, relational and affective marginalized groups, with their pleasures and pain and respective implications in mechanisms of power.

Meanwhile, while illuminating power relations in advanced capitalism, the previously mentioned Foucault-inspired biopolitical scholarship falls short in addressing the affirmative aspects of the posthuman turn. The materialist concept of non-human life (zoe) emerges as a central and productive force, pushing beyond the limitations of biopolitical frameworks (Braidotti, 2022, p.83). This necessitates adopting a conceptual frame of nomadic 'becoming,' as articulated by Braidotti, who was informed by neo-Spinozist vital ontologies, adopting intersectional axes of analysis such as race, ethnicity, age, able-bodied, and class. Braidotti's (2022, p.83-84) conceptualization of posthumanism integrates *zoe* (the life of all living things), *bios* (the life of humans organized in society), and technology, aiming to balance the human with the rest of the world. This perspective rejects binaries such as human/non-

human and instead emphasizes relationality. The posthuman subject is a collective, acknowledging multiplicity while avoiding relativism by considering situatedness: "We are all in this together, but we are not one and the same" (Braidotti, 2020, p.465). This posthumanism framework transcends poststructuralism, composing a new ontological understanding of 'becoming' subjects that recognizes all entities' interconnectedness and co-constructed nature.

Braidotti's (2014) notions of ‘nomadic becoming’ process of subjectivities resonate strongly with my research, which helps me to capitulate the fluidity and processual nature of becoming gender (sexual) subjectivities within the specific socio-techno-political landscape. Specifically, against the backdrop of neoliberalism and postsocialist Chinese context, the devastating effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the location of Wuhan as the eye of the storm has resembled a distinctly time-sensitive and geopolitical subjectivity. Braidotti’s notion of the nomadic becoming process destabilizes fixed identities, displaces dominant knowledge frameworks, and foregrounds the unfolding of heterogeneous and decentralized forms of subjectivity. Within this specific spatial-social context of a global health crisis as well as the heated social hatred globally, biopolitical management of the epidemics creates 'minimal recognition of an epidemic as something-that-passes, and passes between and through the multiplicity of bodies that constitute the body politic' (Thacker, 2009, p.141). Braidotti’s posthuman perspective is critical in understanding the marginalization of bodies associated with Wuhan and its residents, who have been symbolically cast as 'infected' or 'contaminated' by the global health crisis and fuelled by heated social stigma.

Through a posthuman perspective, the new-materialist subjects become relational and collective assemblages of various social elements that inter-/intra-acted span across human and non-human entities, recognizing all bodies — ideological, physical, social — as capable of agency (see also Barad, 2007). This perspective allows for micro-level scrutiny of how bodies are relationally

embedded within a broader network of influences and forces that continuously shape their experiences, identities, and affective relations, traversing boundaries of time, space, memory, and corporeality.

2.3 Part Two: The current 'knowledge' of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity of Chinese youth

As previously noted (2.2.2) the production of ‘knowledge’ is always conceived as an explanation or solution to specific problems within a particular social and historical context. Different fields and aspects naturally give rise to different forms of knowledge production (Braidotti, 2019b; Haraway, 1988). Feminist studies and sociological research inevitably include reflections on their sources and states of knowledge. The feminist politics of locations (Rich, 1987, p.19), and situated knowledge are crucial to this cartographic approach to the subject's process of 'becoming '(Harding, 1986, 1991; Haraway, 1988). Specifically, Haraway (1988) argued that situated knowledge is a consistent materialist line of acknowledging the politics of location in the epistemology of knowledge production. It is undeniable that, alongside global integration, local conflicts and wars, new social realities and competitions, and the emergence of new academic systems and media discourse interpretations, the convergence of theoretical and empirical developments of feminism and sexuality since the 1960s, has prompted new observations and knowledge to emerge and further develop. Thomas Kuhn (1997 [1962]) used the concept of 'paradigm shifts' to explain the emergence of previously unimagined perspectives and knowledge processes. The focus is not on judging the correctness of specific knowledge or perspectives but on reflecting on how our previously relied-upon frameworks have hindered the emergence of new perspectives and knowledge. This is a particularly important theoretical lens for reviewing the strong colonialist epistemological tendency in the current field of gender and sexualities to treat

China as the location for a spread of the Western model of a 'sexual revolution' and individualization.

2.3.1 The shift of paradigm and 'knowledge' production of Chinese gender(sexual) subjects

The making of sexual subjectivity indicates a constitutive sociality of the self that counters the neoliberal reimagination of the genders and historical and political movement. Despite being a burgeoning area of study in social science, the development of gender and sexuality studies in China can be tentatively characterised by **three** overlapping and non-linear shifts. These changes were represented and shaped by the socioeconomic transformation and political environment in China, reflecting a complex knowledge production of sexualities and gender and a mixed process of acceptance and rejection of the traveling transnational theories of gender and sexualities (Spakowski, 2011, p.34-35). I therefore offer some reflections on the historical and political entanglements between sexuality/gender studies as a discipline practiced in China. Recontextualizing the gender/sexuality research through a dynamic body of both English and Chinese scholarship, I characterize the construction of the Chinese gender/sexual subjectivity as an incomplete and constantly transforming project. Moreover, recognizing the geo-political mediated discourses of Chinese gender/sexuality studies helps to propose new possibilities to encompass the Euro-American variants of gender/sexuality studies, therefore contributing to queering the 'knowledge' productions.

Firstly, the earliest academic interests in Chinese people's sexual and intimate practices can be traced back to the pre-modern Chinese context. As early as the 1870s, during China's semi-colonial and semi-feudal period, the Enlightenment era, Chinese (mostly male) intellectuals selectively introduced European sexologist and eugenic beliefs to facilitate China's development into a modernized nation-state (Rocha and College, 2012). It was also when

Enlightenment intellectuals appropriated certain first-wave feminist arguments, such as freedom of marriage and love, along with progressive evolution beliefs. In particular, the endorsement of social Darwinism, namely, the 'struggle for existence' and 'natural selection' (Chung, 2014; Chiang, 2010), had been incorporated in the earliest Chinese feminist enlightenment (see discussion Hershatter, 2007; Shen, 2015). During China's Republican era (1912-1949), new biologizing discourses relating to reproduction, sexual health, and family continued to add to the eugenic beliefs about the future of the race and the nation (Barlow, 2012; Chung, 2014; Dikötter, 1998). For example, Pan Guangdan (1946) translated Havelock Ellis's Psychology of Sex (1933, cited in Guo, 2016) during the May Fourth Movement period (1915-1921) as part of his life-long interests in eugenics (Sang, 2003). In this period, the feminist discourse of the sexuality of Chinese people was imbued with nationalist and racial ideologies, viewing the prosperity of China's future as dependent on the perpetuation of the family and women's substantial responsibility to reproduce. This was also the period when the terms 'sex' (*xing*) and 'gender' (*xingbie*) were introduced in Japan and entered modern Chinese vocabulary (Yu, 2015). Following this, the earlier concept of sexuality and gender, along with Chinese feminism, was 'an event of global proportions' integrating with the local reality at the term of the twentieth century (Liu, Karl, and Ko, 2013, pp.4-6), meaning they were not only Western imports but also fuelled with a traumatic memory of colonial dismemberment. Consequently, despite the later proliferation of Chinese feminist studies, the historical particularity of China's colonial past and acute anxieties over the right of self-determination not only manifest as a nationalist discourse of repudiating feminism[3] (He, 2023, 2024), but also

[3] Such nationalist discourses regard feminists as traitors to the nation and legitimate attacks on feminism as a patriotic defence of the motherland (Huang, 2023). More recently, antifeminists have used nationalist discourses, attacking feminism as a 'Western evil force' and an ideological product imported from foreign countries (Huang, 2016). Such discourses not only otherize Chinese culture and people (Liu and Dahling,

translates into academic concerns about developing alternatives to Euro-American-centric gender/sexuality theory and fending off its cultural imperialism.

In the second phase, the concept of gender was further popularised with the 'gender mainstreaming' mandate of the party-stage agenda for promoting gender equality (Xu, 2009). The conundrum about what uses to make of feminisms as travelling theory and how to make use of it, remains a contested field of both scholarly debate and Chinese state practice (Butler, 2024; Evans, 2021; Hershatter, 2020; Spakowski, 2011; Wang and Zhang, 2010). Rooted in the Chinese Communist Party's early ideological commitment to women's liberation, the principle of gender equality (*nánnǚ píngděng*) was written into the 1950 Constitution as a cornerstone of the socialist revolution. By the 1980s and 1990s, feminist concerns began to expand beyond this formal state framework. A range of civic organizations and NGOs emerged, addressing issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, and rural women's empowerment. These grassroots efforts played a crucial role in raising feminist consciousness and broadening the scope of gender discourse beyond the state-led agenda of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) (Han, 2018). However, after the 2000s, there was a noticeable shift in feminist activism. The earlier model of 'insider' NGO-based engagement gave way to more autonomous and oppositional forms of action—what some scholars describe as an 'outer-system' approach – which includes performative activism, feminist art, philanthropic initiatives, and cyberfeminism (Wang, 2018).

Meanwhile, pioneering diasporic Chinese feminist scholars played a key role in translating 'gender' into '*shèhuì xìngbié*' (social gender/sex), emphasizing the socially constructed nature of gender roles and challenging essentialist definitions (Wang and Zhang, 2010; Yu, 2015). However, some Chinese scholars, notably Li Xiaojiang (2016), argued that '*xìngbié*' (gender/sex)

2016) but also victimize Chinese culture/people/motherland that upholds the harmony and morality of Confucianism (Han, 2018; Tan, 2023).

seeing it as a more ‘localized’ concept rooted in Chinese intellectual and linguistic traditions. In Chinese, the term, *xìngbié*, before the Romanised transliteration, is already a translation/transliteration of Chinese characters — was itself a product of translation shaped by China’s engagement with modernity. In their recent reflection, Butler (2024) notes that the Chinese terminology for “gender” reflects the ongoing theoretical and linguistic negotiations required in cross-cultural feminist translation. These negotiations, as Butler (2024) argues, illustrate a broader predicament of gender theory: that it has always existed in a process of coining and redefinition across multilingual and transnational contexts. The Chinese feminist semantic debates over gender and sexuality reveal the complex process of the local adaptation of 'Western' feminism and has always been a disturbing term partially due to its conceptual ambivalence and translatory literacy (Ko and Zheng, 2006; Butler, 2025; Yu, 2015). The semantic struggle over “gender” in Chinese feminist scholarship is not merely a linguistic issue but one that encapsulates the tensions between universalist feminist ambitions and the politics of local intelligibility.

In the same phase, the nascent academic field of sexuality and gender studies re-emerged after a long 'silence' over topics of sexuality in the Maoist era. Especially after the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, international foundations – carrying Western feminist ideologies – entered China, embedding themselves within various development projects under the banner of ‘progress’. Through their funding and influence, gender studies gradually took shape as an academic discipline, and gender-related discourse began to permeate policy and intellectual debates. At the same time, under the policy of 'economic reform and opening up' (*gǎigé kāifàng*), there was not only a great need for developing social science at the beginning of establishing Chinese higher education sectors but also for understanding the lives of contemporary Chinese people during social transformation (Evans, 1997). In this period, Pan Suiming (2008, 2018), a prominent Chinese sexologist and

sociologist, documented the transformation of sexual norms and behaviours in China from the economic reforms of the late 1970s. Funded by the Chinese government, Pan (2018, 2008) hosted a series of large-scale demographic studies on Chinese people's sexual practices and attitudes, using extensive empirical data from 2000-2015. Highlighting the diversity of sexual experiences among different demographics in China, Pan proposed that Chinese people had 'broken the silence' imposed by the Cultural Revolution and articulated that there had been a 'sexual revolution' as a part of the socialist modernization process (Pan, 2006; Pan and Huang, 2011). This early sexuality research, exemplified by Pan's and his colleagues' research (2006; Pan and Huang, 2011), along with Li Yinhe's research (Li and Wang, 1992) was devoted to demystifying human sexuality. However, it is unclear whether this newfound visibility of diverse sexual practices of Chinese people indicates collective social progress, or the (re)production of neoliberal discourses in making universal assumptions on sex behaviours, which are predicated on a politics of normative heterosexuality (Griffin, 2007). This body of scholarship, emerging at the onset of China's reform era, reflects the confluence of an academic trend favouring positivist approaches and the dominance of the gender and development paradigm — both of which have profoundly shaped and constrained gender and sexuality studies in China. This hegemonic discourse of gender has become the prevailing analytical framework, often marginalizing local feminist experiences and situated empirical knowledge.

In the same vein, utilising the umbrella term of 'doing scientific research', sexology/sexuality researchers in the late 1980s and 1990s published across different disciplines, especially studying the universality of same-sex practices and sex workers as a marginalised group (Ruan and Tsai, 1988; Ruan, 2013; Li and Wang, 1992; Pan, 2004). Among them, Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo's work, for example, *Their World: A Penetrating Look into China's Male Homosexual Community* (1992) exemplifies the earliest paradigm shift from sexological research to sociological exploration of queer communities in China. However,

the critical point of their ethnographic research is the dualistic positions of the researchers and the 'researched'; as the title ‘their world’ indicates, they are objectifying and exoticizing the gay community and intend to establish an authoritative and 'scientific' pursuit of the queer subculture. Observing the social scientific tendency, Lucetta Kam criticizes that the work of the first generation Chinese sexuality research as marked by a 'hetero-centrism' and otherization of the queer community (Kam, 2013, pp.51-52). These works install social science experts as the public spokespersons for marginalised populations in China' and result in a similar representation of homosexuality in China that has necessitated legitimatization by the 'academic cause' (Liu, 2015).

Albeit the research of this decade pushed the boundaries and contributed to the evolving understanding of sexuality in Chinese society, the 'social scientific' approach not only serves as a political reaction against 'Western' influence and theories but fundamentally to the interests of the state. Critiquing the purposeful dichotomous discourse, Wong (2016) argues early sexuality studies participate in the governing of sexuality and the creation of ideal subjects in post-Mao China, helping to produce citizens best suited to fulfilling the modernization project in China. Following the dramatic revelation of China's HIV/AIDS crisis in the mid-2000s, on the academic side, the medico-scientific undertones of sexuality studies in China tethered to AIDS research and prevention funding (Jeffreys, 2017; Ho et al., 2018). The medico-scientific approach was reconceptualized within a public health framework, while studies on sexualities, especially in gay communities, continue to be seen as a matter of medicalization and pathologization of sexuality (Kam, 2013; Wong, 2015). This framing subtly perpetuates the biopolitical reach of state power into individual bodies, emphasizing regulation and control under the guise of health and pathology.

Therefore, the idea that China has undergone a sexual revolution can be misleading, despite its popularity and analogies to the Western 1960s sexual revolution among Chinese and Western scholars (Pan, 2006; Pan and Huang,

2011; Farrer, 2008, 2014). Firstly, it is unclear whether the newfound visibility of diverse sexualities is a co-optation of neoliberal capitalism. Farrer's (2008) argues that China's open-market policy has led to other modern phenomena, such as mass media consumption, which introduced consumerism and self-individualism (Farrer, 2008; Lin, 2018). Following this thread of scholarship is an implicit undertone of Chinese subjectivities as passive recipients of 'Western culture' from Hollywood movies and Japanese and Korean television serials (Farrer, 2014; Zhang et al., 2002).

Secondly, whether some believe the transformation of China's sexual culture stems from domestic reformation (Pan, 1994) or others' articulation of open-market policies that led to the so-called modern phenomenon of ‘sexual revolution’ (Farrer, 2008; Lin, 2018), this strand of work continues to fell into a dichotomy of 'Western influences' and 'Indigenous Chinese-ness,’ which imbued with unquestioned presuppositions regarding 'freedom,' 'democracy,' and 'self-determination'. Similarly, Hershatter (1996) has insightfully criticized such accounts comfortably falling into an Eurocentric way of reporting on China as they valorise an essentialized 'Western' liberation as the only progressive trajectory to compare with. Chinese queer theorist and culture critic Petrus Liu (2010, 2015) also reminds us about the entrenched shadows of the failures of liberal pluralism in the development of theories of sexuality. Therefore, instead of arguing for the 'inclusion' of China in queer studies in the hope of undoing the epistemological imperialism of the West and treating Chinese sexuality scholarships as mere 'footnotes' to Euro-American theories (Wieringa and Sivori, 2013, p.6), I propose to approach the Chinese sexual and gender subjectivities through a feminist posthuman framework. As both conceptual and ethical lens, the feminist posthuman approach to gender and sexual subjectivity, would particularly benefit this research as it helps to take account of the epistemological imperialism without overlooking the unique sexual histories and politics of China (see part 3).

Thirdly, the schematic articulation of the 'sexual revolution' implies a

process of 'freeing' sexuality from 'repression,' or the resurgence of 'natural' sexual proclivities, which reveals a problematic linear progressive understanding of sexuality. Informed by the insights of Foucault's notions of governmentality(1983, 1991), the regime of knowledge is evaluated in epistemological terms — how systems of truth are established, produced, circulated, and executed. In this light, the earlier development of sexuality studies in China helped to promote new ways of 'knowing' particular sexual subjects and generate ideas about how these subjects should be governed or might govern themselves. Concomitant with the Foucauldian discourse, the academic empire becomes a mirror of the political one (Rose, 1999). In the meantime, there have been accounts from historians and anthropologists of Chinese studies providing more nuanced perspectives that challenge the presumed dichotomy between the puritanical repression of the Maoist era and the apparent liberalization of contemporary China (Honig, 2003; Hershatter, 1996b; Chiang, 2010; Evans, 1997). These accounts help to illuminate how issues of sex and sexuality have been made into objects of government in different historical periods.

The early development of sexuality studies transformed the sexual practices and attitudes of Chinese people into what Rose (1999, p.2) would call 'technologies of subjectivity' that enable strategies of power to infiltrate the interstices of the human soul. This is exemplified by Chinese regulatory reproduction policies. In China, although the one-child policy has been relaxed in recent years, its endures long-standing influence in educational settings through unofficial discourses (Zhu, Liu, and Elley, 2022), as well as in the normalization of abortion as a pragmatic solution under a restrictive regime and entrenched moralized discourse surrounding female sexuality (Xie, 2021). Zhu *et al.*(2022) research on Chinese primary students reveals a 'fine line' between acceptable and unacceptable relationships between boys and girls under teachers' surveillance. Exploring the paradoxical discourses of *zao lian* (early love), they argue that Chinese children's practices of heterosexuality have been

significantly influenced by historical views on children's sexuality and expectations for childhood innocence and concentration on academic success over heterosexual romantic feelings (Ibid.). Meanwhile, Kailing Xie (2021) further contends that the widely accessible abortion practices in China do not equate to reproductive freedom for Chinese women; instead, it places the burden of pregnancy on women, reinforcing the patriarchal and biopolitical regulatory power of the state (ibid.). Thus, contrary to celebratory and linear narratives of the one-child policy and sexual revolution in China, these scholars offer a nuanced perspective and a decentring approach to the embodiment of diverse biopolitical forces, gender(sexual) discourses and knowledge involved in young people's gendered struggles (Zhu, Liu and Elley, 2022; Nie, 2005; Cao, 2018; Liong and Chan, 2020). Their research contribute to the understanding of delicate sexual morality and internalized socio-political governance and state patriarchy over Chinese women's reproductive bodies

Overall, the above critique on Chinese sexuality scholarship gives an overview on the intrinsically (re)productive, historical and politically conditioned, institutionalized, and power-laden process in the 'knowledge' production and construction of Chinese desiring subjects. I re-examine the existing 'knowledge' of Chinese gender and sexual cultures, particularly since the economic reforms of the late 1980s. Foucault's famous discussion of the 'repressive hypothesis' has urged us to pause from the previous eagerness to discuss modern sexual repression while re-examining the enticing bourgeois notions of sexual liberation in modern society (Foucault, 1990, p.10). Foucault's argument has profound implications for revisiting the previously celebrated narratives of a 'youth-led sexual revolution' (Pan, 2006; Pan and Huang, 2011; Farrer, 2014b). The Foucauldian thinking highlights the persistent governmentality within the purported increased liberation brought about by individual practices, which has transformed into more subtle forms of regulation and self-regulation (Rose, 1999). Therefore, to research Chinese youth gender and sexual subjectivities requires a decentring approach, which allows one to investigate the diverse

forces, discourses, and knowledge interwoven in the process of 'becoming'.

To move away from the haunted shadow of the 'positivist' paradigm of the scientific approach as well as the dichotomy of 'Western/modern' and 'Chinese/tradition,' I propose to create space for dialogue with feminist posthuman and new materialist theory (Braidotti, 2019a; Alaimo and Hekman, 2008; Barad, 2003). The posthuman approach to gender (sexual) subjectivities – human, non-human under spatial-social-mattering – provides an alternative lens for studying Chinese sexual subjects and the production of 'knowledge.' Resonating with Rose's (1999, p.270) critiques of many humanist and modernist sociologists 'trac[ing] a unified or linear story' and treating' the genealogy of subjectivity as a matter of the succession of epochs that has been advanced by many sociologists on individualization and 'detraditionalization' (i.e., Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Similarly, disagreeing with their 'epochalisation' and sociological reduction of subjectivity, the posthuman approach to subjectivity also attempts to trace a complex variable, material, technical, the confluence of a whole variety of different shifts and practices rather than a singular and epochal history of subjectivity. Here, the repertoire of subjectivity in this reconfiguration of intimacies–feelings, intentions, motivations, the likes, is equipped with a set of habits, dispositions, tastes, and aspirations that are directing and redirecting through intricate networks of forces, desires, and relational elements (Braidotti, 2022).

The third strand of Chinese sexuality scholarship, predominantly employing an ethnographic approach, has been instrumental in analysing the transformation of gender and sexual subjects in China (Engebretsen, 2014; Wang, 2017; Zarafonetis, 2017; Martin, 2022; Rofel, 2007; Louie and Edwards, 1994). This body of scholarship was first initiated by a body of English-language research, authored by both Western researchers and Chinese scholars who have academic training experience in the West and have raised awareness of the variety of impetuses that inform young people's gender performativity. Following their leads, the subjectivities of youth - the focus of this study - are

conditioned by multiple historically specific conditions and sometimes contradictory understandings of what a man/woman should be and how one should act in the practices of intimacies. Here, subjectivities/*zhutixing* appears as an essential datum in which societies are to be evaluated, not merely as representations of subjective reality or cultural beliefs but also as the conditions or discourses upon which individuals make meaning and act. Meanwhile, I recognize the characteristics of the youth subjects in my research context — university students — a group of highly educated young people from diverse socioeconomic and family backgrounds. Navigating omnipresent imagery of fluid and upward mobility life scripts, these individuals inhabit an extended period of 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2000), which leads to a liminal space of exploring intimate relationships and future career pathways. This liminal space is where young people develop a sense of self as autonomous, self-directing subjects, drawing from available social and cultural resources.

In the following two sections, I will engage with the third strand of Chinese sexuality scholarship — a limited yet growing line of literature that addresses the subjectivities in everyday practices and acknowledges the complexity of diverse directions of forces on the process of ‘becoming’ Chinese gender (sexual) subjects. Paying particular attention to the evolving concept of sexuality that shapes and is shaped by young people's practice of intimacies the following section will explore and locate Chinese youth gender and sexual subjectivities in the current techno-socio-political dynamics of postsocialist and neoliberal China

2.3.2 Situating Chinese youth gender subjectivities

The distinctive feature in the 'becoming' process of Chinese gender and sexual subjects is the inextricable entanglements of state feminist politics and postsocialist residues. The individualistic and libertarian values and the history of the modernization process from which Euro-American scholarship on

gendered identities and intimacy do not necessarily share the commonalities with the postsocialist and neoliberal contexts from which Chinese gendered subjects have developed. As the previous section discussed, the distinct pathway of Chinese feminism, from the translation of Western liberal feminism in the 1920s to revolutionary feminism in the 1930s, from socialist state feminism (1949-late 1970s) to postsocialist and neoliberal feminism in the present, have produced complexity and unique characteristics within Chinese feminism. In particular, Maoist and revolutionary discourses of women's liberation promoted women's participation in social production and created new feminine ideals, through campaigns such as “Women hold half of the sky” or the “Iron Woman” that call for women's participation in public affairs. This discourse of ‘gender equalisation’ degenders and neutralizes femininity to conceal the patriarchal ideology of subsuming gender under class struggle and recasting women as patriotic subjects in the service of socialist development (Li and Zhang, 1994; Wang, 2003). Such discourse strips away the possibility for understanding and challenging gender and sexual power differentials (Wang, 2005). Since the Mao era, the legacy of state feminism has enacted a legislative process to enforce gender equality, including legal provisions such as the 1950 Marriage Law, the 1954 Chinese Constitution, and the Women's Federation; these state-sponsored institutions reinvested the institution of marriage with a newly added facet of man-woman relations, which vigilantly guaranteed women equal rights to economic, political and educational resources (Croll, 1981). The changes in gender relations are inspired by top-down measurements and mobilized through state-defined visions of change (Wang, 2005).

When Deng Xiaoping took power in 1978 and introduced a new political agenda of market reform and openness, the Chinese feminist debate shifted its attention to a new politics of emancipation and liberation, moving away from the previous class struggle and ‘gender equation’ campaigns. In responding to the postsocialist transition and market reform, certain Chinese feminist writers and scholars have also strategically distanced themselves from defining feminism

as a power struggle (Dai, Wang and Barlow, 2002; Wu, 2005, 2010). Instead, they have conscientiously adapted Western feminist theories to align with Chinese political and cultural specificities. This adaptation has led to an increasing preference for or '*nǚxìngzhǔyì*' (femininity-ism) over '*nǚquánzhǔyì*' (women's rights or power-ism), with the former emphasizing biological, sexual, and other differences between genders, rather than framing feminism as an overtly political movement, as the latter term suggests. The former term was therefore more readily and widely adapted in the Chinese academy. Insightfully adding the qualifier *weixiaode* to the term *nǚ xing zhu yi'* to signify the 'smiley' and 'unaggressive' features of Chinese feminism, Huang Lin (2004, cited in Schaffer and Song, 2007) locates Chinese 'feminism' within traditional notions of harmony and equality between sexes (not genders) – a notion that was frequently challenged by many other feminist research from East Asian studies (Wang, 2005; Hershatter, 1994; Evans, 1997). Chinese feminism, in its historical and ideological roots, different from its variant forms in the West and in Japan, contradictorily expends women's rights at the expense of curtailing women's agency. Chinese feminist researcher Xiaojiang Li (2016) comments on the postsocialist period in a worrying way, saying that the prosperity (and decline) of the 'liberation of women' has been unsteadily reliant on the governmental policies and top-down legislation; while Chinese women's subjectivity has not yet been awakened nor developed (Ibid.).

The effect of the shifting state policy and state-derived feminist politics, instead of indicating a straightforward break with the Maoist past, suggests a complex reconfiguration of gender subjects. The state does not thereby cease interceding in social life but actively works to promote gender-role essentialism, representing itself as "enabling 'natural' social relationships to come forth from the repression of Maoism" (Rofel, 1999, p. 219; Huang, 2018). Across wide-ranging examples from employment policies and government rhetoric on family planning to popular media, Rofel traces a gendered allegory about the ills of Maoism, according to which '[…] women have merely wished to express their

natural femininity in motherhood and wedded love while men have needed to find their rightful masculinity in economic exploits outside of the state sector, in virile sexual expression, and the mastery of political power' (Rofel, 1999, p.219). Evans (2010) compares two generations of women (those born in the Mao Era and their daughters raised during the post-Mao reform). She finds that the younger generation of women find themselves enriched and simultaneously confused by the effects of the changing ideological and gender climate on their lives (ibid.). In particular, the postsocialist gender politics formulated a 'feminization of intimacy as a market-supported naturalisation of women's roles', managed by the state through a plethora of educational, psychological and media materials, and corresponding with the new forms of gender hierarchy in employment and incomes that the market economy has engendered (ibid.,p.1000).

Following burgeoning consumer culture, as an attendant of state planning and with its global affinity for the West, neoliberalism is increasingly understood as an important impetus in constructing Chinese gender and sexual subjectivities. Despite some researchers questioning the extent to which China's authoritarian governance and market-socialist economy can be usefully described as neoliberal, China's re-entry into the global arena and implementation of capitalist reforms have, to some extent, expanded the country's national market economy into a neoliberalised yet centralized political domain (Ong and Zhang, 2008; Wallis, 2024). Signified by the end of the state-assigned employment system and the emergence of a consumer society after China's economic reform, neoliberalism is widely understood as a type of economic policy and a cultural structure transformation that is associated with open markets, deregulation of industries, and the abandonment of social welfare. Neoliberalism also correlates with the mode of regulation and discipline in which the state and non-state actors interact to shape people's life trajectories (Dean, 2010). The neoliberalist ethos, centred around the 'technology of self' and self-optimizing (Rose, 1992), also greatly impacted the

everyday lives and constructions of Chinese subjects (Rofel, 2007). Yang (2014) insightfully integrates the theory of affect into the analyses of Chinese neoliberalism to reveal the interwoven relations between Chinese neoliberal subjects and state power. She argues that through discourses of happiness and optimism, state paternalism is affectively perpetuated through modes of therapeutic governance to manage social problems (Yang, 2014). Rather than relying on overt forms of coercive governance, state power increasingly functions through 'affective modes of engagement, or individual desires and feelings' (Yang, 2014, p.6). These affective mechanisms foster a sense of optimism and depoliticised contentment, which are subtly disseminated through mass media, journalism, and cultural production (Yang and Tang, 2018; Wallis, 2024). Together, these affective mechanisms produce hegemonic narrative of social harmony that aligns with dominant sociopolitical agendas – what Wallis (2024, p.8) refers to as a "neo/non-liberal" China. This configuration is marked by the revalorisation of Confucian ideals and patriarchal gender norms, coexisting with an emphasis on personal aesthetics and the individualised pursuit of self-development (Wallis, 2024; Fan and Ip, 2023).

In a similar vein, many researchers from the 2000s incorporate the individualism framework into understanding the shifting of familial relations in China, and attempted to address the gaps left by mainstream sociological knowledge. Some scholars have attempted to develop indigenous concepts and theoretical frameworks to better analyse the restructuring of kinship and intimacy under late socialism (Yan, 2010, 2013). In his recent work, Yan (2020) on his concept of striving individualism, distinguishing it from Euro-American models of individualism. Unlike the liberal, autonomous self-central to Western frameworks, Chinese individualism, he argues (Yan, 2020, p.282), is shaped by an ethos of industriousness, self-discipline, and pragmatism. This model of individualism is often enacted through the intergenerational desire to improve the family's socio-economic position—revealing a collectivized orientation embedded within the project of the self (Wallis, 2024; Yan, 2020). Other

researchers argue that the marketization of the Chinese economy and opening up to the global market marked new periods of sociocultural transformations, representing an interesting pathway of adapting to global neoliberalism with very limited political democracy and culturally embedded notions of individual rights (Farrer, 2014b; Zhang et al., 2011). Despite being given an in-depth descriptive anthropological account of neoliberal China, this strand of scholarship takes little consideration of the reconfigurations of gender subjectivities in the transformation process.

The prior frameworks on neoliberalism that draw on a Eurocentric standpoint of individualization and liberalism are not sufficient to capture the multiple dimensions of the state's intervention and resurgence of regressive gender norms. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the pursuit of the Chinese dream — to revitalize China economically, culturally, militarily, and spiritually – has been revised to addressing gender and the socio-techno realm. Exemplified by the overt perpetuation of elevated traditional women's virtues drawing from Confucianism, Xi consolidated the belief that women should find fulfillment through bearing and raising children and maintaining family harmony (Xinhua, 2015). The discourses have contributed to a revised gender law while railing against effeminate men and taking measures to cultivate 'manly' qualities among boys (Xiao, 2022). Along with increasingly individualized biographies and social agency, a reconfigured 'patchy' form of patriarchy continues to entrench in the naturalization of traditional gendered roles (Evans, 2021), fostering the widespread call of revival of gender differentiation (Schaffer and Song, 2013). The neoliberal gendered discourse in China is deeply intertwined with transnational consumerism, which promote individualism and self-empowerment that simultaneously align with the collectivist values of the authoritarian party-state (Liu, 2008; Zhang and Ong, 2015; Martin and Lewis, 2016; Liao, 2019).

There has been increasing scholarly attention on a resurgence of essentialist portrayals of women as gentle, nurturing, and family-oriented within

neoliberal rhetoric of choice and freedom (Evans, 2010; Ji, 2015; Sun and Chen, 2015; Chen, 2016). Wu Xiaoying (2010) utilises a Foucauldian framework to analyse the evolving gender ideologies, highlighting an alliance between the market-driven discourse of individual self-improvement and revived gender traditionalism. Wu (2010) argues that post-Maoist gender discourse focuses on 'quality,' shaped by the interplay of state, market, and traditional forces amidst appeals for modernity and individual freedom. Lisa Rofel traces the (re)naturalization of gender from the 1980s onward, arguing that it is self-justifying actions in response to a 'postsocialist allegory of modernity' (Rofel, 1999, p.217-56). Along with the rollback of the state welfare system and the government rhetoric on family planning to popular media, Rofel (2007) notes the ongoing discourses of the familial relation as the crucial sites for establishing gender and social subjectivities of Chinese young people. The neotraditionalist gender discourses provide ideological recourses from sustaining heteronormative familism and normative gender discourses. Rofel observes in her ethnography that 'all along…women have merely wished to express their natural femininity in motherhood and wedded love while men have needed to find their rightful masculinity in economic exploits outside of the state sector, in virile sexual expression, and the mastery of political power' (1999, p.219). Capturing the paradox and contradiction of contemporary Chinese society, Wallis (2024) coins this context as 'neo/non-liberal China' signifying the continued state effort to promote consumption and self-making ethos, and consolidating the rigid gendered norms. The neo/non-liberal gender subjects inhibit a striking paradox: On the one hand, a stringent desire for individualism and the expectation of self-responsibility, and on the other, deeply held attachments to the conservative ideas about male authorities and celebratory tone for female passivity (Liu, 2014; Zhao, 2023; Ge, 2025) .

The neo-/non-liberal characteristics that feature the promotion of social harmony also give rise to pursuits of (hetero)normative happiness that are entangled with social media, affective forces, and consumptions. In Chinese

social media platforms, with the profound growth of woman-targeted marketing, or femvertising, the narrative of woman empowerment not only obscures the implicit consumerism but promotes the myth of self-improvement and self-care through the consumption of therapeutic and self-optimizing products (Qiao and Wang, 2019; Wallis and Shen, 2018; Duan, 2020; Guo, 2024). Guo (2024) contextualizes postfeminist reconfiguration of the singleness of Chinese women in Chinese social media platforms in contrast with the previous stigmatization of single 'leftover' women in China. The almost identically produced 'living alone' media content creates a hedonistic image of women's singleness – echoing with a transnational postfeminist culture which celebrates women's independence while making themselves into a neoliberal object in feminized consumerist culture (Guo, 2024). The ideal image of autonomous and independent individuals is appealing to many Chinese women, which transforms the self into a successful, postfeminist and bourgeois subject with a promise of liberation through the rediscovery of femininity and material success (Liu, 2014; Peng, 2019; Guo, 2024). The transnational notions of postfeminist subjects have made meaning through various sets of gender practices in China, including fashion magazines, chick flicks, online shopping, and relationship coaching (Meng and Huang, 2017; Guo et al., 2022; Peng, 2021; Thornham and Feng, 2010).

Similar rhetoric is also circulating in the popular self-help culture in the domain of love and relationships in the media that has foregrounded embedded distinctive characters of postfeminism in China. Sun Wanning (2007) explores expert advice and media content on love and personal relationships post-reformation. She (Sun, 2007) argues that such content promotes self-sufficiency and self-reliance, aiding individuals in managing their ‘project of the self’ and achieving a ‘proper’ life and transforming individuals into entrepreneurial actors, Similarly, the concept of 'entrepreneurial feminism' is notably exemplified by the controversial advice of ‘love gurus’ on Weibo, such as the formerly infamous relationship celebrity, Ayawawa (Liu, 2019c).

Ayawawa amassed a large online following by promoting a rhetoric of success that urges women to address their issues through self-transformation, including cosmetic surgery. Her guidance, aimed primarily at middle-class, educated women, offers strategies for action that are justified by claims of scientific authority and neoliberal logic (ibid.). By tapping into young women's anxieties about marriage, these relationship experts have gained considerable success in China, promoting a proactive approach to shaping one's body and identity to secure their advantages in the institution of marriage. In her critical discourse analysis of Mimeng, a women-focused influencer, Peng (2021) found that Mimeng's content exploits neoliberal rationalizations of gender issues, reflecting both capitalist ethos and a rejection of communist feminist values (Wallis et al., 2018, cited in Peng, 2021). The dating and relationship experts that are specifically targeting Chinese women instruct these young women who to date and how to navigate love based on market logic, encouraging them to prioritize their interests by exchanging performances of 'submissive femininity' for material privileges, Underlying this dating advice is the growing class stratification and worsening gender inequality in China. Underscored by neoliberal and consumerist ideologies, all these 'expert' suggestions to intimate relationships and reinterpretations of gender relations concern a plurality of forms of struggles within a pro-marriage and pro-childbearing culture: of family relations and sexual relationships, of economic aspirations and middle-classed lifestyles (Evans, 2021).

Some of the above-mentioned neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies are not new in Western (Anglo-Saxon) contexts. Coining the term 'postfeminist sensibility,' Rosalind Gill (2007, p.163) argues that 'the active, free-choosing, self-inventing subject of postfeminism' is akin to 'the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism.' Gill (2007) also considered that the notion of femininity becomes 'a bodily property' that shifts from objectification to subjectification, placing an emphasis upon self-surveillance and a focus on individualistic empowerment (p. 147). A distinctive sensibility of postfeminism

reproduces itself in the campaign slogans such as 'be yourself' and 'please yourself' that rhetorically simplified feminism to personal choices, thus shifting people's attention from the oppressive social systems to the responsibility of the individuals (McRobbie, 2007). The feminine subject has become a new site of 'the shaping of being' and a self-governing project that could be achieved through endless consumption and making over (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

Following a much broader neoliberal, meritocratic cultural shift and a 'feminist win and masculine failure ' narrative, Western feminist scholars have drawn attention to this seductive narrative about young women/girls' educational and workplace ‘success’ (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001; Ringrose, 2007; McRobbie, 2007; Rottenberg, 2014). According to Rottenberg (2014), recent discourses on feminism tend to create an ideal model for modern women, which is exemplified by the emergence of how-to and self-help books that try to teach women how to balance between successful work and happy family life. Both in the Anglo-European and Chinese contexts, neoliberalism has shifted from being a political/economic rationality to a mode of governmentality that operates across a range of social spheres, embodied gender practice and mental psyche (Rose, 1996, 1999; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001; Scharff, 2016). Therefore, to examine youth’s situated ‘becoming’ requires a critical lens that can accommodate pluralized understandings of gender subjectivities from a more diverse and fluid field of queer feminist research inquiries (see section 2.3.3).

2.3.3 Chinese (hetero)normative happiness

Gendered subjectivities in China are distinctively shaped by a (hetero)normative script of ‘happiness,’ which directs individual desires, aspirations, and behaviors in alignment with neoliberal convergence and the pursuit of harmonious gender ideals in the familial sphere. Centralized around

heterosexuality, virility, consumerism, competition, social status, and power, these ideals fabricate a particular ‘irreal’ version of self (Rose, 1999, p.265). The narrative of empowerment and individualized life choices generates an ideal of the ‘good life’ that intensifies the drive toward a familial future — centered on a nuclear, able-bodied, middle-class, and heterosexual unit. Despite the party-state rhetoric of equality, the essentialist notions of gender, rooted in Confucianism, have re-emerged and reconceptualized neotraditional ideals of conjugal relationships – women are portrayed as natural caregivers and dependents. At the same time, men are viewed as heads of their households and financially responsible for the family. Such dilemmas have their roots in ongoing structural and gender constraints towards women, particularly those that conflict with the transformative images of femininity and trap both genders in a vicious circle of inequality (Croll, 1995). This imagination profoundly impacts constructions of masculinity and femininity in China, generating intense expectations for normative familial roles. The heteronormative familism has profound implications for gender relations and sexualities in China, from the centrality of familial relationships as an important basis for collective gender-giving (Yan, 2016; Driessen and Sier, 2021; Gender-giving see) to the construction of responsible and respectable Chinese masculinities and femininities (Kong, 2019; Barlow, 2004).

The pressure to get married also inhibits a moral panic of rejection from a (hetero)normative imagination of genders. Traditionally, marriage serves as one of the most critical standards for evaluating a woman's psychological, biological, and moral maturity – the only path for women to solidify their 'normality' – becoming proper wives and mothers at a certain age. Toni Barlow (2004) argues that in tradition, Chinese women have often been entangled in relations with parents, parents-in-law, or husbands – the role of women, therefore, became a distinctive relational category centred around *Jia* (family or familial relations). Such rhetoric resonates with Adrienne Rich's concept of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1980). Rich argues that women's heterosexuality is

engrained through societal forces — legitimation, propaganda, social science, and literature — that provide a script for women's sexuality toward men. She then critiques the societal assumption that a woman's status and worth are primarily defined through her relationships with men or through the conviction that her role is fundamental to care for family members (Rich, 1980)

In a similar vein, Honig Fincher's (2014) work on Chinese women's singlehood, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China,* is among the first to have brought scholarly attention to the 'leftover women' phenomenon in contemporary China. Fincher (2014) reveals the toxic vitality of sexism in Chinese heterosexual marriage — while young men receive credit for postponing marriage as a display of responsible masculinity, urban women in their mid-20s are made to feel as if they are on the shelf. *Leftover Women* presents how young Chinese and educated women face the intersectional pressures from state policy, popular media discourses, property legal regulation, and cultural practices – which combine to reinforce the stigmatization of women who defy social expectations and conventional gender arrangements in their intimate lives (Fincher, 2014).

However, over the years, in the maze of individualized choices and women's autonomies, the 'leftover women' discourses – the moral panic on women's singlehood – has changed. Instead of portraying young single women as excessive and irresponsible subjectivities, notions of women's singlehood are 'corrected through careful self-scrutiny and a commitment to self-work' (Lahad 2024, p.42). Such notions create new gender subjects which have shifted from the negative connotation of 'being leftover' to prioritizing career and personal growth (Lamont, 2020). Exploring the notions of woman singlehood as a discursive site and underscoring conservative assumptions, Lahad (2024) illuminates how patriarchy is bestowed with discursive force and power through the promise of the aspired and respected life trajectory.

In a much-needed intersectional perspective on studying the singlehood discourse and institutionalized compulsory (marital) heterosexuality, the

scholarships of Chinese masculinities also contribute to understanding the constructions of gender ideals through intersectional lenses. Haiping Liu's (2023) writing on China's Pick-Up Artist (PUA) training camp extends the context of illusionary ideal masculinity even further. Chinese rural-to-urban migrant men, as Haiping Liu (2023) documents, are increasingly turning to instrumental, cultural-capital-oriented consumption in an effort to embody idealised, entrepreneurial masculinities and improve their marriage prospects. Liu (2023) proposes the 'aspirational tase regime' as a critical concept through which gender identity is appropriated and the use of cultural capital is in the enactment of idealized masculinity. Her analysis of aspirational taste regimes resonates with Rose's (1999, p.271) articulation on ‘technologies of consumption’. Rose (19999) states that one's consumptions are instrumentalized in individuals' pursuit of the self-realization of idealized and respectable gender identities, upward social mobilities, matrimonial prospects, or other aspirations for 'a good life' (Berlant, 2011). In Chinese context, the idealized 'tall, rich, and handsome' (*gāo fù shuài*) type of masculinity, embodied by the ‘charming victor’ of the Chinese neoliberal economy, normalizes the role of men as overbearing protectors and benefactors in heterosexual romances (Song, 2022, p.83; see also Gong, 2016).

In keeping with Song’s (2022) articulation on idealized entrepreneurial masculinity, Liu and Lin (2023) captures the tensions between conflicting realities and aspirational heteronormative masculine ideals in the domain of intimacy by examining single migrant men’s engagement with online dating. They argue that these working-class, single young men navigate their identities through what they term “caring capital” to enhance their competitiveness in digital dating environments (ibid., p,1639). Through providing technological-emotional competencies and emotional-behavioural conduct, these single migrant men actively perform a caring and responsible masculinity through which they negotiate their gendered sexual identities within structurally disadvantaged conditions (Liu and Lin, 2023). As they argue elsewhere, young

single migrant men's practice of performing caring masculinity reveals affective and optimistic desires that are attached to structural inequalities which in turn obstruct the realization of their desire (Liu, Wang and Lin, 2022).

These scholarly contributions call for a shift from viewing gender norms as binary or essentialist toward analysing the ideological regimes and discursive practices that produce, sustain, and contest them — particularly in relation to the (re)production and tensions of (hetero)normativity. Building on this, I conceptualise young people's sexuality assemblages as crucial discursive and affective sites, where gendered expectations, neoliberal imperatives of self-responsibilities, and (hetero)normative ideals of intimate happiness are not only reproduced but also negotiated, challenged, and reimagined in digital and non-digital contexts. These sexuality assemblages capture the entanglement of affective intensities, bodily practices, and everyday ethical decisions, underscoring how sexual subjectivities are continuously formed and reformed within specific socio-cultural and techno-political contexts.

2.3.4 Queering (hetero)normativity: beyond binary thinking of masculine/feminine, Western/Chinese, queer/heterosexualites

Many feminist and queer researchers of Chinese studies have come to realize that approaching 'subjectivity' in China requires an alternative appropriation of 'Western' theories (Liu, 2010, 2015; Kam, 2014; Yau, 2010, 2010). The majority of scholarship on Chinese sexuality studies, however, as discussed previously (see section 2.3.1), often internalized positivist discourses of 'liberalisation' and openness (Farrer, 2014; Pan and Huang, 2011; Jankowiak et al., 2015; Jankowiak and Li, 2017), trapped in a tempting dichotomy of the 'Western influence' and 'Chinese root' (Louie and Louise, 1994; Song and Hird, 2014), especially in the domain of sexuality research in China.

Kwai-Cheung Lo (2005, 2010), as a cultural critic and scholar of Chinese masculinity and queer studies, delves into the complexities of masculine identity

formation and cultural hybridity in postcolonial East Asia. Kwai-Cheung Lo (2005) critiques the limitations of binary frameworks — like the traditional *wen-wu* dyad of Chinese masculinity and East-West, male-female distinctions — in adequately capturing the complex gender dynamics within Hong Kong under Western colonialism. Lo draws on Deleuze's (2004[1987]concept of "becoming a woman" to interpret a feminization trend among heterosexual Asian men observed in literature and media in Hong Kong in the 1990s (Ibid.). According to Lo (2005), elite Hong Kong men's masculine subjectivities are constructed through multiple ongoing and contradictory practices, embodying material and discursive elements reflecting hybrid Chinese identities. Situated within the city's fraught transition from a British colony to a Chinese Special Administrative Region, the process of becoming masculine subjects resists monolithic definitions and emerges instead as a contingent negotiation with the precarity of Hong Kong's sociopolitical realities (ibid.).

To some extent, Siyang Cao's (2018) empirical research on Chinese masculine *shenti* (bodies) and intimate relationships touches on the idea of subject-in-transition in the masculinity-making process. Coining the term 'elastic masculinity', Cao (2018, p. 99) captures not only the flexible and dynamic process of becoming masculine subjects in relations to structural forces and cultural-social constraints in their meaning-making process. Both Lo (2010) and Cao's (2018) work contributes to understanding Chinese masculinities as fluid yet structurally influenced. Together, they provide a nuanced critique of binary thinking in gender and sexuality studies, challenging dichotomies like male/female, East/West, and liberal/conservative. Their theoretical approaches help foreground the adaptability of masculine subjects while revealing the persistent social and cultural constraints that influence young people's self-constructions in diverse, hybrid contexts.

In a similar vein, existing queer scholarship has also shed light on the conflicting ideologies surrounding the exploration of Chinese queer woman/girl-hood — resisting a heteronormative narrative of womanhood yet inhibiting an

apparent hypernormativity (Kam, 2014; Yau, 2010; Xie, 2023; Martin, 2022). Recognizing these hard-earned new spaces for sexual and gendered subjectivities (i.e. women's desires and queerness) might also imply some adherence to self-regulation through discourses of individualism – such as gaining social mobilities and recognitions where the hypernormativity(ies) rest in (Yau, 2010). For example, Kam (2014) studies *lalas'* (lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) lives in Shanghai. In her study, she politicizes the discourses of standing up (*zhan qi lai*) coming out *(zhan chu la*i) and examines the negotiation of conflicts between the desires for familial recognition of one's personal life and the aspiration for social recognition and political collectively. Facing the double bind towards sexual normativity and prejudice towards women as culturally and economically subordinate gender, lesbian participants in Kam's research articulate their obligation as women: to outperform their male and heterosexual counterparts, receive greater social recognition ('upward social mobility'), and to be a filial daughter.

In the meantime, underlying the hypernormativity, as this scholarship recognizes, new queer possibilities emerge — from strategically delaying marriage, obtaining education, and socioeconomic mobilities to active maintenance of familial relationships (Xie, 2023; Martin, 2022), which further place queerness and Chinese (hetero)normativity in flux (Song, 2022b; Yau, 2010). Fran Martin (2022) describes the split values experienced by Chinese female students living abroad, who constantly negotiate competing pressures on their identities — pursuing queer possibilities may position them as unfilial daughters while being ruthlessly humiliated by the hetero-patriarchal power they run away from. More recently, through exploring accounts of Chinese girls' queer exploration, Xie (2023) reflects on the underlying tensions of becoming queer subjects and normative familial ideologies. The familial and filial discourse — getting married and having children – are woven into the naturalization of (hetero)normative imagination of being 'queer' young women (girls) in China (Xie, 2023).

Together, these works point to a crucial analytical shift: Chinese gender subjectivity should not be treated as a stable, homogenous cultural essence, but rather as an unstable and contested site of becoming. The processes through which young people articulate gendered and sexual subjectivities are not merely shaped by binary logics of East/West, tradition/modernity, or heterosexuality/queer but emerge through dynamic negotiations with familial obligations, social aspirations, global ideologies, and techno-cultural affordances. Whether through the ‘elastic masculinity’ of young men or the strategic queerness of young women navigating between filiality and autonomy (Cao, 2018; Martin, 2022; Xie, 2023), what becomes evident is the plasticity and precarity of Chineseness and gender subjectivities as lived, affective, and discursive identity category. By foregrounding these tensions, I argue that Chinese gender and sexual subject formations should be conceptualised not as fixed identities, but as *situated assemblages*—always in flux, produced through entangled histories, institutional forces, and affective investments.

2.4 Part Three: A posthuman approach towards gender, sexuality and mediated intimacies

Informed by feminist posthuman and new materialist research on 'sexuality assemblage,' the human bodies are resembled as multi-faceted desiring machines and are capable to plug into and out of other machinic parts (Ringrose, 2011). Assemblages refer to the affective and agential connection between human and non-human things – connections that create forms of cartography through affective, material, and discursive flows of energy (Gilbert, 2004). The posthuman conceptualization of sexuality assemblage is particularly helpful for this research to rethink the range of intimacies that extend beyond individual human experience to encompass the complex terrains of non-humans. The concept of assemblage, therefore, enables a discussion of material intra-actions and observes how phallic power shifts and unfolds. Through repetitions,

ruptures, and revisiting, sexuality assemblage become a co-created meandering pathway where the feelings and attachments that are generated within and flow into and out of various mediated encounters (Hjorth, 2018; Carah and Dobson, 2016; Renold and Ringrose, 2017).

Drawing attention to the ethico-onto-epistemological entanglement of matter and meaning (Barad, 2007), the conceptualization of intimacies serves an apparatus of desire, values, ideologies, and intentions that intra-act with digital infrastructures, human and non-human entities. "'Intra-action' signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies", Barad (2007, p.33) distinguishes the notion of intra-action from the usual 'interaction' – recognizes that 'distinct agencies do not precede their interaction, but rather emerge through their intra-action'. This conceptual shift has been particularly valuable for scholars in sexuality and media studies, offering a new materialist lens to understand how subjectivities are continuously shaped through human and more-than-human assemblages (see Ringrose and Renold, 2014; Ringrose and Rawlings, 2015). Digital technologies operate on multiple registers: as technologies of the self through which individuals regulate, motivate, and discipline themselves to perform ideal citizenship; and as boundary-dissolving forces that blur the lines between public/private, real/virtual. In this context, the machinery of aesthetics not only absorbs and repels normative ideologies but also reterritorialises meaning through algorithmic, visual, and affective forms of mediation. Therefore, I propose the concept of intimacy(ies)[4] as *affective aesthetics* — a framework attuned to the subtle, intersectional, and affectively charged processes through which digital inscriptions and embodied attachments take form. This allows for a critical analysis of how media technologies mediate, constrain, and enable relational forms of intimacy in an increasingly digitised cultural landscape.

[4] I use the plural form intimacies to highlight the multiplicity and heterogeneity of intimate relations that extend beyond human-to-human interactions.

Drawing upon posthuman and new materialist theory, I wish to contribute to the ongoing challenge of empirical research 'findings' that acknowledge yet deterritorialize the binary machines that posit splits of mind and body, dichotomous offline-online social worlds (Renold and Ringrose, 2019). Following this, in part three of this literature review, I will elaborate on mediated intimacy and further illustrate how I mobilise posthuman feminism as a theory (a conceptual lens) on affect, intra-action, and assemblages and a practical research approach that complements and transcends the discursive approach and theory of performativity to gender and sexuality against the backdrop of the saturated digital technology.

2.4.1 Mediated intimacies in digital culture

The technological and material mediation of relationality challenges several aspects of the conventional understanding of intimacies in digital cultures. Deuze (2007:p.242) noted: 'Our life is lived *in*, rather than *with*, media – we are living a *media life*.' The mediated intimacy, informed by the mass-media discourse, generates an abstract sense as a socio-technical experience of reality – a reality that seems to submit itself (potentially) to the affordances (or in Deleuze and Guattari's (2004[1987]) term 'agencements') of media: a reality that could be cut, pasted, edited, remixed and forwarded (Deuze, 2011). For example, the mobility of the media moving from stationary screens to our hands/pockets has changed the ways the self is mediated and produced into shareable experiences and affective objects, such as blog posts and selfies (Kanai, 2019; Renold and Ringrose, 2017; Carah and Dobson, 2016). Matter (otherwise understood as things, objects, bodies, spaces, and places), as Barad (2003, p.802) argues, is 'an active participant in the world's becoming'. In other words, the materiality of embodied experiences of intimacy and intra-action of material things, such as space, place and objects in digital contexts, constitute the gendered subject-in-becoming.

In considering the materiality of intimacies, the affective dimensions of engagement with media are inextricable forms of everyday life. Through temporally 'distributed routine activity', one can plug in devices or leave them on standby, which reveals that the affect and embodied sensations associated with on/off switch (Pink and Mackley, 2013). In particular, focusing on the direct use of media and its association with action of intimacy, Pink and Mackley (2013) argue the engagement with media – affectively and physically – enables people to be on/off socially and creates an intimate environment that 'feel[s] right' through privileging the intelligibility of a particular organization of social life. The habitual and material dimensions of digital media have become interwoven into the everyday ecology of home life, forming part of the sensory experience of place and intimacy (Pink and Mackley, 2013; Hjorth et al., 2020). This integration links temporality to the social rhythms of work, rest, and the familial division of labour. Based on mutual attentiveness in the conversational and time-place sensitive inter- and intra-actions that require specific forms of mutual adjustment, the configuration of bodily practices with the objects and spaces enacts intimacy in highly structed ways (Pink, 2004, 2012b; Tacchi, 2009: 174).

Accompanied by the explosion of smartphones and new modes of content distribution, the emerging types of co-present visuality have changed users' personal narratives and self-expressive practices, as well as their status of relatability in the public (Ito and Okabe, 2005; Bucher, 2012; Trottier, 2012b). This shift has intensified the persistent effort to display the "right" self and citizenry in public, often through visual forms. For example, Papailias (2016) observes mass-mediated disasters on Youtube and calls it an 'affective public in the assemblage of mourning' (p.1). This performative memorializing creates an extension of mediated witnessing and is glued together through affective relatability in forms of modular remixing, commenting, and textual information (Papailias, 2016). Rather than being confined to linear, chronological representations, memory in such contexts is dispersed across media platforms and entangled with the present. These practices incorporate multiple

temporalities—biographical, national, and global—foregrounding how digital technologies rework the temporal and emotional architectures of memorialisation (Papailias, 2016).

The new communicative technologies, therefore, influence how intimacy is experienced and managed across distances and time, which eventually changes how one construct one's identity, life, as well as posthumous performativity. McGlotten (2013, p. 7) describes virtual intimacy as 'contacts and encounters, from the ephemeral to the enduring, made possible by digital and networked means'. Intimacies therefore become more public, visualised, and are 'extended, prolonged, and ultimately transformed through the new circulations, repetitions, and recontextualizations on the Internet and other platforms' (Graham, Gibbs and Aceti, 2013, p.133). In the same vein, Hjorth (2013) reflects upon the important role of (shared and non-shared) mobile images of their participants, arguing that digital inscription contributes to making visible and durable what used to be fleeting, ephemeral and hardly noticeable, thereby enlarging the domain of what can be subject to affective sharing and witnessing.

Emergent empirical work has mapped how people form unpredictable, strange, and mobile connections and attachments in relation to developments in web protocols and platforms. Specific features, such as tagging, 'Like' buttons, and image-sharing in social media sites, such as Facebook, have exemplified the platformazation and materialisation of relational affectivity (Renold and Ringrose, 2017; Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013; Hjorth, 2018). Tagging, for example, is one of the many modes of digital connectivities that links one's online profile to another, mediating and extending the affectivity of the body (Renold and Ringrose, 2017). Meanwhile, Gerlitz and Helmond's (2013) study of Facebook's Like economy argues that the increasing presence of social buttons and associated social plugins has generated new forms of user engagement and social connectivity. A click on the Like Button transforms users' affective, positive, spontaneous responses to web content into connections

between users and web objects and quantifiable response. Like buttons and other social plugins materialize users' affective responses and social engagement and introduce corporate interest in transactional online data, further intermingling between life and production, intimate interactivity, and economic value, thus contributing to new digital intimacies (Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018).

Along with the evolved features of instant-sharing characteristics of social platforms, the scholarship on the digital inscription of intimacy is inherently renewed and moving toward embracing the ephemerality of media infrastructures. Lasén and Hjorth (2017) have noted that the accessibility, visibility, and transparency that featured in mediated intimacy are modes of creating trust and recognition, but do not necessarily lead to stability — instead these features increase the possibilities for disruptions and conflict. In social media platforms that feature immediate sharing (and disappearing), such as Instagram's 'story' feature and the app Snapchat, the aesthetics of intimacies are coupled with immediacy along with private and intimate shareability, Gaby David's (2015) research on French teenagers' usage of Snapchat found that these ephemeral and intimate selfies comparing images displayed on Facebook or Instagram create a sense of authenticity and realness. Lasén and Hjorth (2017) argue that the immediacy of sharing of photos between users, reinforced by the banality and affective everydayness, becomes a way of performing trust and materializing feelings of love, friendship, and intimacy. Thus, Lasén and Hjorth (2017) argue that 'shifts in the regime of attention, in what is perceived, noticed and effectively witnessed, as those facilitated by digital inscriptions and described in the previous section belong to contemporary aesthetic and political processes' (p.130). This affective witnessing can be powerful, allowing people to engage their own feelings with the observed emotions afforded by the media, which blurs the boundaries between personal and mediated experience (Hjorth and Lim, 2012; Papailias, 2016).

individuals—especially young women—navigate increasingly complex self-presentational dynamics due to algorithmically amplified visibility, which reshape power, privacy, and gendered embodiment online. For example, Boyd and Marwick (2011, p.122) study on microblogging site, Twitter, coin a new term ‘context collapse’ to describe multiple audiences are flattened together. The potential diversity of readership on Twitter ruptures the ability to vary self-presentation based on audience and manage discrete impression (boyd and Marwick, 2011). The emergent visibility of individuals' intimate lives and the potential diversity of the audience's intimate lives allow us to rethink 'panoptic power' for new forms of looking (Koskela, 2002, 2000). Chun and Friedland (2015, p.6) raises concerns over ‘routinely leaking’ that disrupt the illusion of privacy. Through digital tracing and storing, the accidental user-induced 'leakage' has now become always available and accessible for wider phallic-initiated consumption, which again connects young women’s over-embodied gender subjectivities with consequences of the endemic publicity of the Internet (ibid.). Danah boyd’s (2004) earlier research on the early social media site Friendster, popular amongst U.S. teenagers in the 2000s, gives us another example of the fluctuating boundaries between each type of relationship — friends/boss/mother – which are deliberately confused in the co-evolution of the social community and the underlying technology.

The deep mediatization of intimacy and transformative communicative tools raises heated debates over the continuity of social structures and inequalities. For example, regarding social inequalities arising from the use of mobile devices by marginalized groups in patriarchal socio-cultural contexts, Qiu (2009) emphasized the perpetuation of structural hierarchies that prevent access to the Internet among working-class groups in urban cities. Meanwhile, the circulation of images on mobile and algorithmic social platforms is gendered and classed (Peng, 2019; Hjorth and Gu, 2012). Studying the food-photograph sharing of young middle-class Chinese urbanites in WeChat 'moments,' Peng (2019) argues that, through displaying geo-tagged snapshots of food, young

people disclose their everyday consumer experience. Facilitating geographical features and carefully crafted production of aesthetics on one's digital profile, social media provides users with the opportunity to control and mediate an imaginative self-presentation that reflect class distinction and urban life experience in post-reform China (Peng, 2019)

In a similar vein, Nicholas Carah and Amy Dobson (2016) examine algorithmic social media platforms, arguing that these systems increasingly calibrate flows of attention and shape user labour. On platforms like Instagram, users curate images of their bodies in ways that align with an ideal of 'heterosexy[-iness]'—a digitally mediated aesthetic that foregrounds sexual appeal while resisting melancholic forms of normative femininity (see also, Dobson, 2014). This visual labour is entangled with mediated sensory actions from others—such as likes, tags, and views—which together help circulate and affirm 'hot bodies' as affectively valuable. These embodied interactions become encoded into the algorithmic logic of the platforms, reinforcing specific affective norms. Marston (2022) similarly examines teenagers' ambivalent engagements with commercialised relationship content online in social media platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat and Tiktok. She highlights how a heteronormative, entrepreneurial relationship culture circulates as an aspirational lifestyle—where sexualised femininity and the objectification of men are normalised as everyday aspects of social media connectivity (Marston, 2022). This is a culture in which stereotyped feminine 'sexiness' and the increased objectification of men are seen as an ordinary and banal part of social media connectivities (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013; Allen, 2013). This body of digital media scholarship shifts the analytical focus away from individual users' intentions to the sociocultural regimes that shape and are shaped by platform architecture (Dijck, Poell and Waal, 2018; Kaye, Wall and Malone, 2016; Papacharissi, 2018). The bodily interaction become profitable affective labour – users' actions such as posting, sharing, and commenting, the sociality, affect, and attention here become technologically manageable and economically exploitable (Chen,

2023; Wallis, 2018; Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013; Fuchs, 2010; Bandinelli and Gandini, 2022).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic further pushed the boundaries of mediated intimacies as the initial stages of social distancing measures compelled scholars to rethink the politics of intimacies in relations to intersecting social factors such as class, age, abilities, gender, as well as (im)mobilities – conditions that were either enabled or constrained by physical restrictions (He and Zhang, 2023). Some scholars have examined the affordances of home-based communication technologies, or what Watson, Lupton, and Michael (p.178) term 'human-digital-home' assemblages which facilitate remote communication to meet people's need for connection and the maintenance of intimacy and sociality at a distance. Watson et al. (2021) studied how Australian individuals affectively managed and relationally responded to the novel social and structural challenges of distance brought by the global health crisis. Their findings reveal the sociomaterial complexities participants encountered—such as the gendered expectations of kin-work responsibilities, which directly shaped the possibilities of communication within families, intensifying relational tensions during periods of physical separation and crisis.

Meanwhile, with the increase in digitally mediated communication, scholars raised concerns about the burden placed on young people as they navigate algorithmic social media feeds that both circulate idealized gendered embodiments and expose users to toxic content that normalizes online hate (Ringrose et al., 2024). The rise of digital hostility has disproportionately targeted feminists and feminist movements, undoing feminist knowledge and undermining credibility by employing 'righteous outrage' — a rhetorical strategy that draws on and reinforces neoliberalized notions of equality (Evans and Riley, 2022; Xie et al., 2022; see also, Sobieraj, 2020). He and Zhang (2023) explore the creative witness assemblages of 'transnational journeys home' on Douyin (the Chinese TikTok), examining the intersection of emotion, mobile media, and

(im)mobility of Chinese international students' physical and symbolic vulnerability. Their study highlights how Chinese international students navigate immobility through mediated affective performance, such as posting self-representational videos about their experience, which have constructed a dialogic space for their digital solidarity in response to stigmatizing discourses and marginalized group. The social and structural inequalities tied to (im)mobility and mobile selves are thus translated into pandemic-era socio-affective repertoires (ibid.).

What has emerged is a complex and ambivalent picture of digital media's role in shaping intimacy and self-representation. While digital platforms are often heralded for their 'empowering' potential—especially in enabling new forms of self-expression and challenging dominant social norms—this potential is deeply entangled within techno-cultural settings that simultaneously generate, channel, and constrain users' expectations, attachments, and affective experiences. On the one hand, mobile technologies create perpetually connected mobilities and intimacies, blurring the boundaries between physical and digital spaces, past and present, and online and offline interactions (Hjorth and Lim, 2012; Lee, 2012; Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). On the other hand, both academic and popular discourses have raised concerns about the erosion of authenticity and human depth in digitally mediated relationships. These moral panics often reflect a pessimistic narrative wherein new technologies are said to 'liquefy' human bonds and diminish emotional depth (Illouz, 2007; Bauman, 2003). In response to these contradictory tendencies, Couldry and Van Dijck (2015, p.2) propose rethinking the concept of the 'social' in social media. They argue that platforms – alongside the diverse production cultures that sustain them — do not merely reflect sociality but actively construct a specific version of what counts as 'the social,' shaping how users perform and inhabit it (ibid.).

Rejecting the soft technology determinism and conceptual dichotomy of agency versus structure, 'good' versus 'bad' digital practices, I seek to agitate different ways of relating to young people's digital entanglements and keep

meaning on the move (Allen, 2015, p. 121), and look at the socio-material dimensions of intimacy and it more-then-human constituencies (Latimer and López Gómez, 2019). The growing research adopts socio-material perspectives on mediated intimacies, particularly on human and non-human intra-actions to reconfigure the concepts of intimacies and sociality. Specifically, the everyday specialities, temporalities, and materialities that entangle humans and non-humans in producing the sensory experience of intimacy—as affective forces, relational ties, and inter/intra-subjective agencies—have redirected scholarly attention to the material enactments of intimacy in digital life (Latimer and Lopez Gomez, 2019; Hjorth et al., 2019).

2.4.2. Feminist more-than-human approach to intimacies and sexuality assemblages

The posthuman approach towards intimacies and sexuality foregrounds the increasing transductive agency of digital technologies and social media infrastructures that have co-evolved in an ongoing formulation of society and affective performance (Rose, 2017). From platformazation and gamification of romance (Bandinelli and Gandini, 2022; Palmer, 2020) to management of online self-representation (Marwick, 2005; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002), from mediation of social interactions at distance (Lee, 2012; Licoppe, 2004) to production/circulation of gendered values and sexual morality (Ringrose et al., 2013), social media ‘are designed by, and entangled in, physical world social practices’ (Tierney, 2013, p.77). Posthuman and feminist new-materialist researchers seek to 'replace determinist accounts of technology's power with more messy and fragmented theorization of the agencies of the technological non-human and its role in the emergence and transformation of urban life' (Bissell, 2018.p58). Through this lens, the new media technologies are embedded instead of determining embodied practices

– co-constituting a posthuman subject that is both materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, and firmly located in specific places (Braidotti, 2013).

In China, the more-than-human approach to sexuality assemblage of young people is still relatively new and limited in its analytical scope for studying intimacies. In particular, we can still see that most of the media research on intimate relationships remains in the traditional humanist research paradigm – sexuality is bound to human flesh. In this context, the development of intimate relationships is often interpreted through a narrative of positive progression within the Chinese individualization and modernization process. Intimacy is often studied as an 'assemblage' of 'human' relations that are making meaning through Christianity and (Western) modernity as an ultimate object of advanced capitalist desire. Specifically, although *The Transformation of Intimacy* by Anthony Giddens (1992) has been widely criticised for its Western-centric perspective and elitist, male-dominated academic framing, it remains one of the most frequently cited texts on human relationships within the Euro-American context of modernisation. The book continues to serve as a foundational reference for many Chinese sociologists in the study of kinship-based and heterosexual relationships – a narrowly defined understanding of human-bonded relationality (e.g., Farrer, 2014; Pan, 2006; Pan and Huang, 2011; Jankowiak and Li, 2017; Yan, 2003, 2010).

Informed by modernist theorization of intimacy, some feminist researchers examine Chinese individuals' intimate relationships within a modernist framework (Liu, 2019a; Yang, 2016; Zarafonetis, 2017; Chao, 2010). These studies highlight a shift from traditional collective family values towards more individualistic conceptions of intimacy, reflecting an evolution in societal norms and personal aspirations (Chao, 2010; Yang, 2016; Zarafonetis, 2017). The approach taken by sociologists such as Liu (2014, 2019) and Zarafonetis (2017) fell short of addressing the contradictory discourses of 'independence' and was infused with a realism that 'tells life as it really is.' Under the inherent modernist and humanist framework, the youth practice of intimacy is often viewed from a

depoliticizing, neoliberalist stance that relies upon choice-driven and market-centric ideologies; it is typically associated with the private sphere, confined to family and home settings among heterosexual conjugal couples (i.e., Jankowiak and Moore, 2012; Zheng, 2019; Yang, 2018),

Such perspectives often overlook the inherent ambiguities and non-human entanglements — including bodily and affective interactions with space, time, desires, fantasies, technology, and reality — that shape the embodiment of gendered sexuality among young people in China. These include the hardly recognizable mundane and messy power dynamics through which young people navigate their intimate relationships in the online and offline worlds. Exemplified by the work of Ting Ting Liu and Chris Tan (Liu and Lin, 2023; Liu, Wang, and Lin, 2022; Tan and Xu, 2020; Tan et al., 2020), a growing body of research on online dating activities of diverse social and cultural groups are interested in the transformation of social relations into affective labour. In essence, their work shows little difference with the previous modernist conceptions of intimacy, placing the digital intimacies under the narratives of technological empowerment and neoliberalism which have perpetuated a delusional narrative of individual freedom from familial and societal constraints. Underlying such narrative is the entrenched moral panic on the role of technologies in 'liquifying' and alienating human intimate relationships (Illouz, 2007; Bauman, 2003), which categories digital practices of intimacies as good or bad, normative or non-normative depending on their alignment with heteronormative and monogamous values. Moreover, this understanding of materialist-affective dimensions of digital practices closely intersects with the Chinese concept of *guanxi* (relationality) and the commodification of intimacy, particularly from a labour-oriented perspective as propelling social movement.

In a slightly different approach, Chan (2021, 2018) examines the use of dating apps, recognizing the agency of digital infrastructures, such as app design, in shaping intimate experiences on these platforms. Although his work does not explicitly adopt a new materialist or feminist posthuman perspective,

Chan (2021) highlights how elements like market positioning, colour schemes, and interface layouts co-constitute the ‘networked sexual politics’ (p.2) of app users — a network of dyadic connections that both generates and sustains intimacy. In earlier research, he (2018) examined the complex entanglement of neoliberal values and consumer culture in the ambivalent intimate experiences of Chinese gay men on dating apps, which resonates with the intra-active dynamics of socio-technological forces in the field of intimacies. This perspective underscores how digital infrastructure and design choices influence individual interactions and the broader relational and affective landscape in which intimacy is negotiated.

In a similar vein, Cara Wallis (2011, 2013, 2018) has traced changes and continuities that have arisen in the Chinese migrant women's mobile phone assemblage. She (2013, p.93) coined the term the 'necessary convergence' to recognize the economic and social constraints that these migrant women live in, which opens new possibilities for sociality and intimacy while continuing to reify women's marginalization status as rural 'Others' in the urban city. She, therefore, argues that local socio-techno practices have been articulating and processing the broader social norms and codes—deterritorialize and territorialise new cultural and technological practices (ibid.). During her long-term fieldwork, she produced rich digital ethnographic accounts of ordinary marginalised individuals making meaning through the entanglement of social media, affective forces, and everyday ethical choices (Wallis, 2011, 2013, 2018). In Cara Wallis's (2024) recent study on marginalized youth — young creatives and domestic workers in Beijing - the author explores the role of social media in reflecting on their everyday ethical decisions, passions, and struggles in an environment marked by heightened social stratification and state control. Foregrounding the 'ordinary affects' and 'ordinary ethics,' Wallis (2024) draws attention to the inarticulable energies, passions, and forces that move bodies to attach to the affective and ethic dimensions within the broader political and economic landscape of neo/non-liberal China.

However, their approach to digital subjectivities of young people lacks an analytic lens that fully addresses the role of ‘affect’ in rethinking the materiality of technologies, embodiment, and the intra-active formation of subjectivities (Wallis, 2024; Fu, 2018; Liu, 2021). There has been a dearth of more-than-human approaches to digital assemblages of young Chinese people that foreground the discursive-embodied experiences, shifting attention from agency to assemblages, where gender, sexuality, and classed identities are enacted, co-produced by technologies, discourses, and bodies. For example, drawing from Butler’s gender performativity theory (Butler, 2004), Fu Jun (2018) examines the sense of belonging of young people on two major social media sites, WeChat and Weibo, arguing that young people's experience and performance of identities in the online space are mutually constituted by the power of dominant social discourses and the shared understanding of the complex social context they navigate in a networked era.

Moreover, many current digital media and gender/sexuality studies in China have trended toward broader, top-down areas — particularly in examining social mobility, e-commerce, and the empowerment of rural-to-urban women. For example, in Chinese academic work on the affective, relational, and socio-technical dimensions of young people's digital lives, much focus is on the migrant group or marginalized youth (Wallis, 2024; Fu, 2018; Liu, 2021; Chen and Chen, 2023). This direction reflects remnants of the Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm (see section 2.3.1) and non/neo-liberal feminist movements, emphasizing new media's economic 'empowerment' aspects over the molecular and affective dimensions of identity and relationality.

The current research paradigm reflects a neoliberal research agenda and the broader struggles of conducting gender and sexuality research in Chinese – especially researchers can struggle to conduct research on digital media and gender/sexuality studies that is not in alignment with the mainstream policies and political concerns, particularly 'scientific' sexual health framework as previously discussed (section 2.3.1). Such phenomenon encapsulates a

broader scope of research and policy engagement aimed at addressing structural inequalities while linking traditional cultural studies to contemporary socioeconomic initiatives, with particular attention to rurality and women's empowerment, which is difficult to count as an independent sociological research paradigm for digital intimacies (Wallis, 2024; Fu, 2018; Liu, 2021; Chen and Chen, 2023).

This context has left researchers in Chinese sexuality studies, myself included, grappling with finding a 'language' that captures the complexities of intimacies and sexualities in China (Wang, 2022). Drawing on Barad's concept of onto-epistemology (and later ethico-onto-epistemology) and Haraway's notion of situated knowledge (Barad, 2007b; Haraway, 1988), Ingram (2024) explores the generative and expansive space of 'in-betweenness' — the onto-epistemological space within sexuality studies that lies between the knower and the known – a space comprising the intricate, relational dynamics of people, objects, ideas, identities, politics and cultures. In researching Chinese intimate/sexuality assemblages, this *in-betweenness* entails a profound ethical responsibility. For example, as Wang (2022) revisits her research assemblage in studying Chinese women, she finds a lack of language for expressing love and describing sexual practices in/about different contexts. She argues that the *lack* signifies the subject-in-becoming that embedded and embodied the affective experiences redirected by phallic forces (Wang, 2022). Elsewhere, in her earlier ethnographic research (Wang, 2019), she elucidates her ethics-onto-epistemology that turns her knowledge, body, senses, and emotions into feminist knowledge production, foregrounding the fluid, non-monolithic trajectories of subject formation. This geographical and cultural focus highlights a scholarly need in the study of mediated intimacies and digital sexuality assemblages in non-Western contexts, particularly among Chinese youth. At the same time, it is crucial to remain sensitive to the uneven and partial nature of knowledge production, which necessitates a recalibration of local feminist narratives and situated knowledge.

Yet still, there is a growing awareness of integrating material-affective perspectives in understanding digital identities, shifting conventional notions of social capital, selfhood, and relationality (Fu, 2018; Wallis, 2013; Liu, 2021; Chan, 2018, 2021). Conducted among Chinese working women's identity construction and meaning-making process, Zhen Chen and La-Mei Chen (2023) analyse the mobile assemblage of a group of rural-to-urban migrant women in Dalian, a city in Northern China. Challenging dominant critiques of 'postfeminist sensibility' and its relevance in the Chinese context, their research highlights how marginalised women channel their emotional, affective and agentic selves through techno-socio assemblages (Chen and Chen, 2023). Foregrounding the distinct 'becoming, social and transitional' assemblage of Chinese women's subjectivities, these researchers' conceptualization of the subject-in-becoming resonates with a Deleuzian (1988) 'folding' process, in an identity construction process 'between the symbolic/material space – particular, mobile technology and its associated social relation and space – and the self-reflection in the making' (2023, p. 167).

Posthuman subjects are co-constituted with the flows of desires through human-nonhuman intra-actions. In this process, embodied experiences rooted in specific physical places are transduced into attractive digital representations—such as selfies—thereby reconfiguring the meaning of both digital and physical spaces in a multi-sited assemblage where contents were rewarded with attention, algorithmic circulation, and quantifiable Likes (Carah and Dobson, 2016; Chambers, 2017). Chen Liu's (2021) research on Chinese young people in Guang Zhou, indicates that young people's selfie practices are enmeshed with a complex and reflexive process of constructing one's identity through seeing, consuming, and communicating, shaping the broader digital cultures and social norms. Framing selfie practices as part of a 'socio-technical assemblage', she argues that virtual practices of young people are more than mere self-presentation but a reflexive performance intra-acting with social norms, aesthetics, and broader political network. Through practices such as

editing and sharing, people deterritorialize their physical presence and reterritorialize themselves on digital platforms, illustrating a complex entanglement of virtual and real experiences.

Outside of China, scholars have approached the embodiment of sexuality through new materialist feminist lenses to examine various non-human temporalities, rhythms, and affective vibrations within digital sexuality assemblages (Parikka, 2012; Hillis, Paasonen and Petit, 2015; Kyrölä and Paasonen, 2016; Papacharissi, 2014). From taking photos and sharing them online to communicating with emoticons, these technologies are motivated by the desire for 'feeling' intimate and driven by the pursuit of emotional experiences like amusement, interest, anger, and disgust, as much as by conscious, cognitive decision-making (Marston, 2019; Sampson, Maddison and Ellis, 2018; Hillis, Paasonen and Petit, 2015). Recognizing digital intimacy as part of a sexuality-assemblage, it is possible to see more-than-human elements (such as mobile phones, selfies, Likes, and tagging) as implicated in the becoming of sexuality and gendered subjects within and beyond physical spaces (see also Renold and Ringrose, 2017; Ringrose and Coleman, 2013). This conceptualization implies new texture and dimensionality to the broader project of (re)producing sexual meanings and identities via the intra-activity that occurs when mobile phones and young people are in relation.

Feminist educational researchers employ Deleuzian thinking to extend how researchers might think in relation to the meaning-making process about sexuality at school and the university level. Incorporating the relational materialist notion of a 'more-than-human' approach, Allen (2015) expanded her focus in her three-year project studying youth sexual cultures of schooling and sexuality meaning-making at school. The more-than-human analytic focus on young people's digital sexuality assemblages allows her to probe into young people's 'unofficially' learning process in spaces that are not designated as 'educational' – such as gym locker rooms, peer group interaction, school balls and graffiti on toilet walls (Allen, 2015). Inspired by the Deleuze-Guattarian

sexuality-as-assemblage, Allen views youth sexuality as a distinct property that emerges in between the 'spatial' and 'bodily' contact of young people and non-human objects (Morgan, 2000, cited in Allen, 2015). Allen argues that instead of perceiving young people or mobile phones as 'discrete' entities with a morally imbued agency that is 'good' or bad,' through delineating human and non-human boundaries, agency is generated in-between (Allen, 2015, p.130).

Similarly, Ingram (2022) draws on a new materialist ontology to explore the popular cultural construction of romantic depictions of ball/prom culture in the New Zealand school context. Rather than considering ball-girl-date as individual determinate entities, Ingram (2022) takes inspiration from posthuman encounters, foregrounds material-affective forces — material objects, practices, ideas, feelings, spaces, and temporalities — that shape sexuality encounters, and contributes to the complex entanglement and co-constitution of sexuality discourses. Destabilizing the popular constructions of balls as predominantly romantic spaces, Ingram's research elucidates the 'micro-politics of events and interactions and recognizes the messy and contradictory rather than structural forces (such as heterosexualized femininity) – in the girls' space-time-matter becoming (Ingram, 2022).

Other feminist researchers who have employed assemblage theory map out how bodily capture happens through technological mediation and how the phallic assemblages become in specific time/space instances (Ringrose, 2011; Ringrose and Coleman, 2013). For instance, using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage, Ringrose (2011) conceptualizes social networking sites as relational 'affective assemblages,' where bodies function as 'desiring machines,' connecting through virtual Facebook profiles. Within this context, 'looking good' becomes an embodied assemblage of meanings and experiences, shaped by the flow of images and affects that contribute to a 'glocal' (global and local) networked becoming in relation to idealized gendered bodies (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013). In her subsequent research, Ringrose maps cartographies of digital engagement (e.g., de-territorialization

and re-territorialization) to explore the phallic flows operating on social media. that inscribe sexual difference, and the gendered and sexualized affect attached to the images of the young people. These flows inscribe sexual difference and attach gendered and sexualized affects to images of young people. Similar with her work, other feminist-inspired new materialist researchers working on digital sexuality assemblages also illuminate how social media environments mediate the production of gendered and sexual subjectivities (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016; Renold and Ringrose, 2017; Ringrose et al., 2013; Ringrose and Harvey, 2015; Allen, 2013).

Like much of Ringrose's work and her work with other scholars on digital sexuality assemblages, she (2011,2013; Renold and Ringrose, 2017; Dobson and Ringrose, 2016) highlights the importance of capturing the temporal ruptures of the reproduction of gender and sexual norms in young people's digitally networked peer groups. Tagging, for example, as a ubiquitous digital affordance on platforms like Facebook, can be understood as a form of digital exposure—a practice that entangles and intra-acts with bodies, technologies, and affect within broader sexuality assemblages (Renold and Ringrose, 2017). The act of tagging is not neutral; it often carries significant social consequences by reinscribing normative gendered scripts. In particular, it tends to reinforce dominant constructions of female sexuality as hyper-visible and surveilled, while simultaneously affirming masculine sexual agency and dominance through public displays of association and recognition (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016). Conceptualizing tagging as a phallic touch, Renold and Ringrose (2016) illustrate how young people navigate various forms of posthuman, networked digital relationships, ultimately channelling these energies back into familiar material practices of control and the capture of young women's social networking self-display.

Employing a feminist more-than-human lens, these queer and feminist researchers challenge the cartesian binarism and work in the in-between spaces (Renold and Ringrose, 2016; Wang, 2019). Much of this research,

however, focuses on the experiences of girls and young women in Anglo-Saxon contexts, especially digital content and practices like selfies, Facebook tagging, Snapchat, and Tumblr (Kanai, 2019; Allen, 2015; Warfield, 2018; Renold and Ringrose, 2019). This research reveals the intra-acting complexities of digital affordances, technologies, bodies and physical spaces enable the endless possibilities that are entangled with youth embodiment of gendered sexualities. Acknowledging the theoretical and empirical gaps in sexuality studies, there is a pressing need to bridge these gaps within the digital gender and sexuality cultures of Chinese youth through research frameworks that are sensitive to geo-political mediated discourses of Chinese gender/sexuality studies.

2.4.3 Affective turn

Following this ‘affective turn’ in social sciences (Clough and Halley, 2007), affect theory allows researchers to foreground 'ordinary affects', rethinking the materiality, embodiment, and possibilities for understanding social and subjective changes. Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004 [1987]) work is a key starting point for the 'affective turn.' Writing in the translator's preface to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brain Massumi explained the term 'affect' as a pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution of that body's capacity to act (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004[1987], xvi). MacLure (2010, p.284) then draws on Deleuzian concept of affect, adding material dimensions of affect, and commenting that: 'It[affect] precedes, and exceeds, language, biography and cognition’. Affect registers on the body. It is carried by facial expressions, tone of voice, breath, and sounds, which do not operate as signs yet are not mere epiphenomena.

Here, a relational line of thinking decentres locations of affect (e.g. bodies, objects, spaces) by reconceptualising it in terms of assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004[1987]). In a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense, ‘bodies’ does not

necessarily refer to the fleshy human body but instead to a multiple and diverse set of connections across the always entangled territories of the material, discursive, natural, cultural, biological, and technological (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004[1983]). The body is signified through gendered and sexualized discourses through photos and other medium, while feminist Deleuzian thinking goes beyond semiotic, discursive, and cultural analysis (Gilbert, 2004). The feminist Deleuzian conceptualisation of the body addresses both how bodies are constituted—echoing Butler's theorisation of subjectification (Butler, 2006 [1990]) —and how they are capable of becoming through shifting relations, territories, and affective intensities (Grosz, 1994). Within this framework, affect is not simply emotion but a way of thinking about energy, libidinal forces, and the potentiality for transformation. Central to this is the concept of lines of flight (*lignes de fuite*), which signify not merely escape routes, but creative and experimental reconfigurations of life, systems, and subjectivities (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004 [1983]). These lines of flight offer possibilities for breaking free from rigid social structures and normative constraints—not through avoidance, but through the active invention of new forms of being.

The Deleuzian-Guattarian strand of affect theory is metaphysical and anti-foundationalist in orientation, which affirms the biological and material intensities of affect, but without reducing them to essentialist or deterministic accounts of cognition, culture, or political life. Following the Deleuzian-Guattarian thinking, affect is conceived as a force of becoming that emerges through relational and dynamic assemblages of bodies, technologies, and environments. A theoretical grounding in affect orients one toward flows, intensities, connections, and potential, and what Seigworth and Gregg (2010), referencing Baruch Spinoza, call the "not yet," as well as the recognition that what comes next might not necessarily be what one had hoped for (p. 9). Spinoza's definition of affect creates a 'flow' or bodily reaction in the form of 'modifications of the body, whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained' (Spinoza, as cited in Gatens,

2009, p.66). However, incorporating affect into sociological research is not straightforward as affect as a ‘pre-personal intensity’ is ‘not so easily expressed, and indeed might escape or exceed their expression in language’ (Coleman, 2018, p.1334).

Crucial to the theoretical bifurcation of affect theory lies in the ontological splits on whether affect is biological or prelinguistic – an articulation exemplified in the work of Massumi (2002) and other Foucauldian-inspired, critical post-structuralist theories (e.g. Sedgwick, 2003; Stewart, 2007). Disagreeing on the view that affects are merely internal psychological states and distinct from emotions, Sara Ahmed (2014) argues that affects are relational and our responses to 'objects and others' produce feelings and emotions that make impressions. In other words, affect can ‘stick’ and lead to affinity and connection or aversion and even hate as ‘affective value’ circulates (ibid. pp. 10, 45). The stickiness of affect, though temporal, gravitates to certain bodies rather than others through repetition and histories of contexts (Ahmed, 2004). With a more phenomenological approach, similar with Ahmed’s (2014), Judith Butler (2009) challenges the notion that affect is purely biological or prelinguistic, emphasizing its interpretive nature—both in how it is experienced and how it actively shapes meaning. Through shedding light on the possible connections of affect to ethical responsibility and critical judgement, Butler (2009) carefully stresses the body is not merely a passive surface for social inscription but a site of responsive agency, engaging with external conditions. Therefore, in bringing attention to the forms of lived experience, particularly the constitutive intertwining of passivity and sense-making activity in embodied experience, affect itself serves as a foundation for critique and interpretation.

In the same ontological vein of relational materialism, many queer and feminist theorists understand affect as a bodily and an intersubjective phenomenon – a connective tissue that holding together ideas, values and objects within broader sociocultural frameworks (Hochschild,2019[1983]; Coleman, 2022; Wetherell, 2012). Coleman (2022) argues that the value of

affect does not exist in pre-determined entities or states but instead emerges in the relations between them and is constitutive of them. This scholarship seeks to analyse the types of emotions expressed and understood through shared meanings as well as the more somatic, preconscious and relational affective qualities that emerge through sensory engagement with places that they associate with a communal or personal past (Wetherell 2012). Wetherell (2013) initiated an important rapprochement between discourse theory and affect theory in empirical research, redirecting analytical attention to the emergent patterns of situated activity. She argues that these patterns—rather than abstract structures or isolated emotions—should be the central focus of affective analysis.

In alignment with new materialist scholarship, this turn to affect in media studies reflects a growing recognition of the materiality of research encounters—those entanglements shaped by what Barad (2003,p.817) calls the “ongoing ebb and flow of agency” which circulates among human and non-human bodies, technologies, and discursive formations. This conceptual move encourages researchers to consider how affect emerges not merely as an internal state or linguistic trace, but as a dynamic force produced through intra-active entanglements within specific spatiotemporal and sociomaterial contexts. As Wetherell (2015) elaborates, “affective practice is a moment of recruitment, articulation or enlistment when many complicated flows across bodies, subjectivities, relations, histories and contexts entangle and intertwine together to form just this affective moment, episode or atmosphere with its particular possible classifications” (p. 160).

Affect theorists, therefore, attempt to work with the ‘sensual, haptic, corporeal or kinaesthetic’ (Blackman and Cromby, 2007, p. 7), redirecting attention to the ‘somatically sensed’ body, to perceptions, memories, feelings, forms of muscular movement and proprioceptive responses to vibrations and rhythms. Given these objectivities, scholars of affect theory and media studies emphasize assemblage, relationality, articulation and entanglement that

operates routinely between the semiotic and embodied states – such as love, pleasure, desires, as well as sufferings and mourning (Döveling, 2017; Hynnä and Kyrölä, 2019; Kyrölä and Paasonen, 2016; Papailias, 2016; He and Zhang, 2023). In her study of young women who self-proclaimed to be 'avid selfie-takers', Warfield (2017, p.68) draws on affect theory to examine how the interview room, the lighting, and mobile devices, the 'embodied vibrations' of the participants, and her affective presence as the researcher shaped the selfies that were produced in the research encounter. The embodied and ineffable vibration of the research participants and the affective presence of the researchers and other non-human bodies blurs the borders of human and non-human actors, researchers, and researchers, further enhancing the affective 'knowledge-making' process.

Media-afforded subjectivities and bodies – biomediated bodies – not only enables the access to the materiality of the media itself, but also requires the affectivity of the body (‘corporeal capacity’) and allows the affect to flow between bodies (Clough, 2008,p.2). Addressing everyday encounters with and experiences of pornography, Kyrölä and Paasonen (2016) reposition pornography, instead of being a mere object of private consumption, as a complex social and archival construct that entangles with layered carnal interactions between media and (mediated) human and non-human bodies. The materiality of the media – in the forms of media recordings, magazines, and papers – transition from physical collections to intangible 'somatic archives' – an affective memory network within the body (on screen, in print, and of the viewer) which are embedded in and conditioned by cultural representations and norms (Berlant, 1993, p.551-2, cited in Kyrölä and Paasonen,2016).

As such, inspired by the 'affective turn' (Clough and Halley, 2007), my take on affect theory for my research, therefore, sees affect as bio-techno-mediated movement that flows between bodies, values, spaces and objects especially as it travels through digital terrains. Whereas I acknowledge the tensions between affect and discourse methods (e.g. Massumi. 2002), I joined together the

posthuman materialist interpretations on affect in the process of meaning-making and socio-historical performance in everyday lived experience. Drawing on affect theory, I aim to bring a fresh eye to the conventional theorisation of intimacy, where normative affective flows traverse the online and offline, private and public spheres in today's global, digitalised world.

2.4.4 (Re)thinking mediated intimacy(ies) as affective aesthetics

My research proposes a more-than-human theoretical and philosophical approach to studying the sexuality assemblages of young Chinese people in their practices of mediated intimacies. Aligning with Deleuzian thought, I conceptualize gendered (sexual) subjectivity as a process of becoming, not only as a philosophical but also a political and theoretical undertaking. This perspective enables a reconfiguration of intimate machinery within institutional settings, where imperceptible micromoments of territorializing forces and deterritorializing becoming unfold. Accordingly, I explore how gender and sexuality assemblages construct a privileged sense of sameness, shaping how intimacies are affectively experienced — not only within digital spaces but also across broader cultural landscapes.

Intimacy emerges from 'mobile processes of attachment' (Berlant, 1998, p.284) deployed in intimate rituals, routines, and events within the familiar spaces of friendship, family, love, sex, and feeling at home (Pink and Mackley, 2013). Exemplified by the work of Lauren Berlant (Berlant and Seitz, 2015; Berlant, 1998), the discourses of intimacy move from 'public' institutions, ideologies, and regulations to 'private' fantasies, desires, and life goals. Coining the term 'intimate zones of everyday life,' Berlant explores intimacy—typically thought of as private or confined to close relations, intersecting with public institutions, or enacting collective crises (Berlant and Warner, 2000, p317).

Berlant argues that the script of intimacy – performing domesticity, coupledom, and identity that widely circulated in 'the public' through the media (e.g., self-help magazines and television talk shows), is migrating back to 'the private' and creating hegemonic forms of intimacy (Berlant, 2000, pp. 3-4).

In her critical reflections on the notions of intimacy, Lauren Berlant (1998) has insightfully argued that 'to intimate implies the ability to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures,' which 'involves the aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both one and others that will turn out in a particular way' (p.1). Berlant (1998) encourages scholars to conceptualize intimacy not as a fixed set of emotions like love, friendship, or connection but as a relational process of attachment. This process emerges through interactions between individuals, institutions, nations, and an expansive array of other possible relations. As Berlant describes:

> Intimacy [...] does generate an aesthetic, an aesthetic of attachment, but no inevitable forms or feelings are attached to it. This is where normative ideologies come in when certain 'expressive' relations are promoted across public and private domains – love, community, patriotism – while other relations, motivated by the 'appetites,' are discredited or simply neglected. (1998: 285)

Such a vision of intimacy challenges the unitary and human-centric definition of intimacy and entails a non-essentialist understanding of subjects in the process of networked human and non-human elements (Berlant and Warner, 1998; Jamieson, 2007). Intimacy used to narrowly refer to the familiarity of close association and restricted to private or domestic realms (see Jamieson, 1999, 2011). Now, intimacy is reconceptualized as a complex, mobile interaction that traverses public and private spaces, and emerges as a materially and bodily embedded experience that draws from perceptions and intuitions, extending into tangible, real-life conditions and tech-socio infrastructure (Chambers, 2017; Hillis, Paasonen and Petit, 2015; Kolehmainen,

Lahad and Lahti, 2021).

For my research, I reconceptualize mediated intimacy(ies) as *affective aesthetics*, to recognize intimacy as far more than an evolving interpersonal relationship with others but as a form of ethos (or social aesthetics) supported by a range of cultural norms and biopolitical regulations, and afforded by communicative technologies. This framework highlights a complex and hybrid assemblage of affective relationality, wherein affect is not only inscribed in desiring subjects but also entangled with the promises and pleasures of self-representation, self-investment, and consumption (Rose, 1999,p.270).

Control over one's digital engagement on social media generates pleasure, empowerment, and social capital, yet also produces anxiety and competitiveness — particularly in neoliberal and postfeminist contexts. Public discourses and media cultures surrounding sex and sexuality have undergone significant shifts, particularly in mass and social media targeting women and girls (Ringrose and Harvey, 2015; Naezer and Ringrose, 2018; Barker, Gill and Harvey, 2018). These changes have reinforced a neoliberal model of femininity, which is materialized and legitimized through dominant figures of middle-class status, heterosexuality, slimness, and youthfulness, shaping how femininity is performed and advertised across work/study spaces, family structures, and romantic relationships (McRobbie, 2015, 2013; Peng, 2021; Sun and Lei, 2017). Therefore, ideologies and institutions of intimacy are increasingly tied to a normative vision of the 'good life', which individuals actively consume and internalize. This process generates a sense of belonging and affective intensities that align with ideals of a well-planned, healthy, and successful life, often positioned in contrast to 'others'—particularly those from less advantaged class backgrounds or marginalized ethnic groups (Ringrose, 2013; Dobson, 2014; Kanai, 2019). The machinery of the 'intimate zones of everyday life' is partially effective in directing creative energies to produce (imaginary) good citizens and an illusory version of the 'good life' and self-fulfilment (Berlant and Warner, 2000, p317).

The aesthetics of intimacies, interwoven with a fabricated and collective web – a ‘passionate economy’ as Rose (1999) described, in which ‘human beings and their corporeality are connected into flows of needs, desires, pleasures and anxieties’ that emerged in socio-political practices in consumerist and neoliberalist cultural contexts (p.271). More broadly, there is an expanding focus on how feelings and affective practices operate within the visual and social economies of gendered and sexual norms, particularly emphasizing the upbeat, positive affective tone of postfeminism that prioritizes confidence while rejecting expressions of pain, insecurity, or injury – what Kanai refers as ‘neoliberal feeling rules’ in her study on girlhood and media culture (Dobson and Kanai, 2019; Kanai, 2015). Through surveillance to neoliberal and postfeminist cultures, femininities are subject to the premise/promise of normative sameness that affectively circulates and is promoted in the digital intimate space (Kanai, 2019).

Afforded by deep mediatisation, the practice of intimacies weaves different connections with private and public space, presence and absence (Licoppe, 2004; Madianou, 2016; Ito and Okabe, 2005), different models of temporalities (Lasén and Hjorth, 2017), and time-space practices (Baffelli and Schröer, 2021; Thulin, Vilhelmson and Schwanen, 2020), which have shaped the aesthetics of how intimacy has been affectively experienced. Taking camera phones and image-sharing platforms as examples, the images produced in and through cameras, now become part of our attempts to make sense the world, and connect to ephemeral and archival conducts of intimacy (Hjorth and Gu, 2012). Moreover, facilitated by networked sociality of social media sites – according to danah boyd (2014, p.11), persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability – mobile media images can play symbolic and material roles in imbricating intimacy with memory (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Following this, Hjorth's empirical study of microblogging has shown us that taking, editing, sharing, and contextualizing camera phone images, together with built-in locative services, has created put in place and multisensory visuality which brings about intimacy

and sociality in the public domain (Hjorth and Pink, 2014; Hjorth and Gu, 2012). The increased accessibility of tools for recording and sharing images has enabled power to operate through discursive practices, shaping and legitimizing certain aesthetics embedded with representational social values and habitus, yet generating a normative current of affect.

Through post-humanising affect and mediated intimacies, we can see the political potential of affect: the flows of energies that evoke, circulate, and sometimes congest from human to more-than-human entities, while perpetuated by multiple forces in infrastructural and societal environments. Feminist researchers examine the affective and emotional forces at play in youth sexting practices, emphasizing how these affective dimensions intertwine with the lived realities of mediated lives and the heteronormative discursive landscapes of gender, sexuality, and age (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016; Renold and Ringrose, 2019). Studying digitally networked peer groups within school-based qualitative research, some have highlighted the ethical-political relationalities of affect and how it constantly operates on the boundaries of femininities (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016; Renold and Ringrose, 2019; Kanai, 2019). Tracing the affective intensities created through the images of the bodies from phone to phone and body to body, Charteris and Gregory (2024) draw on affect theory to research young people's usage of Snapchat (an instant photograph and messaging application) within schooling assemblages. Based on Snapchat's marketed ephemerality, affective inequalities are produced through texts, images, and videos which are symptomatic of sexist school cultures and masculine sexual entitlement (Chateris and Gregory, 2024).

The concept of affective aesthetics is grounded in a nuanced understanding of the dialectical tensions within inter-/intra-subjective phenomena in networked societies. In these contexts, power operates not only through surveillance or discipline, but also through the affective modulation and transformation of bodies, behaviours, and subjectivities—shaping what it means to be happy, desirable, or perfected. Highlighting Instagram's circulation of a particular genre

of aestheticized, beautified, and idealized lifestyle, Marston (2022) reveals a heteronormative entrepreneurial relationship culture that oscillates between fascination and abjection among her participants. This love-and-hate attachment to the aesthetics of (hetero)normativity is embedded in the production and consumption of everyday media content, entangled with body politics and gendered embodiment (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013; Elias, Gill, and Scharff, 2017; Lazar, 2017). Fuelled by the visibility mechanisms of social media, a contagious and ubiquitous feedback loop of moral transcendence haunts its users, shaping personal narratives and identities in ways that align with entrepreneurial and neoliberal ideals (Kanai, 2015; Marwick, 2015; Demelius and Yoshida, 2025). The ‘hyper-self-consciousness’ fostered by digital platforms is inherently tied to the digital gaze, which encourages individuals to curate and refine their social selves, thereby shaping their personal identities (Floridi, 2014, p.64). Consequently, visual representations not only proliferate the forms through which intimacy is expressed and embodied, but also expose underlying cultural tensions around epistemologies of intimacy—tensions deeply entangled with power relations. There has been increasing body of scholarship shift the analytical attention to the socio-material constitutions of intimacy (Lasén and Hjorth, 2017a; Latimer and López Gómez, 2019), advocating for alternative ways of observing the social as it unfolds in digitally saturated environments. This theoretical reorientation is particularly pertinent to the present study, which seeks to understand the emerging affective, material, and psychic inequalities embedded in the rhythms of everyday digital life (Kolehmainen, Lahad and Lahti, 2021; Alasuutari, 2021).

In this emergent field of digital intimacies, positioning intimacies as affective aesthetics allows for a sensibility that capture its fractures and variations beyond the (hetero)normative orders, without necessarily being confined to new hierarchal structures. Such conceptualisation is particularly important for this research to depart from the Eurocentric definition of intimacy and queer politics that is central to 'identity' politics (Yau, 2010). Instead, it rethinks intimacies as

affective aesthetics — forms of relationality that communicate ethical principles in negotiating normativity and resisting the systematic modern abjection of ‘deviant’ gender and sexual subjectivities. This reconceptualization of intimacy decenters human consciousness, enabling a rethinking of intimate connections that extend beyond individual human experiences to encompass the complex terrains of non-humans.

Expanding on this perspective, Alasuutari (2021) pushes the boundaries of intimacy even further through an exploration of LGBTQ individuals’ experiences of partner loss. Challenging the notion that intimacy requires embodied or technologically mediated connections (Maclaren, 2014; Wilson, 2016). Foregrounding such elusive, intangible, or haunting forms of intimacy, Alasuutari's (2021) research reveals the intensity of the affective intimacy that persists through archives, places, and new modes of 'being,' maintaining continuing affective bonds to the world. The deceased, as a being devoid of life and responsiveness, becomes the ultimate object of desire—embodying permanence and stability that render an affective connection both deeply compelling and inherently unattainable within the bounds of ordinary, living relationships. Her research illustrates the affective capacity of other-than-human elements to generate and sustain intimate connections, thereby exceeding the normative expectations of monogamous, co-present, human-flesh relationships (Alasuutari, 2021).

Taking inspiration from a broader range of queer studies and posthuman scholarship, I propose *affective aesthetics* as a key analytical concept to understand young people’s intimate relationships in this research. McGlotten (2013, p. 7) defines intimacy as ‘a vast assemblage of ideologies, institutional sites, and diverse sets of material and semiotic practices that exert normative pressures on large and small bodies, lives, and worlds.’ Similarly, through addressing mediated intimacies as affective aesthetics, I suggest to reimagine intimacy as shaped by discourses, narratives, affect flows and the visions embedded in media technology, while also acknowledging the significant social

ethos that influences young people's gendered and sexual subjectivities in the digital milieu. Adopting more-than-human philosophies, this kind of rethinking mediated intimacies has opened up new perspectives on how the new communicative technologies influence intimacy is experienced and managed across distances. This expands the concept of intimacy(ies) to more-than-human subjects and intersubjective experiences through 'zoe/geo/techno-mediated relations'(Braidotti, 2022, p.206). Employing a new materialist approach, the notion of *affective aesthetics* emerges, encompassing the bodily, embodied, and sensory experiences of intimacy as individuals transform themselves to achieve happiness in response to a shifting techno-socio environment. This reconstitution structures and frames young people's engagement with new media, where intimacies are conditioned and conditioned by discursive forces—politics, desires, intentions, and techno-social environments. By decentering the 'human' and questioning the normative model of 'human intimacy,' this concept invites an understanding of both abstract and embodied affective aesthetics in the continual process of 'becoming' gendered subjects.

2.5 Conclusion: Towards a posthuman approach to gender and sexuality and youth mediated intimacy

Mobile media practices have invoked a new configuration of challenges of mediated intimacies, where the material, affective, inter/intra-subjective experience of intimacy affordances and digital resources enable individuals to perform operations and make meanings on their bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being. To bridge the gap between existing research on new media, performativity, and sexuality assemblages with posthumanism in the context of young Chinese people's digital gender and sexuality culture, I position my research as filling the theoretical gap where posthumanism and

digital sexuality intersect. In this literature review, I have highlighted a fresh approach that situates Chinese youth and their practice of intimacies within a broader, evolving landscape of gender, sexuality, and digital media. Departing from the dichotomy of Western/Eastern, queer/straightness, and liberal/conservative, this research is a response to the queer feminist research inquiry that takes into consideration of multiple entanglements of matterings into sexuality assemblages.

This chapter acknowledges a small but growing body of empirical research on young people's gender and sexuality performativity in China that has helped to contextualize the transformation of youth's practices of intimacy and sexual subjectivities in line with heteronormative norms in the neoliberal Chinese context. However, although current gender and sexuality studies have invited more creative and critical postcolonial and intersectional research, the limited and partial analytical scope they employ has also pointed to, often overlooked, micro (molecular) levels of ruptures from the 'normativity' of the lived everyday experiences of Chinese youth.

In part 2, I re-examined the specific processes of 'knowledge' production within Chinese gender and sexuality studies, which have developed alongside China's historical, cultural, and socio-economic transformations. Moreover, in the context of neo-liberal research agendas that focused on evidence-based outcomes and the lingering effect of the Gender and Development research paradigms, researchers on Chinese gender and sexuality and digital cultural studies often struggle to secure funding for projects that do not address young people's practices of intimacies and sexual cultures in line with mainstream policy and practical concerns. Correspondingly, Chinese sexuality researchers have often drawn from discourses and positivist onto-epistemology to approach research data, which often draws a distinct boundary between researchers and researched, under an intricate pursuit for 'scienticity' and 'objectivity'.

The distinctive characteristics of 'knowledge' production on Chinese gender subjectivities are deeply rooted in China's unique historical and political context

yet are often filtered through mainstream English-speaking and Eurocentric humanist theories on transforming intimacies in advanced capitalist societies. Haraway (1988) reminds us that science is an imaginary force field where players (academics) 'disintegrate' each other to stay in the knowledge and power game (e.g., publication and grant seeking) (p. 441). Nonetheless, like Haraway (1998), Braidotti also challenges the 'objectivity' and invisible conspiracy of masculinist and white-centred knowledge production, pointing out the 'phallogocentrism' in the Western traditional philosophy (1993, p.6). As a response to these ideas, I have critically mapped out the contours of '(hetero)normativity' in the studies of intimacy in China. Therefore, this literature review points to a more diverse and fluid field of queer feminist inquiry and opens up to alternative ways of knowing while maintaining a faithfulness of the 'real world' (Haraway, 1988). For this reason, I acknowledge that the research I reviewed above is far from an exhaustive account of current media studies on gender and sexualities in China.

For my research, adopting a queer feminist and posthumanist lens offers a unique opportunity to move away from the Eurocentric and linear modernist theorization of youth sexual culture, which has been prominent in research on China. This research embraces the material, embodied, and sensory dimensions of mediated intimacy, as well as the messy moments of ruptures from the 'normativities' in young people's everyday practice. This research perceives youth intimacy as sexuality assemblages – a whole set of flexible but non-arbitrary vocabularies, behaviour codes and aesthetics embodied in young people’s gendered subjectivities and desire in the enmeshed digital and physical world. The multifaceted assemblages of sexuality that constitute young people's practices of digital intimacies extend the conventional concepts of intimacy to the shifting patterns of force relations between bodies, digital devices, and platforms that work to limit or extend bodily and affective capacities.

For this research, the central theme is that intimacy is no longer tied closely

to fleshy human bodies and is no longer restrained by the moral panic on proximity and authenticity since the proliferation of social media (Attwood, Hakim, and Winch, 2017). This research explores sexuality beyond fixed identity categories, adopting a feminist posthuman and new materialist lens to trace the molecular lines of becoming within complex relational assemblages. By attending to the more-than-human dimensions of sexual cultures, the study foregrounds how desire, embodiment, and intimacy are co-produced through entanglements of bodies, technologies, and environments. In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted conventional time-space configurations—what Barad (2007) calls time-space-mattering—by imposing forced immobilities and remaking the conditions under which intimate and affective relations unfold.

Chapter 3: Researching Young People's Intimate Relationships in Chinese Universities during Covid-19 Pandemic[5]

3.1 Introduction

In December 2019, when I received news about the unknown respiratory disease in Wuhan for the first time, little did I know how this could impact my research. Whereas the national lockdowns and international travel restrictions ceased taken-for-granted mobilities, my research field trip, which heavily relied on mobility, turned sideways. The pandemic-related immobility accelerated the entanglement of the materialist concept of non-human life with young people's everyday experiences. To better understand the evolving definitions of mediated intimacies within this specific space-time-mattering Barad (2007) articulates that there is a need for new frameworks that consider how mediated intimacies disrupt heteronormative discourses, hierarchical gender structures, and anthropocentric perspectives in human-technological relations.

In this chapter, I provide a detailed exploration of the methodological issues that emerged while researching young people's intimacy in the Chinese context during COVID-19. I map out the trajectory of my research design, field trip, data analysis reflections, and changes throughout the process. I also address the

[5] This chapter draws from my previously published work: Zuo, Z. (2024) Teaching Sexuality Education in China During Times of Uncertainty. In: J. Bustillos Morales (ed.). *Questioning gender politics: contextualising educational disparities in uncertain times*. Teaching with gender. Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. p. doi:10.4324/9781003397502.
The material has been revised and expanded to align with the broader aims of this thesis, including additional analysis and theoretical reflections.

unexpected challenges of pandemic-related immobilities which significantly affected my research design but also opened new perspectives that yielded different research outputs.

Employing a feminist new materialist approach, I constantly reflect on the ethico-onto-epistemological entanglements of matter and meaning – research surroundings, digital and physical settings, the multiplicity of my research identities – emerging as agential capacities, which generated the research 'data' in the ‘knowledge’ production process (Barad, 2007; Haraway 1988). This chapter therefore, encapsulates the key issues, dynamics and intra-actions that prompt this research and become together in research assemblages and respond to how the research material is analysed (Fox and Alldred, 2017).

This chapter is divided into three sections. Firstly, I provide an account of my own embodied subjectivity and shifting positions that shaped the research and my ethico-onto-epistemological position. In the second section, I explain the ethnographic methods and experiential positions I employed for this research, including online observations, digital diary entries of the participants, longitudinal interviews, and my reflective fieldnotes. The limitations of the participant recruitment process and procedures of anonymity are discussed as well.

In the final section, I discuss the practical ethical concerns emerging in my research and provide a reflective account of my research assemblages that contribute to what emerged as data in this research. As this chapter illustrates, by uncovering networks of 'thing-power' as part of affirmative analytical ethics (Bennett, 2004), the more-than-human perspective I employed contributed to identifying and disrupting the normative assumptions held within qualitative inquiries on youth gender and sexualities.

3.2 Methodology

Acknowledging my subjectivity as a researcher and how my positionality influenced the research process is essential. As a Chinese woman studying abroad, my perspective is shaped by my personal experiences and cultural background, which informed my approach to understanding the complexities of young people's intimacy and sexuality in contemporary China. This positionality created a multifaceted and continuous task of self-understanding, particularly throughout the fieldwork and writing processes, echoing Barad's (2007) critique of classical 'reflexive' methodologies in social science. Barad then address on the invisible entanglements between 'knower' and 'known' (2007, p.86-88) – she argues that the relations between the researcher and the researched become a flexible, inter-active dynamic, with socio-historical-personal imprints on both sides. Through a feminist ethico-onto-epistemological lens, this study challenges the traditional separation between researcher and researched by rejecting the ideal of the neutral observer. It posits the research process itself as a performative, affective assemblage, wherein the researcher is entangled with shifting emotional, affective, and corporeal relations (see Ringrose and Renold, 2014; Scharff, 2012; Allen, 2015; Fox and Alldred, 2015). Throughout the research, I maintained critical awareness of my own biases and the power dynamics within the research assemblages. The following sections will illuminate two shifting points within these research assemblages — my ethico-onto-epistemological transitions and the interruptions of COVID-19. Each of these transitions contributes to unfolding the process of knowledge production in this specific space-time-mattering context.

At the beginning of this project, I subconsciously followed the dominant presumption that young contemporary Chinese people had increasing awareness regarding the status of gender inequality and have become more aware of their (especially women's) sexual desire – the prominent sexual liberalisation articulated by mainstream Chinese sociologists (i.e. Farrer, 2014; Pan, 2006). This presumption ultimately resulted in frustration because it re-inscribed the black-and-white binary images of sexual liberalism/modern vs

conservative/traditional, with a presumption that youth gender identity was monolithic and fixed. Despite the growing empirical literature on young Chinese people's sexual culture, much of it implicitly seeks liberatory discourses (Farrer, 2014b; Pan, 2006), which only reveals outdated gender hierarchies as historical constructs rather than natural and immutable conditions (Zhang et al., 2011; Pan, 2006).

In the early stages of my research, I was attracted by this narrative and tempted to portray young people as a force of resistance who have challenged normative gender expectations. My perception of Chinese young people is predominantly shaped by a narrowly defined 'sexual openness' and the mainstreaming of empowerment discourses in official utterances and public discussion. However, underlining the tentative empowerment and liberatory narrative is a belief that there is only one form of resilience without acknowledging the flexibility and multifaceted nature of the embodied and embedded subjectivities.

Meanwhile, in qualitative studies, making sense of the subject of inquiry is a continuous and sometimes even painful process of seeking answers from the inside and outward. Grounded in a feminist epistemological commitment, it is equally important to exploring the economic, cultural, and social baggage that both the participants and I brought into this research. As mentioned earlier (Chapter 1), I developed my initial research interest from my embodiment of desire through my practice of intimacy at the time. Previous feminist researchers have pointed out the blurry line between the researched and researchers in qualitative research (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Haraway, 1988). The personal experiences I brought into the research shaped my thinking, actions, and feelings throughout the process, rather than positioning me as a disembodied reporter merely collecting data. I will further illustrate this with examples in Section 3.5.1. Meanwhile, my analytical perspectives gradually shifted and developed through relationship-breaking and dating experiences, and talking to my parents and friends. These everyday activities

have intricately shaped my analysis and allowed me to understand and read the different life trajectories of my participants with a sense of empathy.

After resetting my research inquiry, I intended to investigate the complex interplay between cultural resources, structure, and practice in constructing social-cultural gender/classed identities of young people through their narratives. A significant epistemological shift in my understanding of youth identities was inspired by Renold and Ringrose (2011, 2014) whose work complicates the notion of linear, progressive transformation by foregrounding the micro-political movements of gendered subjectivities. Following the Deluzian concept of ‘becoming’, Renold and Ringrose (2011) trouble the lineal transitional and developmental girlhood between innocence and sexual knowingness and develop the concept of ‘schizoid subjectivities’ to describe the messiness of the lived sexual subjectivities. Accordingly, I moved from reading gender performativity uncritically and adopting established categories, to exploring the multiple pushes and pulls that these young people are navigating within the everyday spaces of performativity, old (campus, dormitory, nightclub, workplaces) and new (virtual spaces, online profiles, chat groups, digital affordances). I employed an open-ended approach to young people's engagement with digital technologies, which leaves enough space for the participants to narrate why digital technologies are essential to them in navigating their identities and sociality in their everyday lives.

To achieve these goals, I adopted a constructivist stance that perceives the participants as active agents who, instead of performing a static identity, are agentic beings actively negotiating between various facets of identity, such as gender, age, education and class. Braidotti’s work on posthumanism is a helpful tool for my research inquiries to understand the gender and sexual norms in late capitalist, globally linked and technologically mediated societies (Braidotti, 2019a). Haraway's work insightfully questions the powerful imposition of traditional Oedipal family narratives, which are inevitably centered around a Euro-centric social and historical context while neglecting 'other histories to be

told about the structuring of the unconscious' that are less '(hetero)normative' (Penley, Ross and Haraway, 1991, p.14). Similarly, Braidotti (1993) reimagines a de-oedipal approach to feminist knowledge production and departs from the sanctimonious sacredness of certain philosophical texts – male, white, and Eurocentric – of the masters.

The posthuman theoretical framework Braidotti proposes disrupts the traditional humanistic notion of a unified subject — as discussed in detail in previous chapters — offering a philosophical innovation that is both theoretically and politically significant. This posthuman feminist approach not only challenges binaries such as Western/Eastern and virtuality/reality, but also deconstructs the essentialist frameworks that anchor femininity and masculinity in anatomically and biologically determined bodies. Braidotti's approach, by moving toward molecularization, de-humanization, and de-Oedipalization, seeks to disentangle sexuality from the restrictive dialectics of negativity traditionally associated with phallocentric theory (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004[1983]), or the sanctimonious sacredness of certain philosophical texts – male, white, and Eurocentric (Braidotti, 1993). She introduces the Deleuzian-inspired concept of the "schizoid double pull" to illustrate a schizoid formation that disrupts fixed, linear trajectories of development and blurs conventional generational and categorical boundaries. This schizoid double pull challenges binary distinctions and hierarchical classifications within subject formation, enables a reimagination of more fluid and heterogeneous experiences of identity, desire, and sexuality through the 'becoming' and 'in-between-ness'. The post-structural conceptualisation of the subject, particularly the subjectivity as a non-unitary multiplicity entity in constant relation to other bodies and things, assists my research into the participants' liminal process of 'becoming'.

Centring on my methodological inquiry is how we can analyse both micro and macro power relations in the society that works to constrain and bind subjects. Responding to the similar methodological inquiry, Ringrose and Renold's work draws on Deleuze and Guattari's powerful conceptual repertoire

to develop Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' that position girls' bodies in a complex performative politics (Renold and Ringrose, 2008). By offering a 'molecular mapping', they argue that schizoid dynamics function across multiple levels, generating sustained ruptures within heteronormative femininity embedded in specific social and cultural affective assemblages (Renold and Ringrose, 2008, 2011, 2019). This molecular approach foregrounds the nuanced, fragmented, and fluid nature of subjectivity, challenging traditional structures and revealing how femininity itself can become a site of ongoing transformation. Meanwhile, Ahmed's (2013) theory of affect complements Butler's highly abstract performativity theory and constructs a pluralist methodological framework to investigate the psychic side of the neoliberalist culture. As Ahmed (2013, p.119) argues that emotions 'create the very affect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds', she conceptualised emotions as performative. Affects are not seen as residing within a particular body or object, but their ability to circulate and re-attach makes them binding (ibid.).

Meanwhile, although Braidotti (2014) argues that the process of 'becoming' resembles a 'eurocentrism from within' (p. 179), it may not necessarily be the perfect figuration for exploring the embodiments of intimacy in the Chinese context. This reconfiguration of 'becoming' helps map out the intersectional formation of Chinese sexual and gender subjectivities in this particularly compressed modern Chinese context (Ji, 2017; Chang and Song, 2010). Evans (2010) focuses on the cross-generational intimate relationship as a particular instance of the affective and ethical transformation of the subject in China. She (Evans, 2010) argues that this process of gender 'becoming' is not cohesive and consistent and does not follow a uniform pattern, but is shaped by various social critiques and transformation, apart from individual agency.

My thesis is driven by a posthuman theoretical inquiry, reconfiguring intimacy(ies) as 'affective aesthetics' in which gender and sexual subjectivities are formed through embedded, embodied relational modes in everyday contexts, and are punctuated by affective forces. This approach highlights how

intimacy is experienced and constructed through the dynamic interplay of material, affective, and social forces, shaping and reshaping identities in response to broader socio-cultural and technological landscapes. In a similar vein, viewing intimacies as affective 'intra-actions' which defy boundaries between subjects, bodies, materials and discourses, Yiran Wang (2019) uses Karen Barad's conceptualisation of 'ethico-onto-epistem-ology' (Barad, 2007) and understanding of her 'self' to explore the formation of the same-sex female subject as non-essentialist, non-binary, discursive-material entangled and continuously 'becoming'. Specifically, the gendered and sexual subjectivities are figured through the embodied experiences and the narratives of the 'becoming' journeys of her participants' knowledge, values, sentiments and bodily practices in the localised context (Wang, 2019).

My research is informed by a post-structural feminist ontology that focuses on theorizing 'becoming' and rejects binary interpretations of the body, mind, and emotions, as well as subjectivity and objectivity. Such experience has been widely discussed in ethnography studies where researchers have been encouraged as the 'instrument' or as crucial informants whose identities, emotions, and feelings are intertwined in their studies (Newton, 1993). Furthermore, Donna Haraway (1988) contends that knowledge production is situational. She emphasizes that the concept of situated knowledge must evolve from its original focus on the gendering of human subjects to foster unique approaches to understanding the world and investigating the potentialities and boundaries of knowledge. The production of situated and ethnographic knowledge involves constant engagement with the constructions of 'the self' within social interaction and positioning (Cassell, Cunliffe and Grandy, 2018; Devereux, 1967).

Another point of transformation for my research positioning was the forced immobility of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas the original plan of this research depended on transnational mobility infrastructures, the sudden restrictions on movement forced me to think of alternative ethnographic

methods in conducting the research. Little did I know at the time that the sudden interruption would redirect my research assemblages. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted people's everyday rituals and familiar rhythms of life, it also provided an opportunity to interrogate the mediated practices of intimacy and the routine ways of making sense of the world.

As discussed in the previous chapter, I challenged the modernist and humanistic understanding of intimacy that confines it within a dichotomy of public and private spheres and restricts it to human, fleshed bodies. Feminist and queer scholarship have advanced discussions of intimacy towards a posthuman and new material frontier, breaking down the traditional boundaries that separate human subjects — often implicitly understood as white, male, and heterosexual — from 'other statuses of being and becoming' (Braidotti, 2019; see also Kam, 2014; Ching, 2010; Yau, 2010; Lo, 2005). Despite the scarcity of research on the emotive, sensory, and bodily experiences of intimacies among young Chinese people, this field is growing and has offered valuable perspectives to my research (Wang, 2019; Chen and Chen, 2023; He and Zhang, 2023).

Meanwhile, a burgeoning field of scholarship has moved beyond human-centric understandings of intimacy, with scholars emphasizing relational ontologies and exploring the entangled connections between human and non-human or more-than-human entities (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013; Renold and Ringrose, 2017; Dobson and Kanai, 2019; Kyrölä and Paasonen, 2016). This scholarship is especially relevant for interpreting contemporary understandings of intimacy amidst uncertainty and immobilities, where human relationships with other humans, objects, technologies, and spaces have been fundamentally rearranged. From non-human and more-than-human perspectives, the immobilities imposed by health uncertainties have redefined intimacy, compelling people to confront the permeability of bodily boundaries and to form new connections within socially distanced contexts. Rather than seeing participant narratives as static accounts of actions, the fieldwork itself becomes

a process of situational knowledge production and a dynamic web of forces involving participants, myself, the university context, relationship courses, the camera, mediated voices/images, doors, lighting, overhearing parents, and other elements that shape each research encounter. In this light, the COVID-19 pandemic is not only a contextual backdrop of my research, but an accelerative power that prompts this research into posthuman stances on the interpretation of intimacies which moves beyond conventional, narrowly defined views of human relations.

To conclude, this research, informed by posthuman feminist scholarship, shifts its initial assumptions about sexuality to a transversal framework that explores interconnections across social and cultural categories, space-time-mattering, and their role in co-constituting the research assemblage. By approaching intimacies as a relational bond and symbiotic continuum extending into the non-human world (Haraway, 2016), I was compelled by posthuman feminist perspectives despite the interruptions and challenges of conducting research from a distance. This paradigm shift moved the research towards posthuman, post-anthropocentric, and post-dualistic frameworks of thinking and ‘becoming.' Gender and sexual subjectivities are thus approached as ‘chaosmic’ assemblages — a co-constitutive ‘we’ of researcher and researched, blending human and non-human, zoe/geo/techno-bound elements (Braidotti, 2019).

3.3 Research Context

3.3.1 Situating ethnographic research fieldwork in Wuhan amid COVID-19

Working with youth groups in universities in Wuhan provided significantly different institutional contexts for this research. Firstly, I chose Wuhan as my primary fieldwork site because of my personal connection to the city. Being born

and raised in Wuhan, I had access to social contacts that facilitated reaching potential participants. Even in an urban city like Wuhan, the Chinese concept of *guanxi* — often interpreted as 'social capital' (Lin, 2007; Bian, 2019) or 'social networks' (Hjorth and Arnold, 2013, p.159) — remains influential. In practice, I contacted some potential lecturer participants through my parents' local affiliations and was introduced as the daughter of a friend who needed help with her PhD.

Secondly, Wuhan's unique status as one of China's largest and most populated cities, yet relatively under-researched regarding youth gender and sexuality, made it an ideal site for this study. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Wuhan has been central to industrial development and advancement in higher education. The central and provincial governments have invested heavily in colleges and universities, establishing nineteen higher education institutions. This development has positioned Wuhan as the city with China's second-largest number of colleges and universities, surpassed only by Beijing. In 2022, Wuhan had 1.6829 million college students, the highest number in China, making it one of the country's most youthful and vibrant cities. Despite this, much research on youth gender and sexuality has focused on first-tier metropolitan cities like Beijing and Shanghai (Kam, 2014; Zarafonetis, 2017; Engebretsen, 2014; Rofel, 2007; Wang, 2017). Wuhan, a city in the heart of China, had been largely 'absent' and 'invisible' in most Western mainstream media before the COVID-19 pandemic. My research, therefore, benefits from these theoretical and empirical understandings while aiming to capture a snapshot of Wuhan and its people during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Thirdly, researching the practices of intimacies of Chinese youth and their 'becoming' gender (sexual) subjects is simultaneously a journey of understanding and becoming my 'self'. As a young woman from Wuhan – the river-enclosed city where I once lived as a little girl, I am now a young woman in my late twenties who is living and studying abroad. The subjective and

affective dynamics I experience living in a multicultural city as a student are entangled with bundles of gender and sexuality meanings and practices. Continuing my studies abroad, I have formed an intricate network of social and familial expectations — such as establishing a career, getting married, buying property, and having children, typically in that order (Hong Fincher, 2014; Xie, 2021). At first glance, I have lived relatively 'free' from those constraints and pressures, maintaining the seemingly carefree and promising status of a single, childless, career-free 'student' well into my late twenties. This research serves as a mirror to my personal experiences and an introspective journey into my evolving identity — to a certain extent, it has prompted me to rethink, destabilize, and reconstruct the gendered and sexual norms and practices that were once dominant in my earlier adulthood.

Therefore, apart from the theoretical and empirical contributions, this research foregrounds the entanglements between personal lived experience and academic inquiries. During the pandemic, my family and friends still lived in Wuhan. The media’s portrayal of Wuhan as a ghost town filled with gloomy and unsettling images starkly contrasts with my own memories of the city. While scientific efforts focus on understanding the pandemic’s causes and effects, it is equally vital from a cultural perspective to seek narratives that restore humanity and richness to those affected. This includes shedding light on the mundane, everyday experiences of young people navigating a tumultuous period, thereby adding depth to the understanding of sexual cultures within educational settings. This approach goes beyond the traditional confines of policy, pedagogy, and practice. Instead, it moves toward a textured and multidimensional view of sexual cultures and gender politics that extends beyond the textually driven analyses which has commonly been used in previous literature on Chinese educational institutions (Cui, 2023; Jolly, 2016; Ji and Reiss, 2022; Liao, 2020).

In the cold winter of January 2020, as most Chinese families gathered to celebrate their once-a-year reunion for the Chinese New Year, unexpected

news began to spread: Dr. Li Wenliang[6], an ophthalmologist in Wuhan, had issued a warning to his fellow doctors in a private chat group about a new virus. Although initially suppressed, Li's warning soon gained attention. By early February, before students had returned to university after the winter break, mainland China announced the postponement of all educational activities and restrictions on inter-regional travel, especially in and out of Wuhan. People who had travelled from Wuhan or had contact with those from the city were subject to strict investigations and were required to report their movements to local residential committees (*juwenhui* '居委会'). The Ministry of Education called upon schools and universities to implement alternative delivery methods to continue instruction. In response, the majority of Chinese universities resumed the spring semester by transitioning to remote teaching for the indefinite future. In a pandemic of an airborne virus, 'ordinary' activities – watching movies, living in the university dormitories, having classes on campus – were at the same time environment of harms. Now everything was suspended at the time.

Now, the universities I observed, like the rest of Chinese universities and schools, hastily prepared their online programs with little to no training for the teaching body. Across the country, China has transitioned more than twenty-two million college students to online education, alongside an estimated 180 million schoolchildren. These tens of millions of users crowded onto Tencent Meeting — a platform originally designed for corporate use — which has now become the country's largest platform for educational purposes.

Focusing on Chinese youth in Wuhan under highly specific circumstances,

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[6]Li was summoned to the Public Security Bureau, where he was required to sign a letter accusing him of "making false comments that had severely disturbed the social order. He was one of the first eight individuals investigated for 'spreading rumours.' Tragically, Li later died from COVID-19, and his Weibo page quickly became known as 'China's Wailing Wall.' Hundreds of thousands of netizens have since shared replies to his final post, creating a mega-thread that continues to this day, serving as a digital space of mourning, reflection, and tribute (Lin, 2023; Pritzker and Hu, 2022; Green, 2020; BBC News, 2020).

my research does not seek to generalize this group as representative of all youth in China or the broader Chinese context. This caution addresses a common tendency in many previous cultural anthropological accounts to spatially imagine social scales in ways that flatten internal diversities (Farrer, 2002; Zarafonetis, 2017; Yan, 2003; Yang, 2016). Instead, I approach my study with an awareness that, when an unprecedented crisis becomes embedded in the fabric of the ordinary, it is crucial to consider how specific gendered and sexual subjectivities emerge from an entangled world.

This entanglement is particularly evident in the way pandemic governance and strict lockdown measures recalibrated the social order, producing a world where affective, socio-political, biological, and material forces converge to redefine notions of belonging and otherness (Braidotti, 2019b, p.18-19). Even after restrictions have lifted, the lingering effects of pandemic-induced isolation, digital surveillance, control, and social (dis)connection persist, manifesting in new forms of precarity and affective exhaustion (Anderson et al., 2023). These conditions continue to shape contemporary politics of affect and self-presentation, especially for youth navigating the pressures of digital visibility and neoliberal self-making (Wood, 2024; Ringrose et al., 2024). Through this lens, the pandemic is not merely an event of the past but an ongoing condition that continues to mediate the very fabric of intimate and affective relations.

Nonetheless, in the middle of February, a few weeks after the initial COVID-19 announcement, I found myself grappling with the challenges of fieldwork amid the most stringent travel restrictions and lockdown measures in Wuhan. After struggling to arrange tickets home and weighing the risks of the virus against the potential interruptions to my research, I reached out to the lead lecturers of the Love and Relationship courses. I was relieved to learn that they planned to continue their classes online via QQ group chats and Tencent meetings. Once my access to the digital fieldwork environment was confirmed, I re-established contact with the lecturers — a few weeks later, the courses resumed, along with my now-digital ethnographic research.

Though not the first Love and Relationship courses to have been offered online, such a shift was surely a novel experience for the lecturers and students involved in this research. Initially introduced as university elective courses, outside of the core curriculum, these classes cover a wide range of topics, from emotional intelligence and relationship management to communication skills and family planning. Their goal is to equip students with the 'soft skills' necessary for navigating complex interpersonal relationships, emphasizing the cultivation of harmonious connections that help students balance academic and romantic lives. Over the years, these courses have attracted considerable media and scholarly attention as well as criticism for their teaching approach (Cui, 2020; Deng, 2011; Chen and Man, 2009; Du, 2020; Xin Hua News, 2024). In comparison, my research aims to uncover not only the gendered discourse emerging from these courses but also the latent messages extend within and beyond campuses — touching on institutionalised heteronormativity, gender and sexuality ideologies, and the neoliberal management of intimacies (see O'Neill, 2015; Sun and Lei, 2017; Peng, 2021; Ward, 2020). As I further discuss in Chapter 4, I pay attention to the tension between maintaining normative and aestheticized intimacies and the lecturers' agency as they navigate – and sometimes rupture — restricted mediated spaces to address topics related to sexuality, ethics, and morality.

Leveraging my connections and situating this research in the unique circumstances of the pandemic, my research therefore provides a nuanced exploration of the complex interplay between socio-cultural structures, and discursive discourses in the construction of young people's gendered and sexual identities in Wuhan. Guided by an interpretivist and post-structuralist stance, I approach these young individuals as active agents as they navigating their discursive positions through bodily, affective and material entanglements in their practices of intimacies. In this process, their senses of self are projected onto and expressed through a wide range of cultural and social imperatives (McRobbie, 1992, p.730), bridging micro-/macro-level politics. Accordingly, I

developed a series of digital ethnographic methods to unpack the youth's mediated intimacies in relation to their intimate others (parents, friends, and romantic partners), non-human and more-than-human entities.

3.3.2 Researching sexualities among young people in Chinese universities

This study was situated within specific institutional contexts during the disruptions of COVID-19, engaging both lecturers and young people. Gaining and maintaining access to the research field required considerable time, effort, and careful negotiation of time-space constraints, making it essential to reflect on how varying institutional environments shaped participants' engagement with the research. My research primarily involved young Chinese adults aged between 18 and 22, who were either university students or recent graduates at the time of the study. They were recruited from three different Love and Relationship courses, taught by Li Ping, Guang Han, and Yu Bo at two different universities, University N and H, in Wuhan. Other than the common accessibility to the courses, there were no specific criteria for participation (see Appendix IV). All these students are considered as elite students in Chinese higher education systems, while they were from a variety of backgrounds. Given the sensitivity of the topics discussed – love and sexuality – anonymity and confidentiality were prioritized throughout the research process. Specifically, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identities, and any identifying details, such as universities or workplaces (for the lecturers), educational backgrounds and experiences, were omitted or generalised to ensure privacy (see Appendix I and the following table for participant involvement).

While Chinese universities offer limited opportunities for students to formally engage with sexuality education, the Love and Relationship courses introduced some discussions on practical aspects of intimate relationships, though still within a relatively flexible pedagogical approach. Initially introduced

as elective courses outside the core curriculum, these courses covered a broad spectrum of topics, including emotional intelligence, relationship management, communication skills, and family planning. The underlying goal of these courses was to help students cultivate ‘harmonious’ romantic relationships that balanced academic and personal life, while equipping them with interpersonal skills for navigating complex relationships.

Course content was primarily shaped by popular science literature. Across all three courses, theoretical frameworks such as Robert Sternberg’s (1988) triangular theory of love, Gary Chapman’s (2010) five love languages, and Bowlby-Ainsworth’s (1992) attachment theory were frequently referenced. In addition, the lecturers' use of personal materials supplemented the course content: for instance, Yu Bo incorporated his interest in romantic films as discussion prompts, while Li Ping frequently drew on personal stories about her marriage to illustrate models of ‘healthy’ relationship dynamics.

As shown in the following table, all three lecturers shared a common professional background as psychological counsellors in student wellbeing centres, specializing in relationship counselling, family dynamics, and gender issues. Despite their extensive experience in therapeutic settings, none of them had received formal academic training in sexuality or gender studies. This professional gap is significant, as it shapes how knowledge about love and relationships is taught, often relying heavily on dominant psychological models while leaving critical discussions on gender, sexuality, and power relations underexplored. Still, according to Guang Han (H University) and Li Ping (H university), the courses were designed to maintain a relatively relaxing atmosphere where the students could freely talk about their experiences in a close student group. This has allowed the students and lecturer to enjoy relative freedom regarding the course content design and format (more discussion in Chapter 4).

Table 3.2.2.1 Summary of the lecturer’s background

Pseudonym	*University*	*Description*[7]
Li Ping	H	Li Ping is a psychological counsellor at the Student Development and Wellbeing Centre of University A. She is a registered psychotherapist with a doctoral degree in psychology, specialising in relationships, marriage, and cognitive behavioural therapy. She has been teaching a course on relationships for almost ten years (with interruptions) and once organised a student matchmaking event.
Guang Han	H	Guang Han, with a background in psychology, is a counsellor and a member of a professional committee on sexology. His expertise includes group therapy, crisis intervention, student wellbeing, and family-related issues. He previously supervised a student group focused on LGBT wellbeing before it was discontinued.[8]
Yu Bo	N	With over two decades of experience, is a counsellor and lecturer at *University N*. His specializations include clinical psychology and counselling related to love and relationships.

Table 3.3.2.2 Participant summary and involvement

Pseudonym	*Age*	*Gender*	*Setting*	*Background*	*Phase One*	*Phase Two*	
Bai Xue	19	W	H	Inner	Yes	Yes	Have a

[7] The information has been altered slightly to protect anonymity of the participants

[8] The student group was removed from the university-authorised student society in 2019. Its online account was shut down on July 6th, 2021, along with the dozens of student groups from other Chinese universities. There is still no official account relating to this great purge. It may be linked to a more extensive Chinese nationalist backlash against perceived Western influences under the broader tensions between China and the West.

				Mongolia			younger brother
Chen Min	21	M	H	Guang Xi	Yes	Yes	
Chu Xiao	20	M	N	Cheng Du	Yes	Yes	
Chu Jian	20	M	H	Shang Hai	Yes	Yes	
Ji Lan	22	M	H		Yes	No	Ju Zi's Boyfriend
Ju Zi	22	W	H		Yes	Yes	Ji Lan's Girlfriend
Li Qiong	19	W	N		Yes	Yes	
Linda	21	W	H	Fu Jian	Yes	No	Via text
Mary	18	W	H	Hai Nan	Yes	No	
Shui Shui	19	W	N		Yes		
Tan Tan	21	M	H	Cheng Du, Si Chuan	Yes	No	
Vivian	20	W	H		Yes	No	
Wang Kai	19	M	H	Chang Sha, Hu Nan	Yes	No	
Wei Wei	20	M	N		Yes	Yes	
Wu Yin	22	W	H	Shao Xing, Zhe Jiang	Yes	Yes	
Xu Zhi	20	M	H	Shan Dong	Yes	Yes	
Xue Wei	22	W	H		Yes	Yes	Have a younger brother
Zhu Wen	22	M	H		Yes	Yes	

As a researcher working within the framework of queer theory, I intentionally did not ask participants to explicitly define their sexuality or gender. However, throughout the course of the interviews, many participants organically described their gender identities and sexual orientations in relation to their experiences. Among the participants, nine identified as heterosexual women, and nine identified as heterosexual men. The discussions largely centred on heteronormative relationship dynamics, with most participants referencing only heterosexual romantic and intimate relationships — both their own and those of their peers.

I am also aware of the absence of self-identified LGBTQ+ participants in my research. This raises important methodological and epistemological questions regarding the accessibility, visibility, and safety of queer-identifying

individuals in discussions of intimacy and sexuality in Chinese universities. Initially, the process of identifying prospective participants in this research was close to purposive sampling, but was also a context-specific and ongoing process as the research progresses in selected setting (O'Reilly, 2009). In line with the iterative-inductive essence of the most of ethnographic research, which I will further illustrate research activities, after gaining access, sampling is not a one-off event but something that is part of the entire process as the analysis develops. While I had hoped to include participants across a spectrum of gender and sexual identities, the institutional framing of the Love and Relationship courses, deeply embedded in heteronormative assumptions, constrained the extent to which such diversity could emerge organically. Still, such absence itself is reflective of implicit sociocultural and institutional structures within Chinese universities.

While it is possible that some participants may have had non-heteronormative experiences but did not disclose them during interviews, the fact that all named participants identified as heterosexual highlights the broader structural forces at play — such as the heteronormative framing of university-led love and relationship courses in China, as well as the social stigmas attached to non-heterosexual identities in higher educational institutions in the country (Cui, 2023; Wei, 2020). Therefore, while my study does not claim to offer a fully representative account of youth sexuality in Chinese universities, the heteronormative framing that emerged in institutional settings and participants' narratives are a critical site of analysis, illuminating how dominant structures shape, constrain, and reinforce particular modes of gendered and sexual subjectivities.

As I will further illustrate in the following sections and in analysis, in designing my study I remained attuned to these limitations and critically reflected on how sexuality was framed and discussed within the interviews (see Chapter 5). Rather than positioning this absence as a gap, I approach it as a meaningful silence that reveals how heteronormative expectations structure

both the social worlds of my participants and the ways in which intimacy is discursively regulated in China. This further reinforces the necessity of future research that actively engages with the intersection of digital culture, sexuality, and intimacy beyond dominant heteronormative paradigms.

3.4 Research activities:

3.4.1 Phase one: Gaining access to the 'virtual' field

After deciding to focus on young people's narratives on their practices of intimacy, I underwent two phases to gain access to the campus. In the first phase, I contacted three universities in Wuhan during August and September 2019 after obtaining my ethical approval. With help from my family and a former professor from my undergraduate university, I managed to reach out to six lecturers who either led the love and relationship courses or had previously taught these courses. Despite some lecturers hesitating due to concerns about unwanted exposure, four lecturers initially agreed to participate in the research, and three of them permitted on-site observation.

The semi-structured interviews with these lecturers during the pilot study covered their views on young people's sexuality education based on their expertise in reproductive health and psychological wellbeing, their approaches to discussing sexuality and relationship topics with students, and their thoughts on potential course improvements. Three of the lecturers were currently teaching or had taught Love and Relationship courses (see table 4.1 in Chapter 4 for their background information). The interview schedule was designed to follow three key themes: their perceptions of college students' sexual behaviours and relationships, how to support students in establishing relationships, and the objectives of the Love Psychology course. After the interviews, all the lecturers offered me the opportunity to observe their lectures in the subsequent semester, the Spring term of 2020.

The second phase of the research, as previously discussed, was impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan in late December 2019, which caused my original fieldwork plan to crumble. As Feldman et al. (2004) notes, the problem of obtaining access to fieldwork can come as a 'rude surprise' (p.vii) to researchers, and access issues can persist throughout the data collection period. Therefore, obtaining permission from the lecturers was the first crucial step. During the pandemic, instead of visiting the campus, I was introduced by the course lecturers to the online student chat group and joined their weekly online classes as a researcher. Thus, my primary challenge was maintaining a presence of extensive 'hanging out' in the field while meeting the requirement of informed consent despite being physically absent in the field (Wolf, 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

This is where the traditional ethnographic approach needs to change and adapt to the online research fields. In this specific context of distant research, digital ethnography opens new avenues for understanding the evolving practices of communication in relationships, as well as the enhancement of established rituals and intimacies (Pereira, 2012). Digital ethnography also recognizes the significant role that communicative media play in sustaining visual forms of intimate co-presence (Goggin and Hjorth, 2009; Ito and Okabe, 2005). As such, the traditional notion of 'hanging out' in ethnographic study can extend to various forms of togetherness that transcend physical locality. Leveraging the technological capabilities of social media, this adaptation contributes to the creation of an 'ethnographic place' that considers digital affordances (Pink, 2008).

After the initial frustration, I quickly adapted to the new ethnographic approach, incorporating observations, unstructured interviews, course materials, and multi-modal digital diary entries from participants (including text, screenshots, and audiotapes. Hine (2010) reminds us, when conducting virtual ethnography, instead of striving for a ‘holistic’ immersion typically associated with traditional ethnography, it is necessary to consider the (dis)continuities and

overlaps between digital and non-digital sociality. I intend to explore how these young people experience, construct and maintain social worlds amidst the absence of physical presence. I therefore approach potential participants through the weekly Love Psychology courses and their online community (QQ chat groups and forum discussions) which I gained initial access to through the lecturers. To establish a regular presence with the students, in lieu of the face-to-face greetings typical in traditional ethnography, I adapted by posting in the comment box in the online meeting rooms at the beginning of each lecture. I also followed up with a brief research introduction or friendly greetings in the student chat groups whenever possible. This digital approach helped maintain rapport and familiarity with the student group, akin to the interactions I would have initiated in a physical classroom setting. Eventually, eighteen participants joined the research, including nine young women and nine young men (see Appendix I for participant details). The online interviews, conducted in Mandarin Chinese, mostly lasted an hour, though some stretched to an hour and a half, while a few were unintentionally interrupted and shortened (see later section for discussion). Despite some challenges, eleven participants volunteered to write digital diaries, and after six weeks, twelve of the eighteen participants participated in a second round of interviews.

3.4.2 Phase two: 'In' the field: Researching youth sexualities in university during Covid-19

The interviews with students focused on their practices of intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with related topics. Aside from a few background questions about their hometowns, majors, and relationship status, the interviews were unstructured, allowing the conversation to flow naturally. I paid particular attention to four key themes: (1) their perspectives on sexuality, including attitudes toward sex and LGBTQ+ issues; (2) their views on gender

and relationships, which encompassed ideal relationships, ideal partners, and experiences with sexual harassment; (3) their perceptions of current relationships, gossip, and trending topics within their close social circles; and (4) their evaluations of the Love Psychology courses.

The unstructured and interactive interview format provided participants with greater control over the direction of the conversation (Corbin and Morse, 2003), allowing me to delve into issues and themes introduced by the participants themselves. This method allowed me the flexibility to explore topics more deeply and facilitated adjustments in tone and approach based on the participants' unique insights. This flexibility also required an adaptive approach, engaging with each participant individually rather than adhering to a rigid set of questions or assumptions, enabling a more responsive and participant-centred exploration. Meanwhile, this approach generates new ethical dilemmas and power dynamics shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, age, and class, all of which intra-actively co-constitute the research ‘data’ in complex ways (see later discussion in this chapter).

After the initial interviews, I invited the participants to subsequent interviews and provided guidelines for completing six weeks of digital diary entries. This approach allowed me to observe the participants more naturally and enabled them to reflect on their 'in the moment' thoughts and behaviours. To complement the interview and observation methods, I asked participants to write diaries between the two interviews, including visual images, screenshots, and voice recordings, to understand their communicative methods. I provided a general guideline on topics they could choose from, including their initial thoughts on the Love Psychology course, their everyday and mundane digital media usage practices, and their concerns about gender equality and relationships during the interview period.

Compared with traditional on-site ethnography, this phase of digital fieldwork involved fewer face-to-face interactions, making it more challenging to maintain my presence in the research field and close contact with my

participants. Ethnographers typically 'live in the field' and participate in the world they seek to understand, with fewer preconceived expectations (Silverman, 1993).

In the absence of physical on-site inter- and intra- actions, the diary method proved to be a less intrusive, self-reflective approach, which provided comprehensive, detailed data that might be missed in retrospective accounts, especially when researching invisible sensory and affective experiences. Scholars have long used diary methods in communication studies to research people's engagement with media and mediated communities (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). For example, diary study has enabled researchers to document the different genres of participants, reflecting deep commitment and engagement in particular sites, communities, or practices, often involving feedback, commenting, and other forms of interaction in networked spaces (Horst et al.,2010). Larissa Hjorth (2009) used digital diary methods to research the mobile phone's affective qualities of intimacy. The diary entries documented familiar practices of mobile media that could easily be overlooked in conventional interviews. In my practice, the digital diary method provided a constant portal into the participants' lives, complementing remote research methods and giving me a sense of their everyday media practices, compensating for my not 'living in the field'.

3.4.3 Phase three: 'out' and 'in' the field: Data analysis and conducting narratives out of narratives

After completing the last interview, the initial data collection phase ended. However, the transition 'out' and 'in' the field continued during the post-fieldwork phases, operating in more material, embodied, and sensory ways. Ethnographic research is usually iterative-inductive with stages evolving fluidly and sometimes overlapping (O'Reilly, 2009). At this stage, as the analyses develop and sampling accumulated overtime, it is important to making

constant comparisons so that as ethnographers, one can distinguish the special but typical from the atypical (Brewer, 2000)

While qualitative analysis is often associated with coding recurring themes, categories, or concepts—organising data into schemas of representation that render it comprehensible (MacLure, 2013)—my analytic practice resisted premature closure and fixed interpretation. Instead, I was guided by the principle that "attending to glowing, disconcerting data is most useful when it propels us to do something"(Ringrose and Renold, 2014, p.778). The richness of certain narratives was not a measure of their ‘authenticity’ but rather a reflection of their affective and discursive density—animated by the desires and frictions of gendered performances. These became generative sites through which I could trace the entanglements of bodies, technologies, and norms, shaping the depth and texture of interpretive possibility. Through this process, I followed the threads wherever they led, tracing their tangles and emergent patterns (Haraway, 2016). I paid close attention to ruptures—those affective flickers and discursive shifts—where participants’ experiences plugged into masculinising and feminising assemblages in unexpected ways, momentarily reconfiguring heteronormative and phallogocentric modes of intimacy. In this sense, I was not simply interpreting but composing—assembling narratives from narratives, weaving together voices, affects, silences, and intensities into the ongoing becoming of knowledge (MacLure et al., 2010; Wang, 2022).

In this research, following my body — my affective entanglements and relational proximity to the research — through pursuing hunches, tracing affective cues, and gathering stories across situated contexts, became a methodological orientation in itself. As Skeggs et al. (2008) reminds us, during the analysis phase, researchers are tasked with identifying the social resources, judgments, and tools employed in 'making society' as they navigate their own roles within it. Interviews, then, are not merely exchanges of information but performative acts that create 'real' world interactions. Researchers must critically analyse and reflect on their practices, objectives, affect, intentions, and

the impacts of their interactions in response to participants' contributions. As outlined the performative framework in Chapter Two, the interview encounters also serve as a kind of metaphorical theatre—a micro-societal space where roles of actor and audience are fluid and constantly negotiated between interviewer and interviewee (Goffman, 1959). The performativity of the self in these encounters aligns with broader theories of subject formation, making interviews critical analytical sites for understanding how young people construct gendered and sexual selves. Rejecting the notion of a ‘neutral observer,’ I positioned myself simultaneously as subject and object of observation throughout this affective analytical process. I brought my bodily responses, emotions, and personal stories into the research as legitimate sources of knowledge and part of the discursive-material research assemblages. This reflexive engagement allowed me to be attentive not only to the affects registered through and with my body, but also to the shifting ethico-onto-epistemological relations that shaped the research dynamics in contact with the material realities of intra-human political struggles. I will further elaborate on these elements in the later sections.

Facilitated by digital media, the interview provided a gateway for me to participate in participants' lives despite time and spatial differences. However, I found myself competing with the power and entanglement of social media, phones and other digital devices though they are not in the ‘sight’. For example, during a voice call with Xu Zhi (20, year 2, male), he discussed his breakup with his girlfriend due to a lack of communication when they both returned home from university. However, while I intended to explore this question further, I was bothered by the continuous clicking sounds of his mouse which suggested he was browsing other websites during the interview. The strong embodiment of anxiety and frustration I felt at that moment resurfaced when transcribing the interview when I recalled my struggles at the time – sitting with the urge to fill the discomfort, silence, and long pauses in the transcription.

Here the ubiquitous social media apps and access to digital devices, such

as a laptop/computer and a mouse (matter), evokes further power relationships in the interview process where the agency of matter influences affective research assemblages — an agential cut (Barad, 2007). With the click of a button, the participant momentarily switched off from the interview in this research encounter. Similar micro-ethical moments also appeared in Marston's (2019) research, where she felt alienated when young people shielded their screens during research activities which were meant to be collaborative. Media devices and voice calls in the interview session created a sense of distance between me and the participants, especially since they could quickly retreat to their screens. Albury and Byron (2016) note that phones and apps themselves can operate as "physical boundaries that promote a sense of privacy and interiority" (p. 7). These encounters illustrated many young people's strong attachment to their media devices and highlighted unvoiced disconnections during mediated communication.

Therefore, transcribing and analysing interviews become a tentative process of integrating diverse elements both during and after the interview. Before ethnographers engage in writing as a method of inquiry and discovery (Richardson, 2005), it is essential to accept and explore the complexities of organising stories into coherent narratives. This process is informed by re-listening, intuition, and note-taking as much as by systematic coding methods. As Arendell (1997) highlights, researchers bring considerable social, historical, and cultural baggage to the research encounter. This baggage — encompassing personal history and identity — inevitably influences the interactional process and the ultimate research outcome. Therefore, ethnographic data analysis must consider how social actors perform social life, primarily employing feminist reflexive scrutiny over the data and attuning to the different embodied feelings which I have experienced during and beyond data collection.

For me, writing has been a careful process of synthesizing the diverse and dynamic components of my research to account for the knowledge generated

(Steward and Berlant, 2019, pp.186-187). After spending many months engaging with fieldwork data, I realized that each interaction with the participants' contributions was influenced by a different socio-historical context. This variability inevitably shaped the integration of the data, with each encounter revealing distinct cognitive, emotional, affective, and physical dynamics. Compiling the data for this thesis over the course of a year allowed me to reflect on how the emotions experienced during live research encounters evolved over time, prompting new inquiries. Incorporating my fieldnotes and spending time with the ‘data’, I become aware that as a researcher, I have always been an agentic actor, already unevenly entangled in shaping what becomes 'known' in the research inquiry. In the following sections, turning towards the (partially) missing ‘backstage stories’ outside the scope of analysis, I bring to the surface the links of subtle space-time-mattering that manifest as intra-active relationality in my research assemblages, further embracing the messiness of social relations presented in interviews as performative events.

3.5 Reflexivity:

3.5.1 Navigating my ethico-onto-epistmological positions

Before conducting the research, I was initially convinced about my position as an insider in the research context as I assumed my insider status as a Wuhan native would facilitate access and rapport-building in my research. First and foremost, I was born and raised in Wuhan, where I went to school and acquired my first degree. In addition, I assumed the age gap would be relatively narrow when I conducted my research. The benefits of an insider position are that it could provide reflective observation while allowing me to socially interact and produce knowledge through an insider's perspective. With some participants, this 'insider' approach helped me develop a genuine and mutual rapport. For example, with one of my participants, Ju Zi wrote to me about a conflict between

her boyfriends and we talked over the phone for hours about her recent fight and thoughts. Having experienced a similar situation in a long-distance relationship and being from a similar familial background, we developed a sense of trust and friendship during and after the interviews.

However, the above assumptions were only the partial of the story of my ethnographic research in practice. Previous scholarship on ethnographical research methods illustrates that the clear benefit of having an inside experience is that researchers who are viewed as insiders, or at least knowledgeable of the 'local' customs, will face a more manageable task when recruiting key informants and building up rapport relationships with the interviewees, provided the researchers with situated interpretive proficiency (Gabb, 2010). I will further illuminate with examples about shifts and ethical navigations, which link between my own affective encounters and the feminist new materialist conceptualisation of 'ethico-onto-epistemology' (Barad, 2007). Resurfacing my intersectional positionality becomes a part of the methodological approach to understanding knowledge production 'ethics-onto-epistemology'. This challenges traditional separations between the researcher and the researched, the insider and outsider, the knower and the known in the process of knowing (see Ringrose and Renold, 2014; Wang, 2019).

At the beginning of the data collection, I perceived myself as open-minded and approached my participants without any judgment. During the data analysis stage, there were other moments when I was struggling to understand some of the ostensibly paradoxical statements of my participants about their sex-related concerns. My supervisors kept reminding me of my presumptions of sexual liberation and my position as a researcher and a young woman who lived overseas, more importantly, away from the moral surveillance into the broader family and public culture in China. It suddenly struck me that I had a 'voyeuristic' researcher position underneath my acclaimed 'open-mindedness' (Irvine, 2003) – I was judging my participants' decisions based on my own experience which undermines the meaning-making process of their gender and sexual

subjectivities.

Despite the ethnographic approach having long engaged in the scientific and rational meaning-making analysis of the other, it is still a field of writing filled with contested elements and moments of ruptures (Visweswaran, 1994). In this process, sometimes, I was still trying to pin down stories of others and thrown into moments of dilemma, discomfort, and silence. Research encounters often carry an implicit normativity that values 'good' data and overlooks instances of 'failure' to generate insights, thereby influencing the 'agential cut' of knowing (MacLure et al., 2010). In other words, it is tempting for ethnographic researchers to put themselves ahead of the 'other' about whom they write and selectively choose moments of narratives coherent with their presumed plot. This can limit the understanding of data as a dynamic interplay of both ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in producing knowledge. I therefore became aware of the long neglected emotions, affects and subjective positions during the research process, where discomfort and smothery silence often occurred and foregrounded my 'outsider' position and tenuousness of technologically afforded presence.

Most of the time, the perspectives of my participants, viewing me as an insider or outsider, are beyond my control or anticipation. It is, therefore, essential to understand how they define my positionality and how it has been consistently reworked and contested during the research encounters. In this research, when turning to sex-related subjects, I encountered many participants (young men in particular) who responded with stammering sentences and shyness, and there were uncomfortable silences from both myself and the participants. I am also aware that when my gendered subjectivities become salient during the research, the use of either the 'scientific' terminology or metaphorical slang bridges the voidness of the appropriate language when referring to sex, the embodiment of desire and intimacy in the Chinese context (Wang, 2022). In many circumstances, I asked my participants to define what sexual behaviour means to them and then use their chosen wordings or at least

contour the often-unspeakable embodied experience.

The following excerpt captured the very moment of the embodiment of different identities, gender, and social roles in ethnographic research. Chu Jian, a student in his third year of undergraduate study, participated in this study, expressing his curiosity about gender studies and eagerness to gain better self-knowledge. Chu Jian was expressive, sharp in critical reflection, and keen on life observation. Still, when I tried to ask about the participant's sexual experiences and attitudes, I was facing a multi-folded challenge that intersected with the age gap, gender, and appropriate use of language.

[after a discussion about the first time (the first sexual behaviour) and its meaning to him]

ZZ: What do you mean by sexual behaviour?

Chu Jian: To be more explicit, the first time that the 'absolute distance[9]' between a boyfriend and girlfriend is negative

ZZ: You mean penetrative sex

Chu Jian: Yes, penetrative sex, you know what I mean, [saying the word] it is so much easier now. I am not sure. You must know more than me. I am afraid I do not have any more relevant stories [about penetrative sexual behaviour] to give you (nin[10])

ZZ: You don't need to address me as nin. If you want to avoid talking (about this topic), we can skip this question. I am only a few years older than you, so please be more casual; you can call me Xue Jie.[11]

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[9] He used the mathematical concept of absolute distance to indicate the penetrative sex.

[10] An honorific and formal pronoun is often used in writing language or when speaking to someone of a higher position, for instance, older people or teachers. Usually, the pronoun is used to show the speaker courtesy and respect toward the other.

[11] A Chinese term typically refers to a female student who is older or more senior academically than another student. In English, the literal meaning of "学姐" is an

Firstly, the age difference creates an implicit authoritarian relationship between me as the researcher and the researched that I did not expect before. The fact that I am a few years older and pursuing a research degree indicates that I am in an authoritative role, which I can only vaguely sense the potential impact on my research at the time. Notably, following Confucius's ethics, respecting elder people is ingrained in language, customs, and behaviours in China, including allowing them to go first, respecting their opinions and advice, or using the pronoun '您' (*nin*) as Chu Jian did in the interview. This courteous gesture represents his subliminal rejection of the idea of considering me as his peer or an 'insider' of the research context. For me, at the time, it was an ostensibly distancing gesture which placing me in an authoritative position due to age difference and educational background.

It also relates to how I entered the field at the beginning of the research, where I was introduced by the lecturer and admitted to the chat groups. This method of entry to the research field impacted the my presence as a researcher. In this instance, I could sense the pressure that he felt, caused by my presence as a researcher of gender studies who seemingly knew well the concept of 'sexuality' or 'penetrative sexual behaviour'. As Danzin (2001) reminded us to conceive of an interview as a 'performance event' where both parties are morally engaged, the strategic wordings he chose and his stammering answers also illustrated that the power interplays out of an ambivalent status – between sincerity and awkwardness, between the offering and the withholding of meaning from the participant.

Secondly, my gendered subjective position, also attached to my role as a researcher, also interplayed with the power dynamics during the interview

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elder sister in academic study; it can be translated as "senior female student" or "older female classmate." Because I felt uncomfortable being called *nin*, *Xuejie* offered a closer relationship but still implied an equal level of relationship.

process.

[Fieldnote, March 28th, 2020]

After the interview, I found myself feeling dreadful and drained, lying in bed and replaying the conversation I'd just had with Zhu Wen. A recurring theme throughout our two interviews was his emphasis on 'rationality over emotions.' I began to wonder if this stance was a form of self-protection — perhaps a way to save face — or an affirmation of hegemonic masculinity, with its associations of rationality and toughness. Likely, it was both. My discomfort lingered, not only because of his objectification of women (Zhu Wen: "if I have had more money, women will come after me") but also due to the dynamics of the conversation. I found myself unable to perform the empathetic, active listening role I would usually embody as both a woman and an interviewer, leaving me unsettled about my positionality and responses in that exchange.

My discomfort highlighted in the fieldnote reveals the subtle gendered dynamics throughout our conversation. It demonstrates my gendered positioning within the heterosexual matrix and my role as a sexuality researcher. At the beginning of the interview, Zhu Wen employed overtly sexualised and objectifying language, such as '*tian*' (lickable) and '*chan*' (perving, greedy), to describe her girl crush, Wang Xi's desirability in front of me. His use of performatively invasive and sexual-explicitly language, exerted a masculine domination over me and subjugated me (see chapter 5).

Gender is materialized through spaces and matters. In this specific research encounter, I found myself within a gendered space interwoven with strong heteronormative threads, where language and materiality co-constitute discursive and affective entanglements as I engaged with the data (Ringrose and Renold, 2014). As a researcher and interviewer, I aimed to maintain a neutral, active listening stance, concealing my opinions and refraining from

responding directly to certain labels. Yet, my reluctance to adopt his language or reinforce the objectifying and hostile remarks about other women left me feeling uncomfortably vulnerable in the situation. This inter- and intra- action underscores how embodied gender is both represented and reinforced within its linguistic forms, stemming from discursive-material and cultural systems. The affective intensities that ‘stick’ to my body during this exchange are precisely the same forces that sustain 'everyday' sexism when normalized through gendered material-discursive relations on campus (Ahmed, 2017; see also Ringrose and Renold, 2014; Charteris and Gregory, 2024; Allen, 2015).

Moreover, while I was analysing this piece of interview afterwards, I noticed that I was triggered by his use of language. After the initial data transcriptions, I found myself consistantly intending to challenge his taken-for-granted listing of reasonings during the interview. For instance, he articulated that Wang Xi must have the same romantic feelings towards him because she agreed to join his team after he invited her to work together on a competition project in their laboratory. I asked him several times, “Why do you think this girl is interested in you?" "Have you asked her about her opinions on whether she is open to a date or a relationship?". On the one hand, my dialogue with Zhu Wen exemplified hegemonic masculinities in conversation and the firm grip of regulatory heterosexual norms. On the other hand, in this particular moment, I experienced an affective blockage—a discomfort of silence shaped by my researcher positioning—that inhibited me from articulating my views. This affective tension gradually turned into resentment towards his framing of romantic relationships, which privileged rationality over emotionality and commodified emotional experiences into calculable exchanges. Ahmed (2013) has insightfully argued that, affects align with objects through the iterative attachment to certain bodies. Drawing on Ahmed’s (2013) articulations on affective stickiness, the negative affects that adhered to my gendered positioning generated enduring feelings of vulnerability and dread in the aftermath of the interviews with him. This vignette shows how Zhu Wen and I

occupy certain subject positions during the interview and why such positionings and stances become imbued with affects. Meanwhile, as an interviewer, I asked palpably abrupt questions to challenge his assertiveness on his romantic speculation. My response to his answers reveals the subtle flows of power dynamics and affect flows in this specific instance.

As shown above, my situation is more complicated than the ‘normative’ qualitative power dynamics between the researcher and the participants. When it comes to theorising power dynamic in the research process, the researchers are often viewed as more potent than the researcher, since the researcher is usually the one who frames the topic and course of the interview (Kvale, 1996). However, Elizabeth Hoffman (2007) describes the multifaceted power shift between the interviewer and interviewees as an 'interview dance'. In her view (Hoffman, 2007), many steps/decisions within an interview can shift the power dynamics from the interview locations to the questions. In particular, the researcher's questions can only be valuable once she receives the interview responses.

My experiences show the interplay of the many identities – gender, age, sexual, class, educational background – that are available to us in research of sex/sexuality-related topics, and each of these identities turns different forms of interactions on or off. In my interview with Chu Jian, we conducted the interview using a voice call while he was in a local café where he felt more 'at home' than with his family. Without the additional non-verbal information, such as gestures, the discomfort of approaching such intimate topics still exists. Intending to approach the topic with politeness, he addressed the topic of sex and male body parts, using the euphemistic word, 'the absolute distance', to indicate the physical act of penetration to avoid embarrassment between us. However, once I started to use the more academic term 'penetrative sex' to replace his euphemistic and metaphoric expressions, he said, 'This is much easier'. I realised that I needed to be the one who would break the uncomfortable, smothery silence in the interview by initiating the conversation and replacing

metaphoric words with scientific terms.

I later acknowledged the values of ineffable and vulnerable feelings, which is also part of the process of becoming affected/affecting subjects. In my experience of approaching this topic of gender and sexuality, the lack of appropriate language was compounded by a Euro-American-centric academic voice I unquestioningly adopted and an intention to preserve my identity as a researcher. A similar dilemma was also faced by Yiran Wang (2022) in her research on the female experience and embodiment of intimacy in China, where she found that the lack of 'proper' language — fluent, precise, and rational expression, was partially rooted in the uneven knowledge production process. Wang's (2022) research suggested that the awareness of the need for new interpretations of the often unspeakable or misused word is precisely the opportunity for the researcher to reflect, thus expanding the existing knowledge. She, therefore, raises the awareness of the disjuncture between everyday practices and the dominant, Western-rooted theoretical frameworks through which sexuality and love have been conceptualized and circulated (ibid.). Other East Asian feminist scholars also reminded us that the concepts of gender and sexuality are modern, Western constructs have ambiguous meanings in the pan-Chinese region (Fletcher et al., 2013; Ho et al., 2018; Ho and Jackson, 2021).

Lastly, an often overlooked issue in feminist research is the assumption that patriarchal structures no longer operate within the research field, even when researchers appear to occupy positions of hierarchical authority. Yet, subtle forms of patriarchal authority continue to shape interactions, particularly in cross-gendered interview settings, where uneven power dynamics may remain latent but influential (Holmgren, 2013). Holmgren (2013) reminds the researchers that they must be aware of the practices of privilege and dominance in conversation; one of the ways men perform gender is by taking control of the conversation. A similar situation occurred in one of my interviews. As we were wrapping up the interview, the young man Zhu Wen interrogated

me about my research methodology and insisted that I needed to incorporate random sampling across multiple research sites to ensure more representative results — 'You have to investigate universities of different tiers, from top-tier universities to vocational colleges, as well as comparing universities with different sex-ratios [me: emmmm]'

Initially, this conversation resembles the fundamental ‘epistemic splitting’ (Pereira, 2012) between feminist scholarship (typically aligned with the humanities) and research grounded in a 'scientific' approach (see Chapters 2 and 4). In Zhu Wen’s account, it is apparent that the latter is regarded as more valuable in the production of 'knowledge'. His response thus seamlessly reproduces a an epistemological hierarchy of knowledge production, privileging 'scientific' over 'humanities-related' domains. On another level, his concerns–about whether I can produce thorough research–echo with the unexamined continuous subjugation of me, as a woman and a researcher. His request for further explanation of my research, rather than expressing genuine curiosity, might potentially be an attempt to reassert his authority after an hour-long interview about his experiences, which he may have found particularly uncomfortable and vulnerable. As much as it is uncomfortable to be an interview subject, exposing his emotions can be challenging, especially considering the appropriate performance of masculinity (Allen, 2007; Holland et al., 1998). Therefore, his attempt to 'guide' my research suggests that a confrontational response during the interview encounter put him into an authoritarian position.

At this very moment, my sense of self as a researcher whose aim is recording these men's opinions regardless of whether I agreed with them or not, compounded with affective research assemblages. The act of silencing myself to practice active listening in an interview setting thus produced a sense of powerlessness that accompanies with self-defence. This was amplified by my gendered subjectivity and situated me in a position I did not want to confirm, in which my research abilities and professional skills were questioned whereas the male identity almost equalises knowledge, intelligence, and certainly

assertiveness. Here, it may sound contradictory to the presumed positions of researcher-as-powerful and the researched-powerless. My discomfort suggests a moment of power imbalance caused by gendered subjectivity that I have to endure — because my need for these participants was more significant than their need for me.

This shifted position, or 'interview dance' (Hoffmann, 2007, p. 338), echoes Hollway and Jefferson's (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) insightful criticism of the traditional experimental psychological use of the term 'subject'. Instead of objectifying the people who take part in the research, they highlight the unconscious subjective dynamics in the interview, through which the positions of the interviewers and interviewees both contributed to the process of producing the narratives (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). I also shared a similar experience with other young female researchers who have navigated gendered and sexualised subjectivities while striving to reclaim power as researchers (Cao, 2018). Similar with her interview experience with Chinese men (Cao, 2018), my interactions with most young men in this study were generally smooth. Influenced by Confucian values and conservative attitudes towards sex, these young men were conscious of presenting a civilised, respectful, and socially appropriate masculine identity (Cao, 2018). Similarly, in my research, some man fiercely wanted to answer the questions 'correctly' to say the 'right' things about gender equality to fit into an idealised appropriate, cosmopolitan masculine identity. This is illuminated in how they construct their ideal, respectable masculinity by drawing heavily on local cultural meanings regarding how to treat a woman and what they consider as failed masculinity (see details in chapter 5).

As I reflect above, my subjectivity — encompassing values, emotions, practices, gendered embodiment, and affective responses — is deeply interwoven with my feminist ethico-onto-epistemological stance. This interconnected perspective has not only shaped my approach throughout the ethnographic fieldwork but also informed the subsequent data analysis,

ultimately evolving into the 'results' of this research. This process exemplifies the production of situated knowledge, where research findings emerge from my embodied and relational engagement with the field, in conjunction with the prevailing Eurocentric knowledge frameworks and language addressing sexuality (see discussion in Chapter 2)

3.5.2 Discursive-material research assemblages and challenging mediated presence

Even though I obtained ethical approval for conducting an digital ethnographic study, conducting close, intimacy-focused ethnography across digital and physical barriers presents unique challenges that previous ethnographic research has only partially addressed. For this kind of research, ethnographers often begin with a general focus, gradually identifying relevant participants and following emerging insights through iterative engagement (O'Reilly, 2009). This process traditionally depends on familiarity, time, and embodied presence in the field. For instance, Lukose (2009) in her ethnographic study of romance among youth in Kerala, India, began her fieldwork in a women's hostel and immersed herself in the everyday lives of college students, later found herself visiting less self-evident ethnographic sites – frequenting libraries, lingering in corridors, visiting local places like ice cream parlours and cinemas. The later fieldwork sites, still represented different kinds of publics — consuming, democratic, political, and intimate — that blurred the boundaries between public and private. Such physical embeddedness is difficult to replicate in digital contexts, where the absence of bodily co-presence and the ephemeral nature of online interactions can limit the depth and spontaneity of ethnographic insight.

Similarly, there has been an ongoing discussion in digital ethnographic research around eschewing a sharp distinction between the public and the private (Postill and Pink, 2012; Coleman, 2010; Pink, 2016; Wellman and

Hampton, 1999; Chambers, 2013; Dobson, 2014), However, the context of COVID-19 undoubtedly complicated the situation (Ringrose et al., 2024; Gabbiadini et al., 2020; Watson, Lupton and Michael, 2021; Costa, Esteve-Del-Valle and Hagedoorn, 2022; Zhao and Li, 2023). In this study, I conceptualise distance-based online interviews and observations as discursive-material research assemblages – a form of public intimacy situated at the intersection of conceptual and literal public space. These research assemblages are mediated and subject not only to political and social interventions, particularly those related to gendered discourses and performance of 'proper' citizenship, but also to material and spatial constraints. In particular, the research utilised online interviews and attempted to gather participants' narratives in a non-threatening and familiar environment. Given the sensitivity of the topics discussed — intimacy, relationships, and sexuality — I sent participants an outline of the interview questions in advance, invited them to choose a location where they felt most comfortable, and gave them the option of using either video or voice calls, depending on their preference. While these interviews took place in private, often domestic settings, they nonetheless revealed implicit tensions and risks of exposure—underscoring the complex interplay between privacy and the socio-political dimensions of intimacy in mediated environments.

Conducting distance-based interviews with young people who had returned to live with their parents due to COVID-19 restrictions and the indefinite closure of universities presented significant challenges. Many participants had limited physical privacy and felt constrained in discussing topics related to intimacy, sexuality, and relationships within shared domestic spaces. For instance, the locations they chose varied – only a small number of student participants conducted the interviews at home, when their parents were away for work, or when they had access to a quiet den or their own study space (with the door shut) at home. Technological advancements and software have facilitated new modes of communication with increasing potential to reach global and

geographically dispersed participants (Costa, Esteve-Del-Valle and Hagedoorn, 2022; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Zhao and Li, 2023). Yet still, an utterly uninterrupted situation was not at all achievable during the entire duration of these interviews. This dynamic not only shaped the depth and openness of some conversations but also highlighted how familial proximity and surveillance intersect with broader socio-cultural norms, further complicating the negotiation of private and public boundaries in digital ethnographic research. The following passage comes from three different transcribed audio recordings, all taken in the latter half of the interviews.

ZZ when did you start noticing that you resist this kind of intimacy?

Background noise interrupts.

Wu Yin: Oh, my mom's back. Let me put on my earphones.

ZZ: [Laughs] No worries, feel free to skip any questions if it's inconvenient to answer right now.

Wu Yin: Actually, let's leave this for next time. My mom's here now, so it's not very convenient – she understands Mandarin.

ZZ: Alright, let's pick it up another time.

Chen Xiao: Is it okay if I eat while we talk?

ZZ: Yeah, sure, go ahead. I just wanted to ask if there's anything you'd like to add?

Chen Xiao: Let me think…there might be something, but I'm not sure if it's relevant. Hang on, let me close the door. *[On screen, I saw him turn back and close the door with his foot, then he returned to his seat.]* So, this story is about one of my close friends…

ZZ: Do your parents understand you? Have they said anything supportive or encouraging (about this relationship)?

Zhu Wen: They do. [Pauses and goes silent for 5 seconds.] Well, actually,

my mom just came up to eavesdrop on what’s going on!

ZZ: [Laughs] Did she catch anything?

Zhu Wen: I don’t think so. Alright, what’s your question again?

The interactions described above illustrate that mediated interview encounters are not only susceptible to technological disruptions (Zhao and Li, 2023); while the excerpts of interview clips also expose the mediated ambivalence, particularly the tension arising from potential parental interruptions. In one instance, a participant's relative, possibly a sibling or sister-in-law, lingered in the background, holding a baby — effectively acting as a silent overseer throughout the interview. Although parents or other family members were not visible on screen or audible in the recordings, their mere presence influenced the dynamics of the interview, creating a notable 'data event.'

This scenario highlights the complex material-discursive entanglements of the research assemblage, such as the use of earphones and locked doors, which configure notions of 'good daughters/sons.' The knowledge produced in this research is shaped by the ‘ongoing ebb and flow of agency’ that circulates among both human and non-human entities within the space (Barad, 2003, p. 817). Under the feminist posthuman and new materialist framework, the mediated interview setups foster a rich exploration of the hyphenated relationships between researchers and participants (Zhao and Li, 2023; Fox and Alldred, 2015; Ingram, 2024), as well as the human and non-human interactions and the politics of gendered bodies (Charteris and Gregory, 2024). For example, Chateris and Gregory argue that researchers and the research surroundings are immersed in the intra-active agencies that are actively co-produced in the gendered politics of the schooling assemblages – 'entangled with the school's traditions, university ethics procedures, the sounds of the bagpiping [...] tablets, notepads, the uniforms and the age differences of the researchers from the participants' (2024, p.109). Attending to the intra-active

digital and non-digital entities in the research settings, brings to light the affective flows of denial, shame, and judgment in the context of heteronormative structuring forces. Actions such as reaching for earphones, closing doors, and the occasional 'freeze' in anticipation of parental investigation underscore that young people's gendered and sexual bodies remain under parental surveillance and social expectation. Sharing personal stories about gossip, dating, and sexuality remains fraught with risk during these interviews, highlighting the challenges and sensitivities of conducting research in this specific space-time-mattering context.

Especially during the COVID-19 disruptions, when young people had limited access to a ‘safe’ environment, I found myself facing a series of micro-ethical dilemmas. Apart from requesting appropriate adjustments, in most situations, participants could only share when they found spaces they perceived as 'safer' to disclose their stories—often preferring to be interviewed not at home, but in various improvised 'public' spaces such as a McDonald’s canteen, a public parking lot, or the backyard of their homes. Alternatively, some participants waited until their parents had left for work, allowing them to access a 'safe' space within their homes. The unpredictability of interview locations, therefore, added more unforeseeable challenges for conducting the interviews. In these contexts, the background noise made some parts of the interview inaudible. Yet, I struggled to interrupt and ask participants for explanation, fearing that it would disrupt their narrative flow. Nonetheless, although the reflexive examples presented here are fragmented, they together constitute the 'backstage story' of the material-discursive and affective research assemblages—where non-human and more-than-human actors, through the process of ‘agential cuts’, intervene in and co-produce the research 'data' (Barad, 2003).

3.6 Conclusion:

This chapter outlines the methodological approach of my research project and aims to provide distinctive, reflexive, and critical insights into the study of Chinese young people's gendered identities. Employing posthuman perspective as both a theoretical lens and empirical approach, I integrated the theories of affect, performativity, and discourse, addressing the chosen methods according to the demands of the research inquiry. This chapter explains the methodological considerations for researching mediated intimacies (Berlant, 2000; Attwood, Hakim and Winch, 2017). My research journey was significantly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which shaped my positionality and the spatial-temporal contexts of the study. Initially, I did not set out to explore digitally mediated intimacy among young people. However, the pandemic-related immobility and the co-produced conversational data with participants offered unique insights into how digital infrastructures cut through digital sexuality assemblages. This shift highlighted the importance of considering the affectivity of the multimedia environment and combining affect theories with gender ideologies to understand young people's practices of intimacy.

Conducting online ethnographic research presented challenges due to technological affordances and multi-modal mediated relationships. While communicative technologies provided new opportunities to conduct ethnography despite spatial and temporal constraints, they also raised new micro-ethical issues, particularly concerning publicness, consent, boundaries, distractions and disruption of affordance. Documenting my embodied feelings allowed me to attune to the complexity of digital research assemblages, underscoring the need to acknowledge the methodological limitations in approaching intimacy in the new media environment.

Although I intended to start my fieldwork with an open mind and a feminist researcher standpoint of 'ethics of care' (Gabb, 2010, p.465), I initially tried to fit participants' accounts into predefined categories at the beginning of the data analysis. Over time, I came to recognize that both my participants and I were

intra-active agencies, produced within the gendered politics of the digital sexuality assemblage. This assemblage was entangled with broader forces, including sexuality ethics and normativity—the expectations of being a 'good student' and a 'good son or daughter'—as well as the materiality of the research surroundings, the affordances of digital technologies, and the age differences between us.

Through the framework of feminist-inspired posthumanism, my analysis of the selected research materials points to how the participants negotiate the discursive discourses, affects, and relational connections, with the intra-active technology affordances and (in)capabilities of maintaining and sustaining intimacies in this particularly turbulent time. I therefore conceptualise my ethnographic approach and data collection process as discursive-material research assemblages, in which bodies, technologies, affects, and social discourses are entangled in the co-constitution of intimate practices under conditions of disruption and uncertainty. The young people’s intimacies – their 'stuckness' with families and under parental surveillance, the underlying health concerns due to COVID-19 pandemic, the mediated communications with their friendship groups – were subject to a restricted spatiality for socio-geographical (im)mobility. Despite the limitations of the data collection process, I was intrigued by my participants' dual performances: on the one hand, they performed as innocent children within the family household; on the other, they enjoyed moments of individual freedom, talking to me, a stranger, about their love, intimacy, fantasises, and inspirations.

Chapter 4: Teaching love and relationships in Chinese universities in times of uncertainty[12]

4.1 Introduction

The conflict between different social-cultural norms, as well as Chinese-specific feminist movements and the knowledge production of sexuality research and popular media culture, have all come together, shaping and constructing young people's discourses on love and relationships. This research focuses on a selective course that emerged in Chinese universities in 2007, called Love Psychology, where college students seek advice on dating and relationships from lecturers who usually work as student wellbeing counsellors. This chapter draws from data collected from online observations of three university-led love and relationship courses and interviews with course lecturers in Wuhan, China – the epicentre of COVID-19, during the most stringent national lockdown in early 2020.

The chapter reveals the emerging discourses underpinning the course's promotions of healthy relationships and sexual conduct in mediated heteronormative gender cultures beyond campuses. Findings reveal that the ambiguity of everyday sexism continues despite expanded sexuality-related vocabularies, ambivalent gender equality and diversity discourses that abject feminism, and neoliberal management of intimacies, and self-responsibilisation of women's sexuality. Delving into these gender discourses through their historical and socio-political roots, I argue that their teaching approaches are constructed in an inevitable gender binary and heavily heteronormative spaces. Unpacking these discourses, I illustrate that despite the courses showing some openness towards gender equality and LGBT issues, they reaffirmed the Party-

state regulatory power on youth sexuality and gendered bodies, reinforcing a heteronormative monogamous relationship ideal. Moreover, teaching remotely on digital platforms during the uncertain time of the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic presented the lecturers with unexpected challenges when addressing traditionally sensitive topics. I show how the lecturers are navigating – sometimes rupturing – normative gendered discourses yet still constrained under multi-folded heteronormative gender cultures. My conclusion reveals how external agencies, gender and sexuality politics, digital media, and young people are co-constitutive gender cultures on campuses and beyond, from the digital to the social.

Locating love and relationship courses in Chinese universities

Given the growing demands from university students to access relationship advice (China Youth Daily, 2020; Du, 2020), the course on love and relationship and their similar workshops have been adopted into higher education systems and have grown during the last decade. The earliest reported Love Psychology course was introduced by Renmin University of China in Beijing in 2002 by Deng Hu, a student wellbeing and consultant lecturer (Qin, 2011). Later, in 2011, the Beijing Education Committee began the first official trials on promoting healthy relationships as a part of the compulsory course called University Students Wellbeing Education (Deng, 2011). The syllabus of the course intends to start by dealing with the most common relationship issues among college students, integrated with social psychological theories on love and relationships, aiming to 'teach college students to love themselves, express, accept, reject, maintain love and face break-up' (Deng, 2011, para. 4). The course also includes topics about homosexuality, which was regarded as a taboo topic in the Chinese context. Among all the modules for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in Chinese higher education institutions, Love Psychology, one of the

most popular courses, has 27,000 auditing students online: ‘Love Psychology is a manual to help you find Mr Right', the course description states on the MOOCs website (Zhang, 2018, para.2). Over the years, these courses have attracted considerable media and scholarly attention as well as criticism for their teaching approach (Cui, 2020; Deng, 2011; Chen and Man, 2009; Du, 2020; Hua, 2024).

Compared with their Western peers, Chinese young people are facing a different stigma in a context where strict moralised public discourse on youth sexuality coexists with the sexual liberalism and pluralism prevalent in many Western contexts. Some researchers in the U.S. context support of comprehensive sexuality education positions young people as agentic sexual subjects with specific rights and responsibilities, promotes sexual diversity, interrogates heteronormativity and focuses on unplanned pregnancy and exploring young people's understandings of pleasure and desire (Allen and Carmody, 2012; Tolman, 2012; Lamb *et al.*, 2013). Yet a body of feminist research questions that the contemporary sexual liberalism in many Western contexts though raising awareness towards women’s sexual agency and mutuality, are still unevenly distributed and reproducing traditional gendered roles and expectations (Powell, 2010; Tolman, 2012). Under the conditions of pervasive sexualisation and self-sexualisation, the representations of women’s desire are entangled with the latest production to induce male desire.

Meanwhile, discourses on sexual diversity and gender equality reflect social, historical and contextual variability (Jeffreys, 2005; Sigley and Jeffreys, 1999; Zheng, 2005), and have been consistently negotiated, (re)interpreted, and reproduced in the Chinese educational institutions (Chen and Wu, 2013). Some recent sexuality researchers and educators have provided informative and structured sexuality education for young people, drawing upon existing resources from Western contexts, including positive frameworks of sexuality education for adolescents (Jolly, 2016), comprehensive sexuality education in Chinese higher education (Huang *et al.,* 2009), and empowerment sexuality

education (Fang, 2012). The fight for institutional legitimacy and recognition for comprehensive sexuality education and destigmatising women's sexuality in Chinese educational systems continues (Zhao *et al.,* 2020; Wei, 2020; Li, King and Winter, 2009; Zhu, Liu and Elley, 2022).

Beyond feminist education research on teaching sexuality-related content in schooling or broader educational settings, Love and Relationships courses, or Love Psychology courses, underscore the premise of a 'good life' (Berlant, 2011) entangled with gender and sexuality politics, patriarchal power, neoliberalism and omnipresent media technologies across culture and contexts. The prevailing Confucian and patriarchal gendered ideas at play amongst young people's perceived ideas on intimate relationships cause as much conflicting gendered ideologies as confusion and struggles (Liu, 2019a; Rofel, 2007; Cao, 2018). Meanwhile, the sociological and feminist research on media culture have explored how the embodiment and ideals of (hetero)normative intimacy are socially imposed, afforded with media technologies, stemming from neoliberal feminist discourses (McRobbie, 2013; Peng, 2021; Sun and Lei, 2017; Chen and Chen, 2023) as well as ambiguous 'everyday sexism' and 'rape culture' embedded in masculine 'improvement' camps (O'Neill, 2015; Ward, 2020; Liu, 2023).

In this chapter, this chapter brought attention on a wide-ranging and contested set of transformation of gender and sexuality discourses that emerged in the love and relationship courses against the backdrops of neoliberal Chinese contexts during the pandemic. Here I invited a more careful and discursive assessment of what is at stake in the emerging gender discourses in youth practices of romantic relationships – particular in ways that the nation/states, neoliberalist ethos, connectivity, heteronormativity, and premise of a 'good' life, come into forces in shaping a mediated aesthetics of intimate relationship. I pay attention to the tension between maintaining aestheticized (hetero)normative intimacies and the lecturers' agencies as they navigate–and sometimes ruptures—restricted spaces to address topics related

to sexuality, ethics, and morality among Chinese youth. The findings of this chapter therefore uncovers the latent messages that extend within and beyond campuses.

4.2 'I don't want to be famous': potentiality and performative vigilance in mediated classroom

China was the first country to experience the spread of COVID-19 and, consequently, the first to implement remote learning across its educational institutions. As universities and schools transitioned to online platforms, tens of millions of users began logging onto Tencent Meeting — a Zoom-style video conferencing tool that quickly became the nation's dominant platform for educational purposes. The global pandemic and subsequent university shutdowns introduced unprecedented challenges for both students and lecturers involved in this research. For some students, the shift to digital classrooms created rare opportunities to participate in courses without formal registration. Love Psychology – a series of courses/workshops on love and relationships were already popular prior to the pandemic. According to the lecturers I interviewed, these courses typically restricted by physical classroom capacity, with class sizes ranging from 60 to 90 students (Guang Han, H University, Yu Bo, N University). The shift to online delivery, however, significantly expanded access. On average, class sizes increased to nearly 90 students, and in the case of Guang Han's lectures in University H, attendance peaked at approximately 137 students within the online group. Despite only half of the students being formally enrolled in the course, the virtual format of the mediated classroom unintentionally enabled broader participation, reflecting shifting dynamics of course reciprocity and access in digital learning environments.

However, in this mediated setting, the class saw a significant increase in student numbers, a shift further complicated the affordances—and limitations—

of digital connectivity. This surge in attendance, coupled with frequent technical difficulties, introduced new layers of uncertainty into the online classroom. On a surface level, the shift to conferencing software placed additional administrative burdens on the lecturers: they had to ensure the course content was accessible online, manually admit each registered student into the QQ chat group, generate and distribute Tencent Meeting links weekly, and manage the technical disruptions that regularly occurred during sessions.

On a deeper level, this transition altered the dynamics of the mediated classroom in ways that underscored the precarity of digital pedagogy under conditions of censorship. Within an already charged environment shaped by heightened digital surveillance and waves of socially-mediated activism in stigmatized contexts of Covid-19 pandemic, the boundaries between openness and risk became increasingly blurred.

Fieldnote—March 16th

Lecturer Yu Bo briefly outlines the topics for the course, emphasising that students should not record or share class content online, referencing a few lecturers who gained unwanted fame on Douyin [TikTok]. "This course covers sensitive topics," he explains, "so please let me know if you are uncomfortable, especially female students." He mentions some high-profile sexual harassment cases on campus and stresses his support for gender equality, particularly the destigmatisation of menstruation[13]. But, somewhat unexpectedly, he adds, "sometimes the feminist movement goes too far."

In the last 40 minutes, Lecturer Yu Bo shares two videos. The first video,

[13] In 2020, in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, an urgent appeal for the donation of menstrual products for female medics was ignored by medical institutions. Soon, in response, an unprecedented wave of menstrual activism calling for effective actions and attention to the invisibility and stigma of menstruation, #refuseperiodshame, was started (Zhang and Zhang, 2020)

despite connection issues, addresses sexual harassment on public transportation, featuring a group labelled as "lǎo dǐng" or "dǐng zú" [ding, meaning an imitation of penetrative sexual act, lǎo dǐng being a group of men known for their sexual harassment on public transport and who also have their online community[14]]. The narrator encourages women to confront perpetrators, while the lecturer advises students to report incidents if they encounter them. The second video, shown in response to students' interest in LGBTQ issues, focuses on the LGBTQ community in China. It discusses Yaoi cultures[15], the potential legalisation of same-sex marriage, and transgender topics in China.

The discursive-material assemblage of the technological affordances, comment functions and online chat groups, cameras, and conference software settings produced a mediated classroom and gendered spaces with a strong heteronormative thread. The fieldnote above reveals an open yet still limited space to talk about gender equality and sexuality diversity, which resonates with much research on Chinese higher education gendered culture (Cui, 2023; Huang, 2009; Liao, 2020). As Huang et al. (2009) observed, sexuality-related courses are in a grey area in Chinese universities where the authorities 'tolerate with an attitude of 'opening an eye and closing an eye' (p.293). On the one hand, as the excerpt shows, in this 'grey area' — as an elective class outside the core curriculum — the course lecturer touched upon many topics relating to the

[14] In the context of public transport and sexual harassment in China, "*dǐng*" refers to a term implying a poking or imitation of a penetrative sexual act, often as part of unwanted advances. *lǎo dǐng* describes a group of men notorious for committing sexual harassment on public transportation. This group not only engages in these behaviours but has also fostered an online community where they share stories and reinforce harmful actions.

[15] Yaoi, also known as the Japanese work for Boys' Love (BL) or *dān*měi in Chinese, originated in Japanese manga and is now a popular genre that refers to the media productions that depict homosexual relationships between men (Zhang, 2023; Lin, 2023).

recent heated debate on sexual harassment, menstrual stigma, and LGBTQ issues in China. The lecturer could design his course content and be agile in response to the student's requests (sharing videos on LGBTQ issues) during the class, in which they exercise certain agency and actively challenge the heteronormativity on campus (Cui, 2023). Cui Le (2023), in his research on the experience of Chinese queer academics, finds that heteronormative forces operate in interpersonal interactions and institutional practices and might result in self-censorship to conform to the expectations of the university's leadership and students. The entrenched censorship and university ethics of contact continue to operate through a range of self-surveillance and vigilance (his sensive remarks for the women's participants). Moreover, in contrast to their research on Chinese higher educational institutions in general (Cui, 2023; Huang et al., 2009), the mediated classroom space, along with its specific spatial-time-smatterings has further complicated the pressures that these lecturers experienced and the permeability of heteronormativity.

"I don't want to get famous" – the remarks appeared both in Yu Bo's (fieldnote, N University), and Guang Han's (fieldnote, H University) class. After he listed a series of examples of non-monogamous and non-heterosexual relationships, Guang Han also said half-jokingly and half-sarcastically, "Please don't take screenshots of this course; I don't want to be famous". Fundamentally, under these articulations and warnings lie multiple intermediate grey areas in the overarching pro-gender-equality stance as well as strategic self-censorship amidst a feminist backlash and stringent censorship intensified during COVID-19 (Lin, 2023; Zhang, 2023). In a hypothetical worst-case scenario, if a lecture were recorded and circulated on social media platforms, lecturers who discussed or expressed support for LGBTQ+ rights could risk being publicly labelled as feminists and subjected to stringent scrutiny (Cui, 2023; Huang et al., 2009).

In this scenario, given the unique political sensitivities surrounding feminist and queer politics in China, against backlash of gender antagonism, the

lecturers' cautious language and heightened vigilance reflect the embodiment of a broader heteronormative campus culture shaped by state censorship. Lecturers must carefully navigate the potential for student backlash and the risk of public exposure via social media. Many anticipate that some students may take screenshots or record segments of the lectures and circulate them on external platforms as acts of dissent. This dynamic reinforces what Irvine (2005, p.236) terms the 'speaker's burden,' wherein stigma becomes attached to those who openly engage with LGBTQ+ issues or topics related to sexuality. As a result, all of the lecturers involved in this study experience a heightened sense of vulnerability when addressing queer content in digital environments, knowing they may be targeted for their speech ('becoming famous') and face potential disciplinary pressures from university administrations — even in the absence of clearly defined institutional oversight in these mediated classrooms.

The omnipresent media technologies, in this case, affordances of connectivity in the course embodied a discursive sexuality assemblage that constituted social-cultural norms, gender and sexuality politics, and university ethics of conduct. The classroom itself embodied multiple agentic objects — conference meeting software, screen-sharing, microphones, cameras, counting numbers of students attending, smartphone screen recording features – all embody 'thing power' as an 'agential cut' that shaped attached to broader relational flows which connected students within digital sexuality assemblages lecturers, mediated classroom to the broader social space (Barad, 2007; see also Allen, 2015; Renold and Ringrose, 2019; Marston, 2020). It is important to note that the mediated classroom, afforded by the meeting software and multiple agentic objects, is neither private nor temporal as there are ways to save and spread images and recordings on the user's devices and potentially distribute them to others. The omnipresent mobile technologies vary in in their persistency, visibility and spreadability affordances (boyd, 2014), together plugged the mediated classroom into ambivalent policing of sexuality and censorship, protections and moral panics on youth sexualities (especially

women and LGBTQ groups). Following this, the next excerpt of my reflexive fieldnotes gives us a glimpse into materialised gendered spaces.

Fieldnote May 16th

Despite the session lasting three hours, with a 15-minute break in between, student engagement is higher than I expected. The distance learning format and anonymity in QQ and Tencent Meeting encourage open participation, sparking debates and discussions in the chatbox and during post-class discussions. Students comment on topics like Pornhub, dating, masturbation, and kāichē [driving cars, referring in the conversation about dirty jokes, and the person who are sexually experienced as lǎo sījī, namely experienced drivers]." At one point, the lecturer remarks, "Wow, you all seem to know more than I do." One student mentions that "all my gēmen'er (bros) from my dorm are here," giving me the impression that there may be more male than female participants.

In the above excerpt, the recurring gendered vocabulary in the chat group — such as Pornhub, dating, masturbation, *kaiche* or car-driving— contribute to a sense of common identity. The overt use of sexual and eroticised languages function as part of common linguistic practices that serve as a boundary object to distinguish an implied male camaraderie ('all my *bros* are here') and intra-act with the presence of my identity as a female researcher. The boundary object is further reaffirmed by the Yu Bo's (N University) acclamation ("wow, you guys knows more than I do"). The implied male camaraderie is brought together by both the rhetoric of eroticised language and common interests in 'seductive' skills of men in heterosexual relationships.

Language and materiality co-constitute affective spaces imbued with heteronormative sensibilities, where aggressive male sexuality is eroticised and positioned as a 'healthy,' 'normal,' and 'desired' component of sexual relations. (Charteris and Gregory, 2024; Mishna et al., 2021). The concept of 'rape culture' coined by US feminists in the 1970s, encapsulates a set of beliefs that

normalise men's violence against women, frame women's sexuality as passive, and justify men's entitlement to sexual intercourse as a natural instinct (Phipps *et al.*, 2018). This culture manifests as popular misogyny, everyday sexism, and lad culture, often trivialised through sayings like 'boys will be boys' (Keller, Mendes and Ringrose, 2018; Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016; Phipps and Young, 2015). While topics such as Pornhub and masturbation may not directly attack women in this context, they nonetheless materialise gendered spaces where language and texts are explicitly sexualised, marginalising women's presence (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). This material-affective space extends to me, as a woman and researcher, navigating a mediated gendered sphere where the exclusivity of sexually explicit discourses evokes a sense of being pushed away, muted, and alienated. Acknowledging the affectivity and discursive materiality embedded in the Love Psychology courses and the mediated gendered space would enable us to link the course to wider sociocultural trends and the rooted historical and feministic discourses that these courses inhibit.

Throughout the course period, the mediated classroom and chat group function as an around-the-clock space for students to share personal experiences and concerns related to intimacy and relationships. The discussed topics cover questions about asking someone out, to frustrations over a boyfriend's reluctance to use couple profile photos, from discussions on early love, marriage, extra-marital affairs, and long-distance relationships, to recommendations for out-of-class movies. Observing relationship counselling programmes in China since the 1990s, Sun and Lei (2017) highlight the role of media platforms in engaging specific groups and cultivating intimate publics based on shared interests and desires. Similarly, these online student communities provide a space for young people to discuss ideas and techniques, seek advice, and offer feedback to one another. These interactions foster a sense of belonging and connect students through shared anxieties, stories and sentiments, building an affective network of intimacy-related dialogue

(Papacharissi, 2009, 2016; Ye and Huang, 2022; Chambers, 2017).

The Love and Relationship courses, therefore, turn young people's frustrations and desires into a 'sense of collective sociality rooted in relation of what is personal' (Berlant, 2008, p.10). These mediated classroom spaces emerge as sites for co-creating affective aesthetics—shaped not only by the emotional investments of students and lecturers, but also by the pervasive forces of state censorship, media discourse, and institutional governance. The gendered dynamics of the lecturers and the predominantly heterosexual student participants – further complicate the affective terrain, where moments of vulnerability and connection are entangled with vigilance and fear. Within such contexts, disciplinary power operates not through overt coercion but through ambient surveillance, normative expectations, and the ever-present threat of exposure. Intimacy, in this setting, becomes both a pedagogical resource and a precarious affective formation—one that must be carefully navigated amid the intersecting pressures of control and care. Such aesthetics are entangled in and often subordinated to, the logics of heteronormativity and phallogocentric power that continue to shape youth digital gender cultures.

4.3 ‘All men are after youthful women’: unsettling gender essentialism

> *From an evolutionary perspective, women normally choose those (young men) who have enough financial resources for economic status and professional achievement;*
>
> *While young men choose those (young women) who can produce their offspring, their criteria depend on the women’s physical figures, appearance and age*
>
> (*Li Ping, H University, slides from the first class – “What is Love”)*

A frequent reference used across different love and relationships courses is a combination of evolutionary psychology and sexological accounts to address gender differences. In the excerpt from Li Ping's slides, she draws on the psychological 'nature' of men's active sexual drive to explain intimacy issues, and abstract concepts such as jealousy, fidelity, and commitment. Similarly, in Yu Bo's class, correlating sexual morals with biological predispositions, he told his students, "Men are innately afraid of physical infidelity, as it may discontinue their patrilineal bloodline". At first glance, it is easy to spot these retrospective accounts of gender essentialism that overlook the cultural and societal aspects of sexual conducts while homogenise sexualised bodies into binary divisions afforded by genital and biological sexes (Moore, 1994).

Yet, it is equally important to recognise the linguistic ambiguity and semantic struggels surrounding the concepts of gender and sex in contemporary Chinese. The term *xìng* (性) is frequently used to denote both 'sexuality' and 'sex,' reflecting a broader conceptual overlap. Such overlap has sparked debate within Chinese academic circles around the conceptualisation of sexuality (Ruan, 2013; Pan and Huang, 2011; Wong, 2016). In everyday Chinese usage, the distinction between biological sex and gender remains minimal and ambivalent, with both terms often expressed through *xìng bié* (性别). This compound word translates literally as "sex/gender" (*xìng*) and "difference" (*bié*), underscoring a linguistic tendency to conflate these concepts (Tsang and Ho, 2007).

The linguistic confusion between the concepts of gender and sex, however, only partly explains the (re)essentialising discourses of gender difference observed in these Love and Relationship courses. Given the historical roots of feminist concepts travelling into China (Yu, 2015; Han, 2018), the usage of evolutionary psychology in explaining sex/gender differences and challenges to the imperialist patriarchal systems can be traced back to the earliest references to Darwinism in the early 1870s during the Chinese semi-colonial and semi-feudal periods. These Darwinian principles, namely, the 'struggle for existence'

and 'natural selection', reached their climax in the mid-1890s. China's enlightenment intellectuals appropriated them to facilitate China's social evolution towards modern nations (Rocha and College, 2012). In addition, eugenicist protagonists legitimated certain feminist arguments, such as freedom of marriage and love, with progressive sociologist beliefs (sexual selection) during Chinese Englightment period in the early twentieth century (Hershatter, 2007; Sun and Chen, 2015). Later in the Republican period, new hegemonic discourses relating to reproduction, sexual health, and family continued to add to the eugenics beliefs about the future of the race and the nation (Barlow, 2004; Dikötter, 1998). Pioneer feminist thinkers — mostly elite male scholars coming from an elite background — valued women's substantial responsibility not only for the perpetuation of the family but also for the very survival of China. The evolutionary biological framework on the earlier Chinese feminist thinking is driven by nationalist anxiety, positioning the sexualised bodies of both women and men as bearers of patriostic duty.

The widespread use of social Darwinism and adoption of seemingly ‘scientific’ sexuality discourses not only solidify the age-old centrality of male bodies in heteronormative ideology but also legitimised gendered scripts through pseudo-scientific reasoning. These discourses posited that women inherently value men for their resources and paternal qualities, while men are biologically predisposed to favour women’s fertility and youth. This naturalised dichotomy reinforces the ‘beauty myth’—the idea that women's social worth is tied to physical appearance, a trait treated as a form of currency and power within patriarchal gender relations (Ma, 2022; Mu and Xie, 2014). Conversely, men are celebrated for entrepreneurial qualities and financial provision, reinforcing a masculinised ideal of protection and productivity (Wong, 2020; Liu, 2019). These evolutionary narratives, deeply entwined with patriarchal ideologies, have also contributed to the gendered pressure on women to marry—epitomised by the state-promoted "leftover women" discourse, which many feminist researchers have extensively criticised (Fincher, 2016; Ji, 2015;

Lahad, 2024).

The discourses of naturalisation of gender differences, namely valuing women's youth and physiques and men's wealth, are also replicated through various jokes, banter, interactions, and shared beliefs. For example, a joke that "all men are after 18-year-old girls" circulated in all lectures and are frequently addressed by my student participants as well (see Chapter 5). In the first class, when Guang Han introduced the definitions of love and how the definition evolved across different eras, he then commented and half-jokingly said, "There is a saying that men are very 'faithful'[*zhuan yi*, loyal 专一]: no matter what age they are, 18, 28 or 68, they always like 20-something women[16].''He added, "Of course, this [phenomena] is to maximise the chance of reproduction" (April 14th, fieldnote). Speaking in a seemingly understanding and sympathetic tone, Guang Han further explained, "In a male-dominant world, we [men] have to understand some of the gold-digging behaviours of women because women are in a less advantageous status quo. If you [young men] cannot satisfy her need, she is the kind of woman you cannot afford'' (Fieldnote, April 14th, 2020).

At the first glance, these perceived "evolutionary" gender discourses present women's beauty and men's wealth as the ideal normative match, reducing feminine qualities to indicators of fertility and youthfulness. On the other hand, the language used by lecturers — phrases like "satisfying her need" — position men as active, earnest participants, subtly framing women as "gold-diggers" in a way that enforces a misogynistic divide between "good" femininity (Evans, 1997), and "bad" femininity marked by perceived greed. Women's marital attributes are framed as transient, precarious qualities, while men's

[16] Both male lecturers, Guang Han and Yu Bo, referenced the same joke, which also surfaced in Zhu Wen's (21, year 3, M) account of his romantic pursuits (see Chapter 5). The humour hinges on a play on the word *faithful* (专一), which ordinarily connotes loyalty in a relationship. Here, however, it is used ironically to underscore the notion that men remain 'faithful' in their preference for younger women, regardless of their own age.

traits (wealth, social status, wisdom) are seen as accumulating and intensifying over time. This framing contributes to the social pressure on women to marry within a ‘prime’ age (Fincher, 2016; Xie, 2020).

Within this discursive structure, the notion that men should "afford a woman" is positioned as a marker of respectable masculinity in a competitive neoliberal environment. The notion further internalises a neoliberal, individualistic view of relationships in which women are valued as "commodities," and their worth determined by youth and appearance, while men's respectability rests on their economic achievement and ability to ‘earn’ their place amongst masculine competition (Liu, 2019c; Yan, 2020; Holland, et al.1998). Furthermore, as college men have yet to attain significant economic or social capital to align fully with traditional masculine ideals, they navigate these gaps through alternate strategies. Liu and Lin (2023, p.1639) describe this as ‘caring capital,’ a way for young, working-class men to express "caring masculinities" through emotional intelligence and attentiveness, especially when navigating online dating. Similarly, Wang (2017) shows that young men’s acceptance of assertive female behaviours does not signify a relinquishing of power; instead, it is a way to reframe themselves as tolerant, modern men, adhering to emerging qualities of desirable masculinity without deviating from underlying gender norms.

The discourse of ‘women's youth vs. men's wealth’ legitimates a hegemonic gendered ordering through the so-called ‘evolutionary psychology’ theory. This framework positions essentialised gender differences within an epistemic regime that privileges ‘scientific fact,’ naturalising masculine sexual drive as active and assertive, while framing feminine sexuality as passive and reactive. Tracing these essentialising discourses to their historical and sociocultural roots reveals how neoliberal and individualistic ideologies internalise structural gender inequalities. These ideologies organise hierarchical relationships and psychic investments in ways that carry moral and social implications—shaping how individuals make sense of themselves and others through pedagogies of

intimate life (Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018). Framed as biological or medical truths, these narratives cast gendered expectations and heteronormative notions of intimacy within a meritocratic logic, rearticulating normative intimacy through the pervasive ethos of neoliberalism.

4.4 'I am not a feminist, but…': ambivalent gender equality and gender diversity discourse

The lecturer's vision of progressive relationships incorporated ideas of gender diversity and equality but was characterised by ambiguity and rhetorical flexibility. As noted in section 4.2, lecturer Yu Bo positioned himself as a supporter of gender equality and the destigmatisation of menstruation; however, he also commented that "some feminists are going too far." This ambivalence allows him to navigate the complexities of Chinese feminist discourses, seemingly endorsing certain liberal feminist views while subtly distancing himself from others to avoid the label of anti-feminism. This dual framing of feminism, alongside flexible invocations of gender equality serves to territorialise the boundaries of feminism within a neoliberal and postfeminist climate, marked by deep-seated structural inequalities and persistent gender norms (Liao, 2020; Scharff, 2012; Edley and Wetherell, 2001; Wang and Chang, 2023; Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2016). This discursive flexibility reflects how feminist values are selectively adopted and redefined to align with contemporary socio-political ideologies while maintaining traditional power structures.

> *…I would not necessarily call myself a feminist. I agree with some feminist viewpoints, but I don't really believe in the idea of 'feminism' or 'patriarchy.' The thing is, if we acknowledge feminism, we're also saying that patriarchy exists, and that implies it's an issue we need to address. Personally, I'd say I'm more about gender equality. I see myself as an LGBTQ-friendly*

counsellor. Whether people are women, men, non-binary, or queer, I believe they're all equal (Online interview, Guang Han, H University).

Guang Han's disidentification with feminism is two-fold. On the one hand, his acknowledgement of some feminist principles while simultaneously rejecting the existence of patriarchy reflects a postfeminist stance — one that assumes gender equality has been largely achieved, rendering feminist activism either outdated or unnecessary (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2007). This approach often emphasises personal empowerment and gender equality as individual responsibilities, sidelining systemic issues. Moreover, His preference for "gender equality" over the term "feminism" aligns with postfeminist tendencies to depoliticise feminist discourse, framing gender equality as a neutral, non-confrontational stance. Similar as McRobbie (2009) notes, this rhetorical strategy helps neutralise feminist politics, diluting its potential for radical social change.

On the other hand, his counter-position, rejecting both feminist identity and the notion of patriarchy, resonates with certain contemporary feminist discourses in neo-/non- liberal China (Wallis, 2024; Wang, 2005; Schaffer and Song, 2013). Supporters of such pro-equalitarian feminist claims tend to promote harmonious, non-confrontational gender relationships (Chang, Ren and Yang, 2018). Unlike the well-known third (or fourth) wave feminist movements in the West (Munro, 2013), Chinese feminism is characterised by a compressed and multifaceted historical meaning, and often distanced from overtly political or power-struggle-based views on gender (Chen, 2011; Dai, Wang and Barlow, 2002; Wu, 2005, 2010; Wang and Zhang, 2010; Schaffer and Song, 2013). Meanwhile, radical aspects of feminist ideas and critiques of structural gender inequality are largely disregarded within this context (Han, 2018; Chen, 2011).

In China, the pro-gender-equality yet anti-feminist stance — particularly the anti-radical-feminist discourse — draws not only from the "Western-rooted"

aspects of Chinese feminism but is also shaped by official discourse and state feminist organisations, most notably the All China Women's Federation (ACWF). Women-centred feminism, as framed in governmental propaganda, is presented as the legitimate and appropriate means to empower women and promote gender equality, while terms such as 'feminism' or *nǚ xing zhu yi* ('women powerism'), as well as associated terms like 'feminist' and 'patriarchy,' are seldom used or promoted in official discourse (Huang, 2023; Wang, 2005; Evans, 2021).

Although feminism has recently gained traction as a buzzword within social media and a hyper-commercialised sociocultural landscape (Guo et al., 2022), Chinese feminism faces challenges in reclaiming its radical and political dimensions. Studies on Chinese feminism highlight how the local term 'pastoral/rural feminism' (*tiányuán nǚquán*) reflects the stigmatisation of feminism in China (Zhou, 2018; Wu and Dong, 2019; Han, 2018). This term signifies a 'made-in-China' feminism, often viewed as promoting male hatred and "going too far," perceived as a threat to hegemonic masculinity and social harmony (Wu and Dong, 2019, p. 471). As a derogatory term circulating widely in Chinese online discourse, *tiányuán nǚquán* is used to discredit feminist voices (Tan, 2017; Huang, 2023). Originating as a slur comparing feminists to "rural dogs," the term carries deeply classist and gendered connotations, suggesting irrationality, vulgarity, and inauthenticity. Yet beyond its surface-level insult, *tiányuán nǚquán* reflects an ontological hierarchy that positions Chinese feminisms as inauthentic, especially when measured against an imagined "Western" feminist ideal. This binary framework reproduces epistemic violence by dividing feminism into "real" or "civilised" (often aligned with liberal Western values) and the supposedly backward or opportunistic expressions of feminism emerging within China.

Here, 'radicality' operates as a boundary object, facilitating communication among different social groups while marking 'undesirable' feminism that

challenges traditional gender hierarchies. The perceived ‘radical’ threat extends symbolically to nationalism, where Chinese feminists and their supporters are framed as part of ‘Western evil forces’ intending to disturb societal harmony (Huang, 2023; Chen, 2022; Wang and Chang, 2023). In Debbie Ging and Siapera’s (2019) study on the discourses within the online ‘manosphere’, they argue that the boundaries between misogyny and anti-feminism have become blurred. While "misogyny" often refers to general hostility toward women, "anti-feminism" reacts specifically to feminism as a political movement. Yet both aim to discipline women's thoughts and bodies to uphold the patriarchal order (ibid.). Such circumscribed conceptualisation of feminist discourses thus becomes a 'sticky sign' (Ahmed, 2004). The stickiness of feminist labels evokes a chain of intrinsic association with the political stigmatisation of feminism in China (Chen, 2022; Huang, 2023), within a heterosexual matrix (Scharff, 2010).

Despite referencing non-conforming relationships and using gender-inclusive language, Guang Han’s discourse ultimately reinforces traditionalist views, influenced by a nationalist stance, which emphasise the "Western-Chinese" divide. During his lecture on love and marriage, he listed examples of emergent types of relationships, such as premarital cohabitation and other non-monogamous relationships, but quickly clarified, “Don’t get me wrong, these are just emerging social phenomena from other corrupting capitalist societies” (Fieldnote, May 19th, 2020). Worried that students might interpret these examples as endorsements or share his words on social media, Guang Han set a clear boundary between what he deemed acceptable and "abnormal" behaviours of ‘rotten capitalism’ within the Chinese university context.

The recurrent use of terms like ‘Western,’ ‘foreign,’ and ‘capitalism’ functioned to categorise behaviours into dualistic frameworks of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ and ‘right’ versus ‘wrong,’ reinforcing a hierarchical ordering of sexual expression. The phrase ‘rotten capitalist’ echoes mid-1980s rhetoric, which framed non-heterosexual sexualities and non-marital sexual behaviour as part of ‘bourgeois behaviour’ (Evans, 1997, p.212). Past research on Chinese

sexual citizenship and governmentality reveals a complex ideological blend of socialist and neoliberal thought on governing individual desires and regulating sexualised bodies (Jeffreys, 2007; Rofel, 2007; Wong, 2016). The constructions of some sexual activities and relationships as the "other" contribute to a moral panic about deviance, marked by fears of ‘Western rot’, reminiscent of other moral panics across different historical periods (Honig, 2003). Similarly, Pan Suiming (1995, pp.495-6), dedicated in promoting Kinsey-style sexual surveys and disseminating 'scientific' sexual knowledge during reformation period. He referred to certain sexual activity as ‘extreme phenomena’ - including polygamy, sexual perversion, and LGBTQ groups (Pan, 1995), which were portrayed as deviations from the Chinese public's emphasis on responsibility within marriage and family. Wong (2016) has traced these divisive discourses of sexuality back to the Chinese market reform period, where the ‘anxieties about social problems and sexual evils shaped the accepted parameters of modernist sexuality and created a hierarchical ordering of sexual desire expressions’ (p.72).

Whether through articulations of ‘corrupting Western forces’ or the framing of non-normative sexualities as ‘extreme phenomena,’ such discourses construct an ideal sexual subject in the process of becoming civilised—one that necessitates the acquisition of appropriate knowledge about sex, relationships, and love. This subject is positioned in align with a vaguely defined ‘neoliberal democracy’ associated with competition, meritocracy, the free market, and a superficial rhetoric of gender equality. In this civilising narrative, sexual propriety becomes not only a personal virtue but also a moral and patriotic obligation, deeply tied to the boundaries of inclusion, exclusion, and public participation (Plummer, 2003). By casting certain forms of intimacy and desire as authentically Chinese—and thus civically acceptable—while casting others as foreign, corrupting, or “Western,” these discourses reassert heteronormativity and sustain a moral hierarchy of intimate citizenship. Such logics are further saturated with symbolic anxieties about a decadent, arrogant

West, echoing Cold War-era socialist sensibilities that infantilise and tribalise Chinese sexual citizenship (Liu, 2015), positioning it as either morally lacking or in need of nationalistic protection.

Nevertheless, the discourse of ‘gender equality’ is strategically mobilised to promote state-sanctioned notions of ‘healthy relationships,’ alongside a carefully curated and depoliticised version of feminism embedded within the course content. The lecturers nonetheless accepted some of the central tenets of the feminist and queer movements: emphasising that women and men are born equal and deserving of the same life opportunities and endorsing the right to sexual freedom without fear of persecution or discrimination. This is reflected in various pedagogical choices: for instance, Li Ping substituted "premarital sex" with "safe sexual behaviour", distancing sex from marriage to destigmatise non-marital sexual activity. In her "Truth about Sex and Happiness" session, Li Ping used terms like "partner" or "the other half" (*linyiban*) in place of "girlfriend/boyfriend" to promote gender-neutral language (fieldnote, April 13th, 2020).

While these surface-level inclusions signal a nod towards gender equality and LGBTQ acceptance, an ambivalence underlies this rhetoric, which subtly sidesteps deeper structural critiques of gender inequality. The lecturers’ linguistic selectivity and guarded demeanour mirror a socio-political climate increasingly hostile to explicit feminist and LGBTQ+ rights advocacy — both on university campuses and in wider public spheres. The flexible yet circumscribed deployment of gender equality rhetoric also exposes the complex negotiations that young people navigate as they attempt to reconcile liberal feminist ideals with the widespread stigmatisation of feminism in the Chinese context, as I will illustrate further in Chapter 5. At the same time, it is critical to examine how the invocation of “gender equality” serves not only to construct an idealised vision of romantic relationships but also to rationalise, and in some cases romanticise, sexist assumptions embedded in these interactions.

4.4 Reskilling intimacy and (hetero)romanticising gender difference

The course tapped into young people's relationship anxieties, relying heavily on popular and decades-old self-help books like John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (2002), Robert Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (1986), and Bowlby-Ainsworth's attachment theory as explained by Bretherton (1992). Specifically, in all three lectures I observed, students were required to take quizzes based on attachment theory to categorise themselves into types (secure, anxious-ambivalent, anxious-avoidant, dismissive-avoidant, or disorganised) and to identify their 'love languages.' These psychological models have been widely disseminated through media narratives about romantic relationships in both Chinese and Western contexts. However, numerous feminist scholars and media researchers have critiqued these theories for being outdated and rooted in essentialist, binary gender ideologies that reflect the socio-cultural norms of their time (Sun and Lei, 2017; Barker, Gill and Harvey, 2018; Gill, 2009; Crawford, 2004; Shifman and Lemish, 2011). Despite this, such theories persist in educational and media settings, often rebranded as scientifically neutral or universally applicable, thereby masking their normative underpinnings.

As its title suggests, Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus (Gray, 2002) — written in the late 20th century and originally aimed at middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual American couples — is premised on the assumption that men are inherently action-oriented, whereas women are emotionally driven. As Gray articulated in his book, "Men are motivated when they feel needed while women are motivated when they feel cherished" (2002, p.3). Despite its dated and essentialist framework, Gray's book, alongside similar texts, remains a staple reference in classroom discussions on the affective, communicative, bodily, and sexual conduct of intimacy management. These materials offer

advice based on the presumed 'nature' of gender differences, which are framed through rigid rules, dating etiquettes, and contrasting communication styles. In Guang Han's class, in the following example, he explicated different dating scenarios and made suggestions for young women to perform 'appropriate' femininities. These included techno-social dating protocols — such as how to respond to phone calls — as well as behavioural guidelines for dates, down to detailed advice on whether and how to pay or split a bill.

Suggestions for Girls:

1. ***Learn to be shy.***
2. ***Silent contemplation:*** *Rest your chin in your hands and look thoughtful when you are together at the park; men, apparently, like women who appear to have depth.*
3. ***On dinner dates:*** *You can split the bill or let him pay; treating him to snacks like ice cream or chips afterward is nice. Offer him tissues while eating but don't wipe his face for him.*
4. ***Phone etiquette:*** *Wait until the eighth ring before answering; stay calm yet enthusiastic, even if you are excited to hear his voice.*
5. ***Conflict adds 'flavour'*** *to life: You can quarrel, add some drama, and sa jiao (act like a spoiled child) by complaining and storming off — leave gracefully.*
6. ***Arriving fashionably late:*** *Being late can be charming but keep it within 5–10 minutes and apologize upon arrival.*
7. ***Hug etiquette:*** *Gently avoid his hugs but pat his shoulder even if there's no dust.*
8. ***Kissing etiquette:*** *Qin (a subtle and affectionate kiss) is more engaging than Wen (a lingering, sensual kiss).*

(Guang Han, Class slides—"How to Love Someone")

Guang Han's instruction underscores a nuanced and contradictory

performance of ‘appropriate’ desiring femininity, urging young women to strike a careful balance between receptiveness and subtle resistance, attraction and modesty, desirability and respectability. This framing reinforces a model of "appropriate femininity": nurturing and considerate (Rule 3. offering tissues), sexually desirable without displaying overt desire (Rule 7 and 8. adhering to specific kissing and hugging norms), and assertive but not threatening to masculine authority (Rule 3. offering to split the bill while ultimately allowing the man to pay for dinner).

Guang Han’s suggestions resonate with what Gill (2009) terms "intimate entrepreneurship," where women’s sexual subjectivities and intimate relations become sites for personal labour and investment — centred on psychological, affective, and bodily work. Such guidance situates women’s sexual subjectivity and intimate relationships within a discursive and representational framework, where mediated intimacies are shaped by cultural scripts conflate traditional expectations with contemporary ideals of self-regulation and relational management (Barker, Gill and Harvey, 2018; Gill, 2009). Studying forms of sexual and relationship advice in women’s magazines, Gill argues that ‘[w]omen are enjoined to self-monitor and monitor others, to work on and transform the intimate self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present every action – however constrained or normatively demanded – as the outcome of individual choice and a deliberative personal biography’ (Gill 2009b, p.366). This reflects a broader “emotional investment strategy” (Hochschild, 2003, p.125), or a “new emotional style” (Illouz, 2007, p. 16), where emotional competence is gained through the strategic management and control of one’s feelings. In navigating this complex, gendered domain of intimacy, women are subtly “reskilled” to align with evolving ideals of femininity in intimate relationships (Giddens, 1991, p. 7).

Guang Han’s advice might appear ambivalent, but it ultimately reflects gendered affective labours in an institutionalised and scripted heteronormative relationship. His advice also attributes the promise of intimacy success to

women's self-(re)making abilities in dating scenarios in China. These expectations resonate with messages of self-styled dating coaches popular on Chinese social media, targeting urban, educated, single women in China, from Ayawawa's and Mimeng's Wechat Official accounts (Liu, 2019c; Peng, 2021) to *douyin* (China's Tiktok) marriage and relationship counselling liveshow (Ye and Huang, 2022). Ayawawa[17], the former relationship coach, explicitly endorses patriarchal values and blends them with evolutionary psychology and biology jargon such as 'mate value' (MV) and 'paternity uncertainty' to present her audience with 'scientific' interpretations and solutions to relationship and marriage problems (Wang, 2018). Through a twisted rhetorical 'successology', Ayawawa suggests her main audience — single, urban and educated women — utilise traits like coquettishness and sex appeal to enhance their MV and secure a high-status male partner.

These seemingly contradictory suggestions in Guang Han's courses resonate with the self-styled dating coaches by reinforcing traditional gender norms and heteroromantic ideals within the unequal social structures that shape women's lives in China. His dating protocols — such as encouraging women to provoke minor conflicts to "add flavour" to relationships — mirror the revival of gendered norms under the guise of practical advice. Guang Han and the other dating coaches propagate a romanticised view of entrenched gender hierarchies while framing these behaviours and dating protocols as empowering strategies for women navigating intimate relationships. Men are expected to take the initiative romantically and sexually, make decisions, pay for dates (or cover a larger portion of expenses), and tolerate so-called

[17] Ayawawa, who was known as a Chinese relationship advisor, faced significant backlash and was suspended from major social media platforms in 2018 following controversial remarks about "comfort women." During a workshop, she suggested that these women, who were forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II, were "lucky" and fared better than their male counterparts during the war. This statement was widely criticised for its insensitivity and historical inaccuracy, leading to her suspension from platforms like Weibo (Yi, 2018)

‘’women’s drama’’ (Fieldnote).

In this heteronormative framework of romantic relationships, emotional and affective labour performed by women is normalised and even demanded to achieve forms of gender recognition they may seek (Ward, 2015). Practices like "learning to be shy" (Rule 1.) are positioned as strategies for reinforcing men’s gender authenticity, encouraging them to adopt roles as pursuers and initiators, promoting ideals of Chinese masculinity characterised by conscientiousness and responsibility (see Chapter 5). The dualistic categories of man/woman and masculine/feminine are not only constructed as dichotomous opposites but are romanticised and celebrated through popular postfeminist discourses of intimacy and femininity propagated by the media and consumerist cultures (McRobbie, 2004). Additionally, the lectures revealed instances of “everyday sexism” through dating suggestions, casual banter, and routine policing of women’s bodies, dress, appearance, and behaviour (Keller et al., 2018). These subtle yet pervasive practices foreground how postfeminist discourses can mask and normalise sexist ideologies by encouraging women "to indulge in the possibilities and pleasures of feminine expressions within a context of greater freedom created by the market, private entrepreneurship, and consumer capacity” (Liu, 2014, p.21).

Beneath this contradictory discourse lies the persistence of an essentialised and hierarchical gender order, one that reaffirms romantic coupling as the normative endpoint of adulthood. In the Chinese context specifically, women’s singlehood has been partially de-stigmatised in recent years, yet it continues to be perceived as both ‘a lack and an uncontained excess’ (Lahad, 2024, p.54). Terms such as ‘leftover women’ (剩女), serve as old-new mediated categories invented and circulated by state and media discourses to regulate normative femininity (Fincher, 2014). As Lahad (2024 , p.54) argues, singlehood is therefore ‘perceived as a transitory and temporary life phase, a prelude to marriage and motherhood.’ Within this framework, college student life is subtly positioned as an extended ‘time-out’ from the

dominant gendered life course (see more details in Chapter 5). It is cast as a period of self-cultivation, where academic achievement takes precedence. Yet, this time is not free from all gendered expectations: young people are still expected to master social skills, perform self-discipline, and demonstrate consumer competence — often through practices of intimacy that align with neoliberal and heteronormative values.

4.5 Heteronormative momentum and the moral imperative of self-responsibility

The continuity of these romantic ideals is mediated through cultural narratives saturated with heteronormativity—the pervasive assumption that monogamous, heterosexual, and reproductive relationships represent a universal goal, promising an aspirational and morally sanctioned life trajectory. The notion of self-responsibility emerges as key discourse in framing young people's sexual sexuality with a fabric of neoliberalist ethos and morality. That the discourses of responsibility are not value-free reflects the entanglement of conservative gender ideologies, neoliberal individualism, and patriarchal social values. As Wong (2016, p.5) notes, it entails “a dual emphasis on both restraints and self-autonomy[…]in the construction of ideal sexual subjects”. In this context, sexual responsibility is not simply about safety or consent, but also about moral self-governance and alignment with normative gender expectations. This framing is particularly pronounced for young women, whose sexual subjectivities are often shaped through a restrictive regime of intimate relations—where individual choice is idealised, yet constrained by societal expectations around respectability and future-oriented conjugal aspirations (Xie, 2020; Lahad, 2024). These ideals often culminate in the expectation of monogamous, heterosexual marriage that reaffirm the heteronormative ideals

under the guise of self-directed agency. Such normative pressure, often in the form of a momentum, a light touch, a concern, a gentle encouragement[18] aligns with what Ahmed (2006) describes as a *normative orientation* — a culturally straightened path that privileges certain life choices as more socially legitimate than others. As Ahmed (2017, p.45) aptly notes, this path is seen as "well-trodden," associated with happiness and success, while those who step off the line risk being read as deviant, unhappy, or failed.

Fieldnote, May 12th, 2020

In a discussion about "responsible sexual behaviours," most students expressed support for some college students engaging in premarital sex, though they admitted they would likely not choose to do so themselves.

[Prompted to respond, a male student was asked for his thoughts.]

Student: "Someone needs to know how to take responsibility before having sex."

Guang Han: "What does 'being responsible' mean?"

Student: "If both parties love each other, no one will regret it afterwards. If the girl accidentally gets pregnant, the guy should marry her. Of course, it should be the guy who invites the girl [to have sex]."

Guang Han: "What if a girl or a guy—" (he emphasized "guy," attempting to include LGBTQ perspectives) "got drunk and wanted to have sex with you?"

Student: "Still, it has to be mutually consensual. I usually don't drink. But if she accidentally got pregnant, I would marry her."

Guang Han: "You are such a responsible young man."

In this conversation from Guang Han's class, being a "responsible" man is

[18] It echoes with the experiential tone I conveyed through my own story at the beginning of Chapter 1

framed as the ability to control sexual impulses and the willingness to marry in the event of an unplanned pregnancy. His articulation not only assumes male sexuality as a default state of constant arousal, but also aligns masculinity with the ideal of romantic and sexual self-restraint—an ideal prominent in both Chinese and some Western contexts (Pascoe and Hollander, 2016; Louie and Edwards, 1994). In addition, the student equates masculine responsibility with a commitment to marry the woman in the event of an unplanned pregnancy, positioning himself as a responsible masculine subject who would “take care of her and the baby.” Refusing to marry or asking the woman to get an abortion would, in contrast, be labelled as *búfùzérèn* (irresponsible), signalling a failure of masculinity by prioritising selfish desires over duty.

This exchange underscores a traditional masculine ideal, wherein sexual and romantic restraint is framed as a marker of strength and masculinity (Louie and Edwards, 1994; Li and Jankowiak, 2016; Farrer, 2014a). While upholding the expectation that men bear responsibility in intimate encounters, it simultaneously silences discourse around female desire and agency — positioning women primarily as passive recipients of masculine responsibility. This hypothetical scenario overlooks whether women wish to act on their sexual desires, access contraception, or make autonomous decisions about pregnancy outcomes, thus perpetuating long-standing inequalities in gendered sexual subjectivities (Tolman, 2012; Fine, 1988; Fine and McClelland, 2006). Underlying the discourse of responsibility is the assumption that men are strong and upheld as the decision-makers who shoulder responsibility. At the same time, women are vulnerable and cannot make their own choices (Hollander, 2001). Therefore, in this context, self-restraint and commitment to marriage become the chivalrous choice of men, which implies a courtesy extended due to the women’s subordinate position rather than the respect due to an equal power relations.

The notions of 'responsibility' in this context extend beyond mere duty, reaching an ethical dimension that closely ties a man's worth to his ability and

willingness to care for a woman. Traditionally, responsibility encompassed patriarchal expectations — men were expected to be filial sons, loyal husbands, and authoritative fathers (Louie, 2002; Kong, 2019). Respectability, on the other hand, refers to the need for men to present themselves as socially acceptable and morally upright, avoiding any actions that might bring shame to themselves or their families (Ho, Jackson and Lam, 2018; Kong, 2009). More recently, responsibility and respectability of masculine performativity have also been framed through the lens of 'breadwinner masculinity' (Kong, 2019), where male identity is tied to providing material security, ownership, and contributing to the family's livelihood. This sense of responsibility is typically fulfilled by adhering to familial duties such as marrying, having children, and supporting one's family through hard work.

However, beneath these discourses of responsibility lie deeper anxiety surrounding the attributes linked to masculinity: rationality, competitiveness, tempered sexual assertiveness, and self-control in the neoliberal Chinese society These qualities signify the "civilizing" and self-affirming markers of Chinese masculinity (Louie, 2012), embodying the symbolic possession of the phallus. The idea of the 'responsible man' is thus bound up with a rigid, compulsory vision of marriage, narrowly framing how sexuality and desire are conceptualised and experienced. Within this phallocentric framework, women's sexuality is often framed as something to be "lost" or "lacking," requiring protection from male desire. In the following example, Li Ping connects sexual responsibility as self-protection with direct reference to young women, outlining a structured view of "safe" sexual behaviours:

1. *With protection,*
2. *Mutually respected,*
3. *Be responsible for yourself.*

[In the next slide, Li Ping provides specific advice directed toward young women]:

1. *Fully understand your attitudes toward sex and its potential consequences.*
2. *Avoid situations that might lead to unintended intimacy, such as staying out late and needing a hotel room with a boyfriend, if unprepared.*
3. *If prepared, ensure that sexual experiences will not harm your wellbeing, future relationships and marriage, or societal expectations.*

(Li Ping, H University, Class slides—"The Truth About Sex and Happiness").

In urging young women to "be responsible" and "be ready," these statements subtly place the onus on them to fully comprehend their sexual attitudes — an understanding that, paradoxically, might only be attainable through experiencing embodied desire (Tolman, 2012). Moreover, the gendered apportioning of responsibility expressed in the course reproduces an idealised image of women who need to strike the right balance between acting innocent and unaware of sexual desire but also acting as the gatekeepers of their sexuality ("avoiding every possibility of staying in a hotel room with your boyfriend"). Avoiding sex before marriage arguably comes from a sense of self-protection, but the responsibility has been left mainly to the women since men's desire is seen as uncontrollable (Evans, 1997; Holland et al., 1998).

The focus on protective strategies, like avoiding late nights or shared spaces with a boyfriend, implicitly reinforces miscommunication models around sexual consent, which has already been challenged and problematised by a body of feminist research (Powell, 2010; Bragg et al., 2021; Setty, 2023; Beres, 2010). Young people experience problems articulating and interpreting consent not because of malintent or substandard or disparate communication skills but because of interpersonal and sociocultural power dynamics that constrain the communication and operation of consent. The protective suggestions on ‘not sharing a hotel room with a boyfriend' simplified the socio-emotional skills and

consensual literature that are required to navigate gendered and heterosexual (inter)personal pressures, expectations, and sexual scripts (Setty, 2023).

In Li Ping's last suggestion, the emphasis on women's responsibility and empowered femininity — encouraging girls to adopt confident, independent personas that reject societal judgment and stigmatisation of women's desires (Dobson, 2014). However, such suggestion implicitly overlooks the persistent double standards and imbalanced power relations these young women are facing. This 'empowered femininity' embedded a subject-effect of a global postfeminist discourse, which incorporates feminist signifiers of emancipation and empowerment while circulating assumptions that feminist struggles have ended, that full gender equality has been achieved, and that modern women can "have it all" (Lazar, 2006). Consequently, women are framed as powerful enough to believe that their sexual experiences "will not damage their wellbeing, future relationships and marriage, nor society," and independent enough not to rely on a man to "take responsibility (propose marriage)" after engaging in sexual activity, as the above excerpt suggests.

However, the focus on individual responsibility and tactics ignores the broader structural inequalities inherent in society. This endorsement of an over-individualistic approach assumes that women can opt out of systems of victim-blaming and the normalised sexist discourses in which they are socialised. However, these unequal relations and the absence of discourse surrounding female desire continue to deny women the opportunity to be autonomous, sexually 'desiring' subjects (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2005; Allen and Carmody, 2012). By avoiding conversations about desire and systemic gender inequality, the course perpetuates the positioning of young women within unbalanced structures of power in sexual relationships. Women are not encouraged to recognise or articulate their own desires, fears, or pleasures, nor to navigate the complexities of sexualisation. Instead, they are instructed to manage, reinvest, and discipline 'desiring' femininities within a framework that prioritises and assumes the dominance of men's sexual desires, as the section 4.5

illustrated.

Chinese women are facing similarly multi-layered damage because of objectification and stigmatisation under China's contemporary patriarchal marriage regime and state regulatory power over women's reproductive bodies. The responsibility discourses that are associated with women's sexuality in China bear the imprint of Chinese reproductive politics and the regulatory power of the state. For instance, in her research on young women's attitudes towards premarital pregnancy, Xie (2021) articulates that the stigma associated with women's premarital choices remains powerful and undergoes transformation into a pragmatic and self-responsible discourse. By shifting responsibilities to capable neoliberal subjects, individuals can govern themselves in ways deemed appropriate by the regime (Xie, 2021).

College students, here, in their early adulthood, face compounded dilemmas. On one hand, they are encouraged to take responsibility for autonomous decision-making and assert their true desires and prioritize their self-cultivation. On the other hand, they remain subject to pervasive pressures to conform to moral and sexual ideologies deemed appropriate by societal norms (Pei *et al.*, 2007; Evans, 1997). Without addressing the complexities of sexual culture and practices, the advice inadvertently avoids the discourses of gendered power dynamics, which further reiterates the unbalanced gender relationship, especially when knowledge of safe sex practices is not sufficiently provided, nor is scenarios of consent effectively discussed. Therefore, the ‘be responsible to yourself’ rhetoric, while seemingly empowering, inadvertently avoids these vital conversations and trails off into ineffectiveness. Accordingly, the discourses of ‘responsibility’ in Chinese contexts continue to objectify women under the persistent patriarchal value system orienting young people along the flow of heteronormative lines (Ahmed, 2006). Therefore, this heteronormative momentum is sustained through legitimation institutions, mediated romantic ideals, normative rituals, moral discourses, and strategic silences. With limited meaningful dialogue on gender equality and sexual

autonomy, Chinese youth — particularly young women — face multi-layered constraints shaped by objectification and stigmatisation under a contemporary patriarchal and heteronormative regime that prioritises entrenched ideals of heterosexual conjugal relationships.

Meanwhile, scholars of sexuality education call for a more generous reading of 'incomplete conversations', suggesting that these moments are situated within broader cultural contexts both within and beyond the boundaries of educational institutions (Bragg et al., 2021). Drawing from observations of two school-wide sexual health programmes in England between 2017 and 2019, Bragg and her colleagues found that school lecturers appeared uncomfortable addressing the issues of inequalities and the gendered power dynamics of sexual relationships (Bragg et al., 2021). These limitations were compounded by the physical set-up of classrooms and constrained pedagogical interactions. Importantly, the authors urged us to recognise that the gaps in these conversations do not stem solely from the individual educator's discomfort or lack of knowledge, but also from wider cultural scripts — such as male sexual entitlement, the normalisation of victimisation, and institutional policies on pedagogy and student behaviour.

Yet still, their research has left us with a promising tone–they urgued us to appreciate the 'marginal gain' of the incomplete conversation, especially in opening space for future discussions that move beyond the binary of active-masculine and passive-feminine subjectivities (Bragg et al., 2021, p.281). Such perspective acknowledges the current difficulties and limitation in resources in the educational institutions in engaging with the debates on the issues of equality and sexual consents in England (but also in global context as well). It suggests that rather than waiting for perfectly programmed, fully consensual institutional frameworks, we must cultivate more opportunities and channels for young people themselves to engage with questions of gender, intimacy, and sexuality to shift normative discourses in more accountable and socially just directions.

4.6 Conclusion: Mediated heteronormative culture on campuses and beyond

In this chapter, I advance an understanding of Love Psychology courses as site of mediated intimacy, arguing that the orientating logics and underpinning premises of neoliberal ethos are in many ways consonant with broader reconfigurations of intimacies and the ‘regime of sexuality’ taking place in and beyond university campuses. Through examining lecturers’ narratives, banters and the dating advice provided in the Love Psychology course, this chapter contributes to an emergent body of literature on mediation and reconfiguration of intimacies (Chambers, 2017; Kolehmainen, Lahad and Lahti, 2021; Gill, 2009; Andreassen et al., 2017). The courses serve as a reflective platform, unveiling the gendered discourses and mediated heteronormative cultures on campuses and beyond.

In this chapter, the Love Psychology course serves as an alternative trajectory of sexuality education in China. However, the entrenched ‘scientific’ approach to sexuality research in China and institutional heteronormativity remain as implicit active actors in the courses and 'classrooms'. The findings of this chapter are partially consistent with existing research on sex education in higher education contexts in China (Wei, 2020; Huang *et al*., 2009; Cui, 2023; Liao, 2020), where means of self-surveillance and censorship prevail. Meanwhile, the Love Psychology courses this research studied have touched on the topics of gender equality and sexuality diversity, under the ‘grey area’ of the university authority (Huang *et al*. 2009). My research, therefore, reaffirmed the prevailing though limited agency of these educational practitioners in navigating the course content and interaction pedagogies, especially in the mediated classroom. Through an in-depth and detailed digital ethnographic observation of the mediated classroom, I have considered the digital

technologies and particular space-time-matterings of the COVID-19 pandemic. I argue that the communicative technologies, on the one hand, strengthen the networked and affective connections; on the other hand, they inhibit discursive-material assemblages which link the 'grey areas' to a broader socio-political, gender and sexuality politics, university ethical conduct, the digital censorships and the stigmatised pandemic context, along with the broader Chinese feminist movements and neo/non-liberal contexts which have further complicated the interplay of institutionalised heteronormativity.

In this chapter, I paid close attention to lecturers' agentive negotiations — and occasional ruptures — within discursive-material spaces. I argue that the pedagogical encounters in classes, which range from discomfort and mediated discourses to silence, humour, and strategic avoidance, together sustain aestheticized forms of intimacies which again plug into heteronormative and phallogocentric modes of organising gendered and sexual subjectivities. The Love and Relationship courses, therefore, reflect the construction of affective aesthetics that are deeply interwoven with neoliberal logics of self-cultivation and morality, state-led governmentality around gender and sexuality, and cultural norms that prioritise heteronormativity while romanticising stereotypical gender roles. This chapter therefore reveals a hybrid regime of neoliberal rationality that encourages self-governing autonomy to produce ideal sexual and gender subjects, through affective self-remaking strategies within the heteronormative realm.

Additionally, the findings of this chapter also shed light on the tasks for developing affirmative gender-inclusive sexuality and relationship courses that shift the focus from the danger sides of young people's sexuality. As I have discussed in this chapter, the courses are highly homogenous – all courses observed were fuelled with personal anecdote and outdated social psychology. These courses unintendedly avoided or ambiguously addressed certain critical sexuality issues, such as the socio-emotional skills behind consensual language (Setty, 2023). This chapter recognises the potential courses on love

and relationships for opening up space for dialogue and reflection. In the meantime, there is still a pressing need for developing culturally-grounded pedagogies and approaches to Chinese youth sexuality, in the meantime, centring students' voices in articulating their understandings and experiences around love, sexuality and intimacy that build upon conscious articulations of desire, critical thinking, sexual and literal competence (Palmer *et al*., 2017). Following this, the next chapter will move on to young people's everyday navigations of gender and sexuality, focusing on moments of rupture, ambiguity, and disembodiment of youth's gendered subjectivities.

Chapter 5: ‘Becoming’ desiring subjects: the Chinese youth’s navigation of everyday intimacies

5.1 Introduction

Building on the previous chapter’s exploration, this chapter examines how young people (re)assemble various imperatives of class, gender, and sexuality in their ongoing process of ‘becoming’ desiring subjects. With heteronormativity as a central theme, this chapter reconceptualised intimacies as *affective aesthetics* to challenge essentialist understandings of heterosexuality and its assumed link to marital, heterosexual relationships. By exploring young people’s narratives around intimacy through their stories, gossip, reflections on love and relationships, anxieties, and perceptions of social norms and stigmas, I aim to deepen the previous discussions on gender and sexuality discourses in a more nuanced way. I am interested in exploring how young people navigate, de-territorialize and re-territorialize, notions of ‘normalcy’ in intimacy, negotiating ideals of ‘good’ conduct and a ‘good’ life (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013; Berlant, 2011), as well as ‘appropriate’ gender performativity – as responsible and desiring gendered sexual subjects (Rofel, 2007; Cao, 2018; Xie, 2020).

Here, intimacies are mediated through aesthetics that encompass “the impassivity of diverse class, racial, sexual, and gendered styles of composure” (Berlant, 2011, p.5). The concept of *affective aesthetics* recognizes the role of affect that flows through and registers within bodies, while also capturing the complex paradoxes Chinese youth face as they navigate multifaceted aspects of intimacy - social aims, sexual morality, ethics, life narratives, and ideals of responsibility and independence. For Lauren Berlant, intimacy, embedded within social institutions and political contexts, “involves the aspiration for a

narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way" (1998, p.286). This is particularly pertinent following the COVID-19 pandemic, a worldwide health emergency that has redefined boundaries between individual and community, private and public spheres, virtual and physical spaces, and human and non-human. Through this analytic lens, this chapter seeks to unsettle the binary divisions and linkages within intimacies, while acknowledging the messy, chaotic sexuality assemblages that are deeply enmeshed with power, exclusion, and hierarchical orderings, and extending to a micro social atmosphere and subjective becoming (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001).

The data in this chapter draws from four cases studies of two young men, Zhu Wen (21, year 3, M), Chen Xiao (19, year 1, M), and two young women, Xue Wei (20, Year 2, W), Bai Xue (20, Year 2, W). The research data is based on interviews with these young people, their diary entries and my ethnographic fieldnotes during and after the interviews. By drawing attention to the inconsistencies in participants' narratives in relation to their gendered positions (Hollway, 2008), I consider the entanglement of young people's narratives and practices of intimacy with the intersection of material-discursive forces.

In this chapter, I conceptualize intimate machinery as operating within sexuality assemblages through affective intra-actions rather than mere interactions; foregrounding how imperceptible micromoments of territorializing forces and deterritorializing becomings are constantly entangled. This lens is critical to understanding how regulatory power becomes psychologically embedded and internalized through discourses of choice, agency, and autonomy, while simultaneously dissolving boundaries between subjects, bodies, materials, and discourses (Ringrose and Rawlings, 2015). Through studying young people's narratives of intimacy and personal biographies, this chapter examines how they mobilize available cultural and material resources to navigate (hetero)normative positionings, at times upholding certain conventions, while at other moments subtly or overtly resisting them. My

analysis transcends the modernist interpretations of youth's experience of intimacies that linearer progressive and flatten out the seemingly mundane facets of everyday life (Pan, 2006; Evans, 2010; Liu, 2008; Farrer, 2014b), instead embracing a more-than-human, non-binary perspective that attends to the dynamic gendered assemblages in everyday intra-actions. I investigate how gender and sexuality assemblages produce a privileged sense of affective sameness - or affective aesthetics - that shape how intimacies are felt and lived within university campuses and across broader cultural terrains.

5.2 Xue Wei

5.2.1'I still feel like a child': Negotiating with innocence, responsibility and 'appropriate' femininity

The theme 'responsibility' or 'responsible sex behaviour', as previously discussed (Chapters 2 and 4), surfaced prominently in my conversations with Xue Wei, a 20-year-old university sophomore. Xue Wei, who seems puzzled about her past 'unsuccessful' relationships, said to me "[I had] three [relationships] in the previous school year, and four in the last one and a half years of college", She shared her confusion about what she values in a relationship and has constantly felt incapable of managing a relationship well. In our interviews, she reflects on her past relationships while continuously yearning for a loving and responsible 'healthy' relationship in the future. Her struggles in relating to other aspects of her life have also come to the fore when we approach the definition of 'responsibility':

ZZ: What is your opnion on sexual behaviour?

Xue Wei: I think it should only happen when both individuals can take responsibility for it.

ZZ: What kind of capability is needed to take responsibility for it?

Xue Wei: At the very least, I think one should be sufficiently independent — meaning not relying on parents for financial support while engaging in such activities.

ZZ: What responsibilities do you think society should take? For example, if pregnancy occurs, right?

Xue Wei: If it happens and one has the financial means, they can handle it themselves.

ZZ: Have you considered it [having a sexual experience] in your past or future relationships?

Xue Wei: If the relationship is long-term and I feel capable of taking responsibility for such matters, I would consider it.

ZZ: By responsibility, do you mean handling it on your own in case something like pregnancy occurs?

Xue Wei: Yes.

While Xue Wei appears open to sexual intimacy, it seems that she is more frightened by the out-of-wedlock pregnant discourses presented in the popular media and culture, and 'safe sex' campaigns. The perceived 'risk' of sexual behaviours foregrounds the 'responsibility' that centres around financial independence as part of her sexual autonomy. Xue Wei's narrative strategically positions her sexual 'becoming'—on the one hand, she seems open to engaging in sexual behaviours; on the other, she vigilantly ties these behaviours to the prospect of a heterosexual, monogamous relationship potentially leading to marriage.

The previous research on sexual behaviours and attitudes of Chinese young people only touch upon the layered contradictions in young women's aspirations to be self-governing and rational subjects before engaging in intimate behaviours (Martin, 2018; Yang, 2016; Friedman, 2005). The regulatory discourses on teenage sexuality (especially young women's) are

closely tied up with *zǎo liàn* (literally means, early love), which is associated with intense surveillance, censorship, and deflection of romantic relationships among school-age youth (Zhu, Liu and Elley, 2022; Shen, 2015). Seen as a serious social issue, *zǎo liàn* is subject to school regulations, family pressures, and even state laws, all aiming to protect minors' moral integrity and future prospects (Shen, 2015). Even though the *zǎo liàn* discourses have gone through several shifts in China, both cultural and historical perceptions of children's sexuality as innocent and their primary duty of studying continue to dominate, and discourage any romantic liaisons and perpetuate the need for protection. Meanwhile, struck by the almost default association between sexual encounters and pregnancy, I further probed this discourse during our interview, continuing to question such equivalences and their implications for young women's autonomy and agency.

ZZ: Is it possible to say that sexual activity, because if precautions are taken well, it may not necessarily lead to pregnancy?

Xue Wei: Indeed, if precautions are taken properly, it won't necessarily lead to pregnancy, but I don't feel comfortable with it [sex] because of my upbringing. My parents wouldn't want such things to happen so I wouldn't engage in such behaviours during my student life. I still feel like a child and don't think I'm ready for such things.

Framing sexual encounters as inherently tied to pregnancy not only reflects the underlying risk-oriented discourses that dominate narratives of young women's sexuality (Xie, 2021a), but also positions them within a collective (familial and social) effort to align their material bodies with their own narratives of 'becoming'. This narrative frames the young woman as a student who has to prioritise study and academic excellence to achieve financial success, ensuring she does not end up like 'other' women — those who become pregnant before marriage and rely on their parents. Such statements echo the omission of

female sexual desire, and it would be simplistic to argue that concepts of desire, pleasure, and sexual subjectivity maintain consistent meanings without acknowledging the social landscape (Tolman, 2012). Whether seeking marital promise or financial stability, this narrative exemplifies the cautionary stance that young women internalise as a sense of responsibility prioritising risk avoidance and self-regulation, which consequently overshadows discussions about women's desires or pleasures.

Xue Wei's discourses also reflect an underlying anxiety about potential disruptions to the imagined pathway of a middle-classed, independent woman, and an omnipresent imagination of (hetero)normative happiness (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001; Xie, 2021). Women's sexualities have long been associated with danger, shame and risk (Xie, 2020, 2021b), while aspirations for happiness are often internalised through narratives that privilege long-term, committed, monogamous relationships culminating in marriage - a momentum of heteronormativity (See section 4.5). These pervasive assumptions construct monogamous, heterosexual and reproductive relationships not only promising an aspirational path that leads to 'happiness', but also a morally sanctioned life trajectory – where deviation is framed under disciplinary consequence. Within this framing, the discourse of self-responsibility emerges as a central narrative, embedding young people's sexual subjectivities within a fabric of neoliberal morality, where individual accountability, emotional regulation, and future-oriented planning are valorised.

Xue Wei's articulation of feeling 'like a child' emphasizes underscores the self-infantilisation that occurs when women are encouraged to defer sexual activity until deemed 'ready' by external authorities, such as family or society. By using the 'like a child' discourse, Xue Wei places herself within a traditional moral framework that limits sexual autonomy based on age, educational status, and familial control, suggesting that sexual maturity depends on social approval rather than personal readiness. In the U.S., similar narratives of sexual readiness — both emotional and physical — are prevalent in the Abstinence

Only Until Marriage sexuality education curriculum, which categorises some behaviours as positive and normative, while others are seen as confusing or abusive (Lamb, Lustig and Graling, 2013; Fine and McClelland, 2006). Similarly, in the U.K., abstinence-only discourses perpetuate a desirable ignorance, producing silences through discourses of childhood innocence (Epstein and Johnson, 1998) or presumed innocence (Renold, 2002). Previous researchers on children's sexuality, for example Lamb and Peterson (2012), have argued that discourses on emotional and biological readiness propagate the misleading notion that there is a specific moment when an adolescent or young adult transitions from being unequivocally unready for sex to being unequivocally ready for sex.

In this case, for Xue Wei, as a young woman, who is already in her early twenties, age is not necessarily the only measurement for the specific appropriate timeframe for responsible sexual engagement. If we put a posthuman performativity spin on this discourse of 'appropriate age', we can see that age itself carries discursive-material implications so that it functions as a gendered construct that significantly shapes and redefines the contours of nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti, 2011, 2014). Age is contingent but concrete entanglements, imbued with varied social meanings that dictate sexual norms and expectations, intra-act with Xue Wei's sense of 'the self' and the 'becoming' of desiring 'subjectivity'. Xue Wei's reference to feeling 'like a child' illustrates how her age, intertwined with her roles as a student and a daughter, subjects her to academic, social, and gendered norms. These identities place her within a matrix of power where age not only defines but also constrains her sexual agency, projecting societal expectations of sexual readiness and propriety onto her. This framing situates her within ongoing debates about the materiality of age and its impact on gender performance and sexual identity. Using childhood innocence as a safety net, she strategically positions herself in relation to the inherent childhood innocence and desirability in (hetero)sexual 'becoming' (Renold, 2005; Renold and Ringrose, 2011; Zhu, Liu and Elley, 2022), and

differentiates herself from sexually desiring to deliberately sexually disinterested subjectivities in specific campus apparatuses of meaning and matters.

The agentic self-responsible subject can modify their desirable feminine subjectivities and cultivate themselves in the 'appropriate' way of being feminine, capable of making the right choices at the right age, while remaining vigilant about gender performativity. Young women are growing up in a societal environment where narratives on the representation of desiring women, regardless of their age, fall into a narrative of negative consequences leading to betrayals, infidelity by men, and foolishness and vulnerability of the women (Xie, 2021a, 2021b). Although female chastity no longer holds the same repressive institutional power as in the past, it continues to exert a significant cautionary influence on the psyche of Chinese youth on governance of their sexualised bodies. Therefore, the discomfort Xue Wei experiences with sex reflects the intersection of family values and societal norms in regulating her sexual agency, which complicates the previous linear understanding of young women's transitional sexuality. In this instance, by framing herself under the 'good' student/child model, she navigates complex and conflictual negotiations at both the familial and campus/social levels, constructing an appropriate femininity distanced from disruptive, academically underachieving, and ultimately 'failing' femininity.

5.2.2 Rupturing and navigating desiring femininity and 'in-betweenness'

Xue Wei: We [my roommates and I] always discussed it – when is the right time for sex, whether to cohabitate with our boyfriends. We had different opinions on whether to have sex before marriage. They think they will need to understand each other before marriage better, especially since it will get

complicated if they find they are not [sexually] compatible once they are married.

ZZ: And you had a different opinion on this?

Xue Wei: At that time, I thought if it [sex] happened and then we separated because of incompatibility, my future boyfriend would mind my sexual experience. Therefore, I don't think it [having sex before marriage] is appropriate.

ZZ: So, you think your next boyfriend [or potential husband] would mind if you are sexually experienced? But then you changed your opinion; why?

Xue Wei: I am also worried that once we find that we are incompatible after we get married, it will be complicated to get divorced.

ZZ: But do you think you've changed your opinion on having sex in a relationship during college?

*Xue Wei: Not in college, because we cannot be sure that the other one would be the person I want to Què dìng zhōng shēng [*确定终生,commit to *spend my whole life with someone]*

ZZ: Què dìng zhōng shēng?

Xue Wei: Yes, once we secure a job, enter society, and our relationship is on a stable track.

In the above example, she relays discussions in her dormitory, through which a more comprehensive picture of 'responsible' life choices emerged. The dialogue excerpt resonates with her previous articulation of being 'self-responsible' and desiring feminine subjectification. Despite sounding rhetorically empowering and liberating, the idea of compulsory heterosexuality leading to marriage remains intact—manifested in the normative trajectory to "commit to spend one's whole life with someone, secure a job, enter society, [and] place the relationship on a stable track." Xue Wei's vision of her future, which centres on personal independence, may reflect a broader generational shift. This shift, as previous research on dating and sexuality suggests, is

marked by an increasing emphasis on individualistic desires and aspirations, even as they remain entangled with traditional expectations (Liu, 2019; Ji, 2015). Some feminist sociological researchers further observe that young Chinese women face conflicting demands: they are expected to adhere to traditional definitions of womanhood while also navigating the pressures of fitting into a new, unpredictable market economy (Liu, 2014; Zarafonetis, 2017; Driessen and Sier, 2021).

Xue Wei's shifting perspectives and her dormitory discussions reveal the intricate process of feminine "becoming," which is marked by heterogeneity and flux, leaving contradictions in how she articulates her sexual subjectivity. On one hand, Xue Wei seeks sexual compatibility with her future partner, reflecting a desire for sexual agency. On the other, she grapples with confusion, anxiety, and fears about insecurity — emotions stirred by the powerful phallic forces that challenge her self-responsible and desiring subject. In this scenario, encapsulated by the ideal of proprietary and monogamous bliss ('*que ding zhong sheng*' — spending a whole life together), young women's bodies and sexualities are constrained within a domain that prioritizes 'responsible' choices aligned with familial and heterosexual norms of intimacy.

Meanwhile, if we take a closer look at the space-time-mattering of this excerpted conversation, Xue Wei appears to be constituted as a series of 'holes' within heteronormative discourses, reflective of broader cultural neoliberal desiring assemblages. The materiality of the location, the dormitory, and the timing of the 'girls' talk' reinforces 'lines of flight' where they queer and deterritorialize from dominant heteronormative discourses (such as the taboo of sex before marriage and the shaming of women's sexual desires) to reterritorialize as 'desiring' feminine subjects. Glynos and Stavrakakis (2008, p.264) suggest that collective fantasies, like legitimizing women's sexuality and desires, have the potential to restructure hierarchical relations, such as 'patriarchal social logics', in unforeseen ways. Ringrose and Renold (2012) also optimistically highlight the power of girls' group fantasies within

heterosexualized schooling contexts to resist the 'regulatory machine of the young classed and rationalized heterosexual matrix' (p.473).

Nevertheless, social and parental expectations remain deeply entwined with the everyday oppressions of the heterosexual matrix, manifested through feelings of shame and excitement during Xue Wei's dormitory conversation. In spaces like the dormitory, where the queering of (hetero)normative femininity emerges, discussing alternative approaches to sex, gender, and relationships represents a liminal state — straddling the 'in-betweenness' of emerging subjectivities between girlhood and womanhood, student and future wife, financially dependent and independent. The physical space of the dorm, coupled with the intimate, yet quasi-public nature of the conversation are freeing from parental surveillance, operating as a potentially subversive space that reclaims new possibilities for femininity and fosters productive flows of desire with unpredictable future effects.

The complex interplay between empowerment and traditional gender roles also appears in Xue Wei's reflections on the power dynamics in her previous relationship. She reflects on her previous 'manipulative behaviours' [her words]:

Xue Wei: I was manipulative and always asked him to run errands for me, like collecting my parcels and buying me breakfast. I think sometimes I treated him as a labourer or a tool.[…] I was demanding, and he always had to follow. For example, he was a smoker, so I asked him to quit smoking, and I liked to keep him disciplined. At first, he was quite obedient and liked to do what I asked him to. However, as time went by, he gradually realized he had suppressed his anger and one day, he let it [his anger] all out.

[We continued talking about the criteria she is looking for in a young man]

Xue Wei: I prefer gentlemen who, for example, walk on the outer side of the pedestrian or stand in the flow of traffic when crossing the street, or someone who would help you with small things like pouring water during meals, showing thoughtfulness.

[…]

ZZ: How do you perceive gentlemanly behaviour in men? Especially in your relationships or romantic experiences?

Xue Wei: Some girls, like me, might crave that feeling of being chǒng (宠 pampered/ spoiled), like being treated like a little princess. So, if someone's personality is naturally caring and considerate, and they always think about you and take care of you, the relationship might last longer.

For Xue Wei, the preference for gentlemanly conduct — such as escorting her to her dormitory, running errands, and demonstrating protective behaviour like walking on the traffic side of the sidewalk — indicate a persistent adherence to heteronormative gender scripts. These scripts valorise traditional masculinity while simultaneously using traditional feminine roles to exert control within relationships. Thus, gendered subjectivities are constructed under the dual pressures of striving for individual self-sufficiency and conforming to the normative aesthetics of a romantic relationship that reinforce essentialist views of masculinity and femininity (Liu, 2014). The underlying gender differential logic and neotraditional ideologies position men as the breadwinners and chivalrous protectors (Cao, 2018; Allen, 2007; Liong and Chan, 2020). Such dual positions also resonate with Liu's (2014) research on urbanite women in Beijing, in which Liu argues that the Chinese women hold a dualistic portrayal of the 'autonomous modern female' and the 'dependent modern female.' (p.22). By taking an instrumental gender practice, Chinese young women 'modify their autonomy - a 'self-curtailed version of autonomy' - through which they evolves a harmonious balance of opposite discourses (ibid. p.32). By adopting the persona of a 'little princess' in her relationships, Xue Wei engages with postfeminist discourses; a blend of freedom, liberation, and pleasure-seeking that simultaneously reaffirms essentialist gender differences, crafting an aestheticized image of conjugal harmony.

Apart from gendered scripts and performative norms, Xue Wei's self-

reflection — marked by her critical account of her “manipulative behaviour”— encapsulates the unresolved tension women face when navigating assertiveness and control over men’s bodies and attention. This assertion of agency is simultaneously intertwined with a reaffirmation of feminine desirability through being cared for or “pampered.”Similar to the challenges faced by women in the West under 'postfeminist culture', young Chinese women are navigating their own myths of 'feminine difference' and equality (Spakowski, 2011; Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006; McRobbie, 2007). These myths are embedded within a socialist rhetoric of achieved liberation and a denial of women’s sense of self (Liu, 2014). McRobbie (2007) frames this gender re-positioning as a 'postfeminist masquerade.' Drawing on Butler’s concept of gender melancholia, McRobbie argues that this re-positioning is not merely a re-traditionalization but a 'containment strategy' adopted by the (patriarchal) symbolic to manage potential disruptions to the stable binaries of sexual difference (ibid. p.724.). The hyper-femininity of the masquerade reinserts women within traditional gender hierarchies — illustrated by the archetype of a 'little princess' and chivalrous boyfriend — ironically reaffirming femininity while suggesting these performances are freely chosen. By explicitly embracing certain aspects of femininity, it seems that the affective labour of care promotes specific performances of masculinity, which ultimately rooted in an outpouring of unfulfilled desire for a heteronormative imagination of intimacy (Walkerdine, 1984).

Studying Xue Wei’s case reveals a series of seemingly contradictory gendered discourses that nevertheless unfold into a prioritised process of gendered and sexual ‘becoming’—an affective aesthetics of inhabiting a particular gendered subjectivity. Xue Wei links sexual responsibility with financial independence and commitment to a heterosexual, monogamous relationship, reflecting an understanding of sexual intimacy that aligns with middle-class, heteronormative ideals. Her aspirations for independence are articulated through and shaped by her sexual and relational choices, which

ultimately orient her towards the pursuit of a suitable marriage partner and the promise of (hetero)normative happiness.

5.3 Bai Xue

5.3.3 'I can add his name later on the property deed': Marriage and career as a site of resistance and gender becoming

Bai Xue, like Xue Wei, holds aspirations for financial independence and a form of femininity deemed desirable within her societal context. I encountered Bai Xue during her third year of undergraduate studies while she was auditing one of the Love Psychology courses. In our first interview, Bai Xue explained that her aspirations for independence and career success are rooted in her upbringing in a 'traditional' family. Furthermore, her dream to achieve a desirable femininity includes specific aims related to property ownership and career pathway, which she considers integral to her vision of romantic relationships.

Bai Xue: Growing up, I often heard praise for my appearance alongside comments like, 'You don't need to work hard with these looks; you can marry a rich man.' My mom, despite being well-educated, holds traditional views and believes a woman needs a husband to buy property for her. So, a girl like me shouldn't need to strive. Despite this, I believe I must work harder to achieve a higher platform and independence, to distance myself from such perspectives.

ZZ: What kind of life do you envision for your future? What does independence mean to you?

Bai Xue: I aim to break free from my family's influence, or better yet, become a positive influence on them. I dream of earning enough to demonstrate that I can be self-sufficient […] achieving high academic success, securing a

stable income, and buying a small apartment for myself for stability and security. I would like to be in a relationship, but I am willing to remain single if I cannot find someone who truly suits me. To me, being independent means not having to rely on anyone else for happiness or financial support; it even means not needing to have a child. I've also encouraged my younger brother to seek love in a way that isn't confined to traditional gender expectations.

Bai Xue's narrative presents a juxtaposition between subversion and reinforcement of heteronormative expectations around conjugal relationships in China. At first glance, her aspirations for financial independence and autonomous decision-making appear to challenge the traditional objectification and subjugation of women, which is embedded within the pursuit of heteronormative happiness, or at least (hetero)normative consumptions. Prolonged singlehood and solitary living have emerged as symbols of independence, shaping new feminine identities that challenge traditional timelines and spatial expectations imposed by family and society (Bernroider, 2024). Moreover, Bai Xue's ambition to own property is not solely an expression of her entrepreneurial spirit, but also marks as a symbolic request for security and stability—seeking both success and independence within a patriarchal cultural framework. Specifically, Bai Xue's 'traditional' mother supports the idea of leveraging 'female privilege' to negotiate conjugal property as she encourages Bai Xue to 'capitalize' on her appearance and 'gender advantages' (Zheng, 2019; Liu, 2014). This perspective resonates with the notion of women as objects of male desire and underscores a neotraditional form of femininity in the market-oriented neoliberal and post-socialist context in China.

This seemingly progressive shift towards an idealized vision of middle-class, financial independence may still mask potential risks and structural inequalities, resembling more of a mirage than a genuine transformation. Traditionally, property ownership underscored a woman's subjugation to

patriarchal control — viewed as possessions of men or the patriarchal family (Fincher, 2014). Confucian beliefs have ingrained ceremonial 'rites' that teach feminine virtues from a patriarchal viewpoint; emphasizing obedience and loyalty codified in the Three Obedience[s] and Four Virtues (Confucius, 1979 [19.22]). These doctrines articulate women's role and their relation to men, which requires a woman to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son after her husband's death (Wolf and Huang, 1980). This marriage custom also revealed in the specific wordings for marriage in China: for women, the word is *jià* 嫁 which means marry into a man's family, for men, *qǔ* 娶 which means marry to get a woman in his family.

In practice, homeownership has long been regarded as a prerequisite for marriage in China. This norm reinforces both gender inequality and class stratification, placing a double burden on men and women alike (Croll, 1995; Rofel, 2007; Fincher, 2016; Driessen and Sier, 2021). Following the market reforms of 1980s, the collapse of the employment-based welfare system and the end of state-allocated housing not only led to soaring housing prices, but also exacerbated structural gender disparities in the early 2000s (Fincher, 2016; Driessen and Sier, 2021). Ethnographic studies have shown that under the combined influence of legal frameworks and patrilocal norms, women—particularly educated, urban daughters—are often excluded from property ownership, as marital homes are typically registered under the husband's name (Fincher, 2016; Zavoretti, 2017). The property ownership has become a criterion for assessing a man's ability to support a family, and therefore is seen as an indispensable characteristic of Chinese men's masculinity and a signifier of his socio-economic standing (Driessen and Sier, 2019; Choi and Peng, 2016; Mao and Wu, 2024).

Whereas marriage continues to be viewed as a rite of passage to adulthood and social legitimacy, Bai Xue, the young woman discussed here actively resists the dominant script of hyperfemininity and obedient conjugality. Her rejection of heteronormative timelines manifests through both symbolic and

material acts: purchasing her own apartment, living independently from her natal family, and encouraging her younger brother to find love irrespective of gender or sexuality. These choices signify not only a defiance of traditional familism, but also a remaking of feminine subjectivity within the neoliberal, post-reform Chinese context. Her narrative reflects a fusion of aspirational individualism and feminist resistance, positioning herself as both socially mobile and ideologically autonomous.

Moreover, Bai Xue's seemingly autonomous choice and individualised approach to romantic relationships need to be situated in the broader sexuality assemblage that is fuelled with gender antagonism. Her gendered position is not only shaped by the hostile comments about the equation of her appearance and 'values' as a woman from her family and relatives, but also by the dominant narratives that frame young women as vulnerable, within a heterosexualised culture structured by phallic power. These tensions are further compounded by enduring gender inequalities in relating to marital property ownership in contemporary China (Fincher, 2014; Evans, 2010). As the first-born daughter in a two-child family (she has a younger brother who is currently in junior high school), Bai Xue's Bai Xue's experiences are embedded in both structural and affective dimensions of gendered expectation. For her, educational mobility may represent the initial step in rerouting a normative feminine life course — one her mother embodies and continues to uphold with conviction.

Her motivation for academic and career success to live independently and escape the scrutiny from her family and others, embodies a similar aesthetic preference which envisages a pathway toward liberated modern and middle-class femininity – a resistance to heteronormative gendered and classed values. Underpinning this, the ideal subjects of female independence and 'freeing' from 'traditional gender roles' is the renewed requirement for young women as a subject of capability – a subject of intensively manageable, postfeminist, gender-aware biopolitical practices of new governmentality (McRobbie, 2007; Rose, 1999). The fabricated middle-class imagery in Bai Xue's accounts

reflects a 'matter of individual responsibility', intermeshed with a discourse of individual endeavours and discipline centring around the narratives of choices and upward mobilities (Rose, 1992:142). The potential for social mobility and middle-class privilege is often predicated on a future imagined without children or family responsibilities. This framing not only intensifies the pressure on women to achieve individual success, but also positions single women within a discourse of 'unbalanced subjectivity,' where personal ambition is viewed as coming at the expense of normative relational roles (Lahad, 2024). This discourse positions single women in a fraught relationship with societal expectations, where the stereotype of the 'leftover woman' becomes a battleground of lack and excess, amplifying sexist and patriarchal pressures (Lahad, 2024). Mediated through the discursive categories of class-gender-age apparatus, Lahad (2024) suggests that these discourses not only reinforce harmful stereotypes but also compel women to undergo self-transformation to align with societal ideals of finding the 'right one'.

Meanwhile, in her personal reflections captured in a voice memo diary, she articulates a shift in perspective — viewing the search for 'Mr. Right' as a choice rather than an imperative. This subtle defiance of the marital norms could be seen as a form of resistance against the pressured matchmaking that prevails in youth gender cultures, advocating for personal fulfilment and emotional compatibility in defining one's romantic life.

> *I wish to find someone where we just fall in love with each other or who I'm really into, and he will like me back afterwards. This is the kind of relationship that I want. As for what the lecturer mentioned about marriage law[19] [note: prenuptial agreement and property ownership] today, my family*

[19] In 2011, the Supreme People's Court of China implemented a new interpretation of the Marriage Law, stating that ownership of housing property would be attributed to the person named on the property deed, unless challenged legally. While this regulation seems impartial, it tends to affect women adversely, given that property deeds in China

are fairly open about it [buying a marital property]; if he has financial difficulties. As long as I feel safe around him and he won't betray me, I can add his name to the fáng chǎn zhèng [房产证 property deed] one day.

Marital property ownership is entangled with deeper layers of transformative gender dynamics through its historical legacy and socio-economic transformation. Here, in Bai Xue's fantasy of an ideal romantic relationship, the object — *fáng chǎn zhèng* (property ownership) serves as a symbolic marker for social status and sense of security, as does her familial financial support (Mao and Wu, 2024). With the promise to 'add his name later [on the property deed]' and 'make sure he wouldn't betray me', she reconfigures her gendered position in her imaginary of romance with men where she could inhibit a more powerful positioning within a usually hierarchal heterosexual matrix.

In Baixue's case, the depiction of 'independent women' is not only imbued with a middle-class aspiration but also reflects a manifestation of the neo-traditionalist shift in marital norms. Revisiting her research data on single professional women in Shanghai in 2015, Chenying Pi (2024) argues that Chinese women envision an egalitarian, companionate model of marriage. In doing so, they negotiate their identities as independent modern women—not only challenging dominant gender paradigms, but also engaging in self-regulation by reinventing, disciplining, and managing their femininity (Pi, 2024). The widespread belief that men should be the primary homebuyers is so ingrained that women are often discouraged from purchasing property themselves due to fears of 'scaring off potential husbands,' which is considered shameful within many social circles (Fincher, 2014, p.87; see also Mao and Wu, 2024). Indeed, the gendered assemblages of masculinity and property deeds suggest that the working and reworking of the norms – purchasing marital

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more commonly bear the names of men (Zang, 2020)

property as a masculine act – 'echo the master discourse' (Butler, 2004). The performing of these norms, particularly adding a name to the property deed as a symbol of assessing a partner's loyalty, reveals a reversal where men, rather than women, are objectified in a patrilocal familism.

Apart from previous empowering singlehood and resistance to a normative life, Bai Xue's notions of matrilocal marriage practices, perhaps still reiterate a dominant aesthetics of normative forms (hetero)normative intimacy. Such 'freedoms' are perhaps only accessible with a relative class privilege, which is embroiled not only in financial and material matters, but also in the emotional burden associating with maintaining singlehood to defy patriarchal power. Such narratives are still hooked in an either-or relation to her negotiation and resistance against the naturalisation of marriage and family: either they find 'Mr Right' and get married; or they do not find 'the right one' and stay single. Other 'alternative' imaginations of romance and familial relations are limited.

*5.3.*4 Navigating the gendered body: Affective tensions between attraction and repulsion

Baixue's ambivalence toward the objectification of young women's bodies—including her own body and appearance as desirable—emerged as a recurring theme throughout the interviews. In addition to mentioning her mother and other relatives' commentaries on her appearance in the last section, I invited her to expand on her discussions about her 'appearance'.

> *I have been working on my Mǎ jiá xiàn (visible abdominal lines). Recently, I started on flexibility, like splits and other basic dancing practices. Sometimes I live quite simply — I do not care for my looks and do not even wash my face. But when I go out with my friends, I wear makeup, style my hair and match my clothes. (ZZ: do these efforts take much time?) Not quite. These are my daily routines, and they are quite normal for me. It doesn't*

mean that nǔ wèi yuè jǐ zhě róng (A girl will doll herself up for him who loves her), but to satisfy me.

At first glance, Baixue's narrative about her beauty maintenance resonates with postfeminist subjectivities intertwining personal beauty endeavours with the prevailing expectations of hyperfemininity necessary for heterosexual appeal (Liu and Li, 2024; Ma, 2022). Instead of defining 'readiness' by specific standards such as the 'ideal' weight or body shape, the beautification process focuses on personal feelings of preparedness. According to Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) and Tincknell (2011), makeover narratives often promise emotional renewal by transforming the body into a slimmer, rejuvenated version of itself, positioning the non-conformist body as the abject 'other'. Moreover, incorporating this transformation within narratives of self-care, the discourse surrounding 'body perfectionism' subtly assures women of their autonomy and ability to manage themselves effectively, while placing the responsibility for shortcomings on the individual (Negra, 2009). This 'perfect body' discourse echoes with Western research on postfeminist neoliberal young womanhood that, for middle-class women especially, for whom the performance of femininity is no longer regarded as supporting a patriarchal system, but it is rather to be freely enjoyed for its own sake primarily through active consumption (McRobbie, 2009). Emphasising the agentic subjectivities, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, have written extensively about "aesthetic entrepreneurship" (Gill, 2007; Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017) on shaping experiences and practices relate to beauty. The management of one's body is taking part in a new and unique form of biopower based on self-care and motivation and pursuing so-called spiritual satisfaction ('to satisfy myself').

Recent scholarship has increasingly shifted away from analysing beauty standards purely as cultural symbolism, instead turning toward the interior and psychic lives of young women navigating neoliberal conditions (Orgad and Gill,

2021; Scharff, 2016; Wood, 2024; Ma, 2022). In the Chinese context, Ma's (2022) study of 'nner beauty' discourses further reveals how such narratives are tethered to both state and market interests. These discourses construct young women as self-disciplined, financially independent neoliberal subjects, while simultaneously reinscribing patriarchal gender norms that position women within traditional familial roles (Ma, 2022, p.10). Situated during the UK's first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, Wood's (2024) study of feminine beauty practices highlights a move from 'aesthetic labour' — the work of maintaining and improving appearance — towards *affective labour* - the emotional and psychic work of cultivating a disposition aligned with the demands of capital. In a time of heightened insecurity and precarity, affective labour became central to sustaining a gendered, racialised, and classed moral vision of the 'good' pandemic citizen — one who not only followed government-imposed distancing measures but also seized the lockdown as an 'opportunity' for self-transformation (Wood, 2024, p.84). This in turn provided a sense of control and security amidst uncertainty. Such self-care discourses reflect long-standing neoliberal governance strategies that devolve responsibility onto the individual. In both cases, beauty and self-care become deeply affective projects that sustain neoliberal logics under different cultural and political configurations in the specific time-space-mattering of Covid-19 pandemic.

Therefore, when approaching the narratives of 'self-control' and 'discipline,' along with the discourse of 'satisfying myself, not others,' from a culturally grounded perspective, Bai Xue's beauty management reveals a set of contradictions. Her practices are shaped by, and simultaneously reproduce, an aestheticised feminine body politics embedded in a heteropatriarchal market economy (Liu and Li, 2024). For instance, the abdominal workout she mentioned has been the standards for sporting an appropriate but feminine appearance. *Mǎ jiá xiàn*, the visible abdominal lines, indicates a low-body fat, slender yet 'appropriate' muscular female body, in contrast with a rugged muscular aesthetic or the curvy body figure. We can find this double bind in her

engagement with her make up practices as well: she emphasises her agency (sometimes she can choose not to wear makeup) and argues that her effort is pleasing herself rather than others (*nǔ wèi yuè jǐ zhě wóng)*. From her accounts, we can see the normative gendered and body beauty ideals are interwoven with narratives of discipline and with which rhetoric and images of aesthetic vigilance and affective labour are institutionalised and neutralised. Bai Xue's narrative normalised the physical beauty standards and reinvention of oneself as an appraisal of personal characteristics for self-disciplinary ('it is my daily routine', it is 'normal').

Underlying Bai Xue's contradictory articulations about 'beauty management as self-discipline' and repudiation of 'being desirable' and on the other rejecting the notion of being desirable—lies a neoliberal narrative of self-choice. This discourse reaffirms her agentic subjectivity while simultaneously reinforcing her capacity to enact and regulate male desire. Such performance of 'emphasized femininity' (Connell 1987, p.183), empowered by 'the knowledge of '[one' s]own sexual attractiveness' also lend themselves to being visually consumed by others, even as it suits one's liberated interests to do so' (Gill 2009a, p.148). The female body becomes a 'transductive force', the term coined in Yang's study on beauty labour (Yang, 2017, p.126). Through treatment, exercises, and make up, 'the individual female body has become 'the site of extracting values and entrepreneurial capital' (Yang, 2017, p.130).

If we consider psychic effects of repeated the melancholic dynamics (Butler, 1995), Bai Xue's accounts of vigilant 'beauty management' inhibit a carefully regulated psychic forces of heterosexualised expectations of bodily transformation. While she positions herself as an 'independent' woman–resisting to normative marital norms and rejecting 'trying too hard' on beauty maintenance, there is, nevertheless, a palpable pleasure in repeatedly narrating her feminine desirability. Her repeating narrative on her bodily transformation and management inhibit in a complex desire for bodily disciplinary and the dilemma for desiring about men's attentions (Ringrose and

Renold, 2012). Throughout the interview, Bai Xue makes continual efforts to convince me that she is disinterested in male attention and does not seek to be the object of heterosexual desire. For instance, she notes: *"I know many people fancy me… but only attracted by my beauty"* [she giggled], while simultaneously qualifying this with a classed and self-regulatory disclaimer: *"Well, it sounds a bit narcissistic."* Such narrative repetition reflects a double-bind: on one hand, a desire to affirm socially normative expectations of feminine beauty, and on the other, an effort to neutralise potential criticism — especially those surrounding vanity or overt sexual availability in the culturally normative scripts for women. By consistently emphasizing her agentic distance, her performance of 'not caring' becomes part of the very disciplinary logic it seeks to resist.

At the same time, referencing her 'popularity' among young men and displaying qualities of self-discipline, Bai Xue's narratives expose the invisible but entrenched hierarchical terrain of heteronormativity in the university setting and broader cultural contexts. "*Some of my friends jokingly told me that a lot of guys seem to treat me specially because of my looks… as someone who's constantly told that I'm pretty, I think it's quite normal…*" [her words]. This apparent 'normalisation' of attention from men is not simply a reflection of her desirability, but also a performance of postfeminist femininity — assertive yet modest, desirable yet disinterested — embedded in classed, gendered, and moral expectations. The micropolitical implications of these territorializations manifest in her vigilant and, at times, almost confrontational stance on heterosexual appeal among her same-sex friendships. Her heterosexually-coded body and appearance function as battlegrounds or sites where she simultaneously upholds and negotiates the norms dictated by heteronormativity. These are central to the enjoyment she derives from discussing her beauty and projecting a posture of nonchalance.

Studying politics of 'postfeminist masquerade' demanded of young women (McRobbie, 2009), Ringrose (2008) argues that the psychic energies invested in involved in disassociating from the harmful dynamics in young women's

accounts of performing sexiness and femininity in socially 'acceptable' way. These tensions are visible in Bai Xue's discursive strategies for performing 'appropriate femininity. This young woman's very resistance of patriarchal heterosexualisation is couched in the neoliberal discourses of self-improvement, disciplines on regulatory norms on young women's gendered bodies, which again reorienting her gender subjectivities towards the dominant modalities of the 'appropriate' femininity. The affective dynamics in her discussions about feminine beauty generate a vibrant tension between attraction and repulsion in her sexual assemblages, reinforcing institutionalized and culturally normative aesthetics for performing heterosexuality. Her sexuality assemblage thus reinforces institutionalised and culturally normative aesthetics of heterosexuality, even as she claims to disidentify with them.

5.4 Zhu Wen

5.4.1 I like her 'naivety' and 'lickable' body: Channelling hegemonic masculinity with subjugate positioning of women

Zhu Wen is a twenty-year-old young man studying Applied Physics. He perceived himself as 'sophisticated and sociable' [his words]. Zhu Wen disidentifies with a hegemonic masculinity – *I am not gao fu shuai (tall, rich and handsome), only tall probably […] instead, I am a fat guy, but I am not a fat zhai (otaku, slovenly unattractive)'*. Through his self-reflective identification of his gender subject, he contemplates his positions in the gender hierarchy, with a subtle reference to the hierarchy of masculinities in wider society (Gong, 2016)

In the post-socialist and neo/non-liberal Chinese context, the idealised 'tall rich handsome' type of masculinity, embodied by a 'charming victor' of the neoliberal economy normalises the role of men as overbearing protectors and benefactors in heterosexual romance (Song, 2022, p.83; see also Song and

Hird, 2014). Song and Hird (2014) note that, along with a post-reform diversification of masculinities, men's sexual attractions are very much associated with their socio-economic positions. Such an association is evidenced by contemporary marital customs, for example, as noted in the previous example, requirements for grooms to provide symbolic expenses, such as property ownership (Luo and Sun, 2015; Zavoretti, 2016). Compared with young women's reflectivity on this objectification and the patriarchal logic behind such a marital tradition, young Chinese men often see it as women's 'natural' aspirations to be with powerful men to legitimize their control over socio-economic resources (Liu, 2019a).

However, the self-proclaimed masculine identification is never a simple gendered positioning, rather it involves a multiplicity of hegemonic sense-making and requires multiple positionings (Wetherall,1997). The following excerpt comes from a discussion of Zhu Wen's recent crush on Wang Xia young woman from the same laboratory. Through narrating his fantasised intimate relationship, he reconfigured himself in a hierarchical gendered position within the heteronormative structures that operate through gender-class assemblages.

[In the interview, Zhu Wen elaborated on this ambiguous romance with Wang Xi, a young woman working in the same laboratory with him]

Zhu Wen: I have to admit that I am chan ('馋' drooling over). [I was attracted to] her body on first sight – she has the kind of 'kě tiǎn' ('可舔''lickable') body figure …she almost fits my imagination of a perfect girlfriend – good-looking, slim, particularly she is dān cúun (naïve, innocent 单纯). Except she is a bit short, she is near perfect.

ZZ: Since you have been talking a lot over a year, have you found anything you have in common?

Zhu Wen: Common things [deep breath and pause] few. We complement each other in many ways. For example, I am generally more sophisticated – always thinking of all the possibilities. She is,

however, much simpler and probably naïve. She might enjoy studying a lot of the time. Since she can get into this university (H), she is probably also intelligent.

The (hetero)sexualisation of Wang Xi, his crush, was most apparently revealed in his referential strategies that overtly concentrate on her physical appearance and body features (good-looking, slim). As Zhu Wen explained in detail in his criteria of idealised femininity (pretty, slim, naïve), he desires a particular type of woman characterised by attractive appearance and approachable personality. The criteria he listed define both purity/virginity (naïve) and slimness as indicators of sexual attractiveness, constituting a specific reference strategy that centres around an immature, vulnerable imaginary of femininities. The discourse not only aligns with China's patriarchal tradition, which emphasizes women's obedience, but it is also shaped by an aesthetic that frames women's 'docile bodies' within a patriarchal market economy and commodity fetishism (Peng, 2022; Liu and Li, 2024).

Zhu Wen contrasts his own self-described 'sophisticated' and 'calculating' nature with what he perceives as the girl's simplicity and 'naivety,' thereby casting himself as the one in control, and adheres to an imaginary of dominant masculine position. His characterization of Wang Xi's intelligence as 'not too bad,' even though he acknowledges her admission to the same university, subtly undermines her intellectual capabilities, positioning her as inferior. When I probed for more details about this relationship, Zhu Wen explained that he made his interest clear through various actions: assisting her with projects, escorting her back to the dormitory after classes, and initiating discussions on news topics he considered intellectually stimulating. (''I asked her to send an analysis on the news to me'').

Zhu Wen's narratives points to the traditional male-dominant power structures where man assume the assertive and protective role while women and femininity are seen as submissive and passive. It can also link to male

power and desires that contextualised on the comments he made on Wang Xi's body — "drooling over her body", "she has a lickable body figure." Through overtly erotic fetishizing and objectification of women as sexualised bodies, he further asserts his desiring hypermasculine subjectivity where masculine subjects are associated with vigour and machismo, entwined with fantasies that bind with women's sexualized and 'docile' bodies (Tsang, 2020; Holland *et al.*, 1998). In Holland *et al.*'s (1998) research on institutionalised heterosexuality, men can access a public language of instrumental sexuality as a comfortable embodiment of their sexuality. Despite Zhu Wen acclaiming to refuse the demands of hegemonic masculinity (tall rich and handsome), he reiterates his masculinity through his access to the language that objectifies women and exercises power over women (see discussion on the participant-research power dynamic in Chapter 3).

The analysis of the extract and observations reveals a sexuality assemblage involving Zhu Wen, the young woman he has a crush on, and the heteronormative context of university life — such as escorting her to her dormitory as a culturally coded expression of romantic interest. This assemblage further includes idiosyncratic elements such as his bodily features, academic pursuits, and broader discourses surrounding women's sexualised bodies. Within this framework, a flow of affect emerges, marked by Zhu Wen's acknowledgment of his socio-economic disadvantages and his interest in Wang Xi. These social/subjective factors collectively reinforce Zhu Wen's masculine position within the heteronormative structuring. This situation is further complicated by Zhu Wen's participation in serial heterosexual dating, which occurs in a competitive environment against his imagined *'gāo fù shuài'* (tall, rich, and handsome) rivals. This competitive dating scene is tinged with anxieties and a sense of inadequacy, stemming from insecurities about his physical appearance and socio-economic status, as well as his status as a student.

5.4.2 '800 yuan, problem solved': Affective thrust, fantasies and successful masculinities

The ongoing analysis of Zhu Wen's situation sheds further light on the affective flows and capacities that characterize his sexuality assemblages. Acknowledging the significance of psychological and sociocultural affectivities allows for a deeper understanding of the micro-politics at play within this sexuality assemblage. Shortly after the initial interview, Zhu Wen expressed his feelings to Wang Xi, and only received rejection from her. However, when asked about his feelings regarding the rejection, Zhu Wen did not directly articulate his emotions. Instead, he shifted the topic to his future ambitions, expounding his plans for success:

After being rejected, it suddenly strikes me that– why on earth do I have to find a girlfriend in university […] It is difficult to imagine the oddity of having a girlfriend in college, and then you end up getting married [...] having a girlfriend in your twenty-something is like raising [yang, 养] a wife for others […] if you really want to find someone to spend a lifetime with, you have to take it slowly […] I have invested so much in this ambiguous relationship in the first two years of my undergraduate life; I will not have enough energy to have another one […] she also knows (my sacrifice/investment).

….

I think it [read: relationship, love, marriage] has to go with the flow. My aunt told me that if I went to Shen Zhen for work after graduation, there would be a bunch of [women] in every age group from 20s, 30s, to 40s [available for me to pick]. While [in college], if I want to have a relationship so that we can study together, I only need to keep in touch with Wang Xi. If I want to have sex, I can use the money to solve it [he snorts] …800 yuan, problem solved. […] If I find a job and obtain a well-off life after graduation, women will come

after me.

Zhu Wen's framing of his future career ambitions and the instrumentalization of romantic relationships functions as a reference point for his deliberate detachment from emotional vulnerability — as he remarked, "*surprisingly, I do not feel hurt from her rejection.*" This rhetorical stance reflects a broader discursive pattern wherein ambition and emotional toughness are positioned as masculine virtues. Meanwhile, as he frames his ambition and resilience, his narrative reflects a pragmatic approach to heterosexual relationships, treating a romantic partner as a strategic investment—an asset that may or may not yield desirable returns. His statement that having a girlfriend in college is akin to " *raising [yang, 养] a wife for others*" starkly illustrates the gendered logic of ownership and transferability. Here, the woman's sexualized and gendered body is rendered a form of property, and the dissolution of the relationship is framed not as emotional loss but as a failed investment or betrayal — where the woman is imagined to ultimately 'belong' to another man. Therefore, by framing romantic entanglements as economic transactions, Zhu Wen not only objectifies potential partners through marriageability criteria but also engages in self-objectification, evaluating his own worth in terms of aspirational upward mobility. Acknowledging his current economic disadvantage and appearance, Zhu Wen pins his hopes on upward mobility, and which he believes will enable him to attract romantic partners more easily in the future. His remark "If I find a job and obtain a well-off life after graduation, women will come after me", resonates with the "joke about faithful men" that frequently appeared in the Love Psychology course (Chapter 4). In an attempt to convince both me and himself, Zhu Wen constructs an imaginary embodiment of normative masculinity by envisioning a future self that situated within a mature, 'adult' heterosexual position. He fantasizes that once he achieves the markers of a "good life" or "well-off" status (financial stability, professional success), he will naturally embody a Casanova-like figure,

attracting women effortlessly. This projection reflects not only internalized scripts of gendered success but also a deferred ideal of heterosexual desirability, where masculine worth is imagined as accumulating over time and translating into sexual capital.

The production of Zhu Wen's gendered 'being', is coincidence between the perceived self and the 'imaginary positioning'. In this case, he conforms to key elements in descriptions of hegemonic masculinity — man as ambitious and vigorous, emotionally tough and able to keep his rationality. His articulation strategically takes – what Wetherell and Edley (1999, p.342) term – 'imaginary position' through which individuals align themselves with hegemonic masculinity without necessarily embodying it. In the context of my research, this concept is useful for understanding how participants like Zhu Wen construct aspirational narratives of toughness and ambition, even when their lived experiences do not fully match the dominant masculine ideal. Rather than actualising hegemonic masculinity, Zhu Wen perform imagined proximity to it, which serves to stabilise his self-worth in precarious social and relational conditions (see also, Connell, 2003; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2003). Indicating that he would satisfy his personal wants and desires by purchasing sex ("800-yuan, problem solved), he 'objectively' separates his emotional needs ('keep in touch with Wang Xi') and sexual desires (he claims to have 'stronger sex drive' than average guys) from a romantic relationship. Through consistent creation of a more fulfilled imagery of masculinity – 'phantasmatic efforts at alignment' (2014[1993], p.22), Zhu Wen's palpable sexist utterance engages in a process of dis-identifying with the multiple emasculation he has faced – as a student of a relatively socio-economically disadvantageous status and a young man recently romantically rejected by a woman

Despite this young man's apparent disregard for emotional fluctuations, there are still affect flows underlying his intensions to reduce intimacies to instrumental practices (''as a study company'') and/or commercial sexual transactions ('"800 yuan, problem solved"). Within this affective assemblage of

narrating his unsuccessful romantic stories, he has been actively negotiating normative assumptions of masculine sexuality through performatively to reproduce an idealised entrepreneurial masculinity, or what he describes as ‘sophisticated’. Despite his romantic failure and perceived disadvantages in physical attractiveness and socio-economic status as a young man at the age of twenty, he envision his life course – academic achievement, admission to a prestigious university, and securing a high-income job, and makes decisions on marital-oriented relationship. His aspirations stimulate affective flows that align with the ideals of a Chinese-version of the middle-class 'good life' (Yan, 2020; Xie, 2020; Liu, 2019a; Martin, 2018).

The endorsement of neoliberal entrepreneurship and imagination of wealth and access to sexual resources are reflected in the ever-changing hegemonic masculinity formation within China’s socio-economic contexts (Osburg, 2013; Tsang, 2020; Zheng, 2006; Liu, 2019a). Tsang (2020) provides a compelling analysis of single rural-to-urban migrant men who, in seeking sex-related services, confront unattainable ideals of normative masculinity. Channelling the microenvironment and discourses of the single-adult men and their major ‘entangled’ life tensions onto the macro sociological pictures of China’s neoliberal dream, she argues that masculinities and desire are differently articulated and shaped by external economic, intuitional and demographic changes impacted by heteronormative expectations (Tsang, 2020). Meanwhile, Liu’s (2019) research on the hegemonic exemplary norms of *chéng gōng* (成功 successful entrepreneurship) as a prerequisite for ‘the good life’, as well as personal quality and respectable masculinity. His findings highlight how the internalisation of success—measured through prestige, wealth, and personal discipline—reflects a meritocratic ideal shaped by China’s post-reform market economy and transnational neoliberal logics (Liu, 2019a). Zhu Wen’s narrative echoes these dynamics. His educational trajectory — from a prestigious

university[20] to a high-paying job in Shenzhen—represents more than just class mobility. It embodies an aspirational masculinity rooted in geographical and cultural mobility, supported by educational credentials and marketable capital. As Kaufmann, Bergman and Joye (2004, p.751) note, such aspirations are best understood as a pursuit of 'motility' — a socially constructed capacity to be mobile, to aspire, and to act upon that aspiration in pursuit of a more complete, worthy, and respectable subject position.

The endorsement of the meritocratic and neoliberal values also reflects this young man's relations and perspectives with women, through which he recognizes social ideals as well as identifying the 'other'. Speaking with respect and admiration about the superior positions of the *dàlǎobǎn* (literal translated as big bosses, or successful businessman), Zhu Wen encountered during his internship, he elaborates his perspective on sexual harassment.

Zhu Wen: The only way you can resist [sex harassment] is to become part of the elite class, and then no one can control you otherwise you can easily ruin your own career prospects…when people climb up, they see the backsides of the above and smiling faces from below. It's quite ironic. That's reality… For women, you can either tolerate sexual harassment or choose to lower your standard of living. But a man tries to sexually harass me (he snorts), I'd clearly tell him not to and I'd give him a good kick if he persisted.

ZZ: Even if it might affect your future? [note: as I tried to apply the same logic to his statements on sexual harassment]

Zhu Wen Well, that can't be helped. [Laughs[Let it affect me [my future[, then. Homosexuality, there's nothing that can be done about it. I heard that if a woman has taken emergency contraception before, it can affect the male fetus' brain, causing the male to self-identify as a female in his mind, which is one of

[20] H university is one of the "985" "211" university, known as first-tier universities in China

the causes of homosexuality.

Zhu Wen: I didn't quite understand what you just said. Do you think that women taking emergency contraception would...?

Zhu Wen: …Influence the male foetuses if the emergency contraception increases the estrogen in the male fetus' brain, making him psychologically identify as female (Me: Hm) which leads to homosexuality.

Zhu Wen articulates his aspiration to 'become part of the elites' as a strategy for protection from sexual harassment, reflecting a cynical understanding of how gendered power operates—particularly in relation to class and career advancement. His view implies that sexual harassment is an inevitable reality unless one possesses the power and status to resist it, thereby reinforcing a neoliberal discourse of self-responsibility. In this framing, the burden of navigating structural inequalities such as gendered violence is shifted onto the individual, rather than prompting systemic redress. While Zhu Wen appears aware of the structural limitations that hinder women from fully resisting harassment without facing repercussions, he simultaneously invokes a reductive and individualistic solution—framing his hypothetical response (*"I will give him a good kick"*) as a performance of assertive masculinity. In doing so, he constructs a version of masculinity rooted in control, superiority, and autonomy; one that disavows vulnerability and aligns itself against feminized or queer positions, which are perceived as inherently weak. This further solidifies his gendered subjectivity through proximity to hegemonic masculinity (Butler, 2014[1993]). Drawing from pseudoscientific beliefs that pathologize 'queer' 'homosexuality' and condemn women's sexuality ('e.g., the use of emergency contraception as the 'causes' of homosexuality), Zhu Wen constructs a version of straight masculinity that actively distances itself from sexualities deemed 'abnormal' (Pascoe, 2005). Arguably, the discursive strategies in his sexuality-assemblages are manifested within a social-cultural structures of 'compulsory heteronormativity' (Rich, 1980), wherein heterosexuality is assumed, enforced,

and naturalized. Within this framework, masculinity is celebrated through competitiveness and virility, while attributes associated with femininity, such as emotional expression, vulnerability, or dependency, are disavowed (Holland *et al*., 1998; Kimmel, 2017; Alldred and Fox, 2015)

The analysis of Zhu Wen's case highlights a complex web of discursive and material relations that shape, and are shaped by, his sexual assemblages. These include significant others (such as his aunt, girlfriend, and imagined future wife), intimate encounters (like Wang Xi's rejection and social events involving powerful male figures), circulating gender and sexual discourses (such as the valorisation of youthful women), and socio-economic positionalities (from his current identity as a student to his aspirations of becoming a successful businessman). These assemblages also extend to abstract notions like love, commitment, and sexual desire, revealing how such concepts are mobilised and negotiated within the broader affective and ideological landscape of masculinities in transition. The brief and ultimately unfulfilled romance with Wang Xi acted as a pivotal moment that further destabilised Zhu Wen's already fluid sexuality-assemblage. This encounter intensified affective flows and produced new territorializations of hegemonic masculinity, most notably through his fantasies of future success and increased romantic desirability. These imagined futures serve to consolidate a version of competitive masculinity structured around homophobic distancing, heterosexual assertion, and bodily capability. In this way, Zhu Wen's sexuality-assemblage is increasingly oriented toward a heteronormative horizon, one that is deeply entangled with the privileges and aspirations of middle-class, neoliberal entrepreneurial masculinity.

5.5 Chen Xiao

5.5.1 It's not chauvinism': Performing responsible masculinity

and mobilizing gender equality

Chen Xia, a 19-year-old young man, during the last three months away from campus, had been constantly caught in fights with his family about his major choices. After the lockdown restriction lifted in his local township, he worked as a part-time guitarist in a local nightclub. In our interviews, he was keen on sharing his observations about the ‘messiness’ in his workplace. He enthusiastically shared a screenshot of a conversation with a young woman he had met at a nightclub. Reflecting on the interaction, he interpreted the woman’s messages as an invitation to take the relationship further and remarked, "Look how fast a relationship (or fling) develops in the nightclub." During the interview, he elaborated:

> *Casual relationships like that are neither safe nor appropriate. The young women who work in those clubs don’t take themselves seriously. In less developed areas — villages or small towns — girls often start working in nightclubs at a very young age, sometimes even while underage. Many are still in secondary schools or vocational schools; some have dropped out of high school. Their attitudes towards sexuality and relationships are different from those of ‘normal’ people. They are very experienced [he emphasized]. They might change boyfriends every few days and start gaining these experiences [presumably sexual experiences] much earlier. It’s not zǎo liàn (early love) for them — I doubt they even have a concept of zǎo liàn. At the same age, they’ve already experienced everything, so we naturally have very different views on many things.*

He continued, recalling a specific encounter:

> *For me, the nightclub is just a social space. I know many people go there*

for 419[21] *or diào yú ('fishing')*[22]

His narrative reflects broader societal discourses on the appropriate behaviour and sexuality of women and young men, particularly the stigmatization of young women's sexual agency. Laden with moral boundaries of what Chen Xiao perceives as appropriate and responsible reflect a class-based bias and strategies for 'othering' women and distancing himself from these women. Crucially, as Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) and Scharff (2016) have shown, certain kinds of racialised and classed subjects are labelled as 'other'. Moreover, as Scharff (2016) argues, under neoliberalism, the exclusionary dynamics also extend to reflect the positionalities required to be an entrepreneurial subject. Here, through linking the sexual behaviours and attitudes of these young women to their socio-economic status and educational background ('school dropouts' or vocational schools, and coming from less developed areas), his articulation not only makes a judgement on what counts as respectable femininity, but also reflects on a self-responsible subject. This observation adds to the previous discussions on becoming a responsible and desiring subject through subjective repudiation – the subject configures itself through rejection of the other and what they are not (Scharff, 2016). In this extract, the construction of Chen Xiao's gender and sexual subjectivity also involves repudiating those women who engage in casual relationships and do not achieve academically as in his word, 'different than normal people'.

Meanwhile, in contrast with previous research on exhibitions of masculinity in nightclubs that suggest a static and solidarity masculinity display that adheres

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[21] A numeronym widely used in Chinese online discourse — plays on the phonetic similarity to the English phrase 'for one night', indicating a casual sexual encounter.

[22] In the context of a night club, *diào yú*, or fishing, is a metaphor for the dynamic of pursuit and seduction, particularly referring to someone who use various strategies as the 'bait' to draw the attention of potential partners.

to a hierarchal social power (Farrer, 2008b; Allison, 2006; Osburg, 2016), Chen Xiao's narrative reveals a more discursive positioning of masculinity. Chen Xiao's flexible and adaptable masculine position echoes Liong and Chan's (2020) research on young men's responses to sexualised culture in Hong Kong. Liong and Chan (2020) find that educated young men adopt diverse strategies and 'performative vigilance', to dodge masculine stigma - the male as a sexual predator - while making use of their cultural and educational capital to assume available hegemonic subject positions (p.226). In Chen Xiao's account, instead of viewing the nightclub as a liminal space for sexual freedom and consumption, his narrative suggests a rhetorically of resistance of sexualised cultures in such spaces, in the meantime, framing himself under a rational and responsible/respectable masculine position.

In addition, this subjective position can be traced back to the Confucian ideal of masculine self-cultivation – what Louie (2002, 2003) terms the quality of wen—which emphasises the containment of excessive sexual desire and the disciplined suppression of bodily urges. Chen Xiao's narrative negotiates socio-cultural striated heteronormative masculinity with other categories, and ties sexual morality to class, and socio-geographical positions. In the nightclub setting where potentially symbolize a space of moral and social fluidity, Chen positioned himself differently ('it is a place for socializing for me') and avoided the label given to undesirable and lustful nerds who seek transient sexual encounters in clubs. Underlying his insistence, he intends to stabilise his identity in the inherently unstable, shifting experience of 'becoming' masculine subjects. This is also particularly apparent in his discussion of responsible masculinity.

> *First, from the traditional perspective, responsibility means that as a young man, you have to support your family as a form of protection. […] Compared with how I treat my friends who are guys, I'm always kind to girls. If a girl makes mistakes, I won't blame her. From the education and upbring I have*

received since I was little, there is an unconscious feeling that girls are more vulnerable – they have fewer strengths, while men are usually in a leading position where they need to support their families. It is not male chauvinism; in general, we (young men) should protect girls as much as we can, no matter what kind of girls they are. […] Even though there are many girls who are feminists in our society, statistically speaking, they are still more vulnerable than men. We (as young men) shouldn't snatch their (women's) resources; we need to protect them.

Chen Xiao articulates his understanding of masculinity, which intersects with traditional gender roles focused on gender differences and exhibits an ambivalent stance towards pro-egalitarian gender politics. His discourses, reveal an ingrained belief in gender differences and familial gender roles where women are perceived as inherently more vulnerable and thus deserving a different standard of treatment (Liu, 2014, 2019c).

Ostensibly, Chen Xiao's discourses recognizes the presence of feminism and omnipresent gender inequality in the expressions "*it is not male chauvinism," and "we should not snatch women's resources."* Through these articulation, he again reiterates a respectable and gentle masculinity (*"we should protect girls as much as we ca"*). In this extract, again with a patronizing tone, his accounts for performing a respectable and responsible masculinity still centre on gendered relations and familial obligations, in contrast to the explicit sexism that portrays women as the object of male sexual desire through laddish behaviours (Phipps et al., 2018) or a hatred towards women (Kimmel, 2017). This observation still inhibits a more implicit mechanism that degrades the subjectivity of women, while tactically performing an alternative masculinity. The simultaneous subversion and reinforcement of hegemonic masculinities, resonates with Allen's (2007) research on the romantic masculinity, where she argues that hegemonic masculinity is agile to contemporary demands on heterosexual men, promoting concurrent displays of romantic sensitivity and

hard masculinity. Chen Xiao's discourses surfaced a representative masculinity that is uniquely intra-acting with historical-social-cultural contexts of emerging gender equality politics.

In hindsight, his narrative still presents an exclusionary logic and manifests through his performance of 'appropriate' masculinity. The micro-level tactical homogenizing discourse (*"no matter what kind of girls they are"*), though tentative and plausibly open, is laced with structural alienation that stipulates that women should behave in a certain way while subtly 'othering' women who may be 'feminists' (*"…even if they are feminists"*). By asserting "it's not chauvinism," Chen Xiao attempts to claim moral authority and articulate a self-reflective stance, acknowledging broader structural gender inequalities while maintaining his own position within them. This balancing act between reflexivity and normativity illustrates how ideals of "respectable" masculinity are shifting and no longer wholly aligned with rigid hegemonic forms, but negotiated across time, space, and social contexts (Robinson and Hockey, 2011) Nonetheless, his narrative offers a glimpse into the emergent reconfiguration of masculine virtues grounded in emotional awareness, intimacy, and humility (Cao, 2018; Yoo, 2020), suggesting possibilities for more inclusive and relational forms of masculinity.

5.5.2 'I kissed a boy just for fun': Subverting and restoring (hetero)normativities"

Upon reflecting on his recent intimate relationships in the initial interview, Chen Xiao brought up a "blurry phase" from high school when he kissed a boy, which, according to him, led to momentary confusion.

ZZ: Lately, have you been interested in anyone?

Chen Xiao: With guys, not really... it's not quite the same. I feel like everyone probably goes through a kind of blurry phase with orientation, right? Like,

that period where things feel a bit undefined. I definitely went through that. Back then, I had this pretty innocent experience where I kissed a guy, and it felt so strange, you know? But then I thought, "Wait, this doesn't feel right. I'm supposed to like girls." So, I just left it at that.

Chen Xiao's narration invites closer attention not just to the content of his story but to the relational dynamics of the interview itself. In this moment, he was perhaps seeking affirmation or even recognition, both of the act itself and the instability of his desire. Notably, his phrasing — "everyone goes through this, right?" — is a tentative reach, gesturing toward me not only as an interviewer but as someone intelligible within a broader gender-sexuality knowledge field. His retrospective narration seems simultaneously casual and testing, as if probing the limits of what is acceptable or intelligible within our interview exchange.

The affective currents in the encounter — the flickering of humour, hesitation, self-irony — are not simply noise around a truth, but constitutive of how truths around sexuality and desire get formed, withheld, or negotiated. As Ahmed (2006) suggests, queerness often appears as a "moment of disorientation," with the potentiality of 'not following' certain conventional scripts and challenges the commitment to a 'liveable life' (Butler, 2004, xv). Chen Xiao's narration of same-sex intimacy, framed not as a stable identity but a humorous rupture, may be read as a queer moment of affective ambivalence. The moment becomes a flickering site of queerness: an unresolved, affectively charged narrative that hovers between subversion and normative restoration.

In that moment, I too was being constituted - not as a neutral researcher, but as a gendered and sexualised subject, co-implicated in the meaning-making process. My own (non-)response - my silence, my attentive listening, my redirection - may have contributed to his move to contain the kiss within the frame of youthful confusion and eventual heterosexual consolidation. As the conversation continued, I further asked for his interpretation of this 'blurry

phase'.

ZZ: Why did you feel that way at the time?

Chen Xiao: Well, I was already in middle school, and gender was still kind of fuzzy for me back then. Looking back, it seems kind of funny.

ZZ: So, what was the situation? How did you end up kissing a guy?

Chen Xiao: I just thought he was really cute.

ZZ: And what kind of relationship did you have with him?

Chen Xiao: It was just fooling around, really [he stressed]. I don't even know what to call it. Thinking back, I guess I just wanted to do something bold and get a reaction from people because there were so few of us around.

ZZ: Did you know if he was [gay]?

Chen Xiao: Sometimes there were others around, but I just felt a special kind of fondness for him. But really [stress again], it only happened once or twice and then it never happened again.

Chen Xiao reinterprets his experience of 'kissing a boy' and being attracted by his 'cuteness', as an act of 'attention-seeking' – a bold move performed to elicit a reaction from observers. Attention, as Adam Phillips (2019, p.5) describes attention as a form of investment and risk-taking — an exploratory process that enables individuals to derive pleasure from beyond the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable or expected. Attention, therefore, is shaped by what captures people's focus as well as the affective forces that constrain or divert it. By framing the moment of 'kissing a boy' as an 'attention-seeking' behaviour, Chen Xiao distances himself from same-sex desire while still acknowledging the event. This gesture invites a more nuanced reading: what might seem like retrospective disavowal also holds space for desire, risk, and experimentation. In this sense, Chen Xiao's performance of masculinity constitutes an 'alternative figuration' (Braidotti, 2011, p.248). The attention he

garners and the pleasure he derives challenge heteropatriarchal norms and the phallogocentric model that traditionally aligns masculinity with heterosexuality.

At the same time, his pleasure is not solitary; it is communal, situated within the social dynamics of peer culture. By placing himself at the centre of collective attention, Chen Xiao resists the monotony and disciplinary rigidity of the school environment. His action becomes a form of counter-conduct toward the conventions of school life and heteronormative teenage romance. As Kehily and Nayak (1997) argue, humour, whether expressed through gameplay, storytelling, or ritual insult, can function as a survival tactic within the oppressive micro-politics of school culture. Similarly, Chen Xiao's impulsive kiss becomes a form of playful disruption, a way to cope with boredom, ceremony, and the ritualistic codes of adolescent masculinity. It reveals the cracks in normative scripts, especially within the constrained landscape of Chinese education, where public intimacy and romantic expression are tightly regulated (Zhu, Liu and Elley, 2022).

Meanwhile it is also worth noticing the cultural specificities of homosociality in the Chinese context that dissolve the conventional boundaries of (hetero)masculine behaviours in many Western distinction. In the historical and social context of ancient China, same-sex intimacies were often understood through frameworks of friendship and brotherhood, rather than through the binary of homo/hetero (Louie, 2002; Chou, 2001; Coleman and Chou, 2013). Influenced by religious traditions, ethnic understandings of sexuality, and the historical absence of modern regulatory regimes, such as blurred lines between friendship and desire have shaped a unique cultural grammar of masculinity in China. In this light, Chen Xiao's kiss can be read not only as a moment of disruption but as part of a wider tradition of male intimacy that resists easy categorisation. For instance, in his study on masculinity in the Chinese entertainment industry and business circles, John Osburg (2013) notes physical displays of affection among Chinese heterosexual men often foster intimacy and strengthen social bonds. Wei Wei (2017) investigates the presence of

homosexually-themed '*gao-ji*' discourses among straight-identified urban youths on campuses. He suggests that these homosocial bonds allow for emotional intimacy while enabling the performance of hetero-masculine behaviours. Wei (2017) introduces the concept of 'ironic heterosexual recuperation,' which highlights the strong incentives for men to engage in gender identity management. This process helps reinforce and occasionally redefine the normative boundaries of masculine behaviour, subtly negotiating the interplay between homosocial intimacy and heterosexual identity (Wei 2017).

Within these sexuality assemblages of ‘kissing a boy’, it is also noteworthy that he emphasises this ‘blurry phase’ as ‘not real’ or illusionary and temporal: “I don’t know what to call it,” “it happened only once or twice,” and as something he moves away from – “gender is still kind of fuzzy for me back then.” Situated within the space-time-mattering of the school context, this moment involved age, gendered and sexed bodies, and adolescent embodiment coalescing into a particular becoming—one that Chen Xiao later reconstructs from the position of a young man in his twenties. Drawing on Phoenix and Sparkes’ (2006) theorisation of ‘acting your age’ and the symbolic ‘resources’ individuals use to perform age-appropriate identities (p.108), Chen Xiao narrates these impulsive kissing encounters as ‘playful’, ‘fooling around’, and ‘funny’. In doing so, he positions these acts within the context of schoolboy banter—using them both as a resource for peer belonging and, perhaps inadvertently, as a momentary disruption of the dominant heterosexual matrix. Yet, through retrospectively framing these experiences with a tone of maturity and self-reflective distance—what Jackson et al. (2014) describe as a ‘knowing better’ mode of heteromasculine reclamation—Chen Xiao realigns himself with normative masculinity, smoothing over the earlier ruptures in gender and sexual boundaries. Such ideas partially resonate with some masculinity researchers in the U.K. who discusses masculinities and adolescent performance of laddish masculinities that feature hedonic practices, sexist and homophobic attitudes

as transitional as through which men's identities shift through both space and time (Nichols, 2018; Jackson and Sundaram, 2018; Phipps and Young, 2015a).

This interview extract offers further insight into the interrelations and affective dynamics at play, revealing that the bodily practice of 'kissing a boy' is not a simple act, but a complex set of discursive-corporeal and affective relationalities. In these 'kissing' events, the sexuality-assemblage is articulated through the relational interplay of multiple elements: Chen Xiao's memories, narrative accounts, collective gender norms and politics, peer interactions, and the discursive-material context of the campus environment. The affect flows continue to contribute to the materialisation of 'kissing-boy-school' and same-sex activities as funny, attention-seeking or unknowable. In this assemblage, Chen Xiao's gendered body becomes a site where all sorts of unexpected and unpredictable linkages are reproduced (Grosz, 1994, p.181 cited in Renold and Ringrose, 2011; see also Albred and Fox, 2015). As Ahmed (2006, p.170) theorises, the 'affect of disorientation' circulates in these micro-movements—between sexual orientation and other forms of orientation, between body and space-time. In Chen Xiao's narrative, this disorientation functions as a kind of machinic glitch: a momentary rupture or re-routing that allows him to both navigate and subtly destabilise the normative sexual regulations that frame 'appropriate' heterosexual masculinity.

5.4 Conclusion: Affective Glitches Beyond Binaries and Heteronormativity

Working on the micro-movement of power, this chapter foregrounds the youth's process of 'becoming' desiring subjects to a deeper level and captures the fine 'lines of flight' of each case. Chinese gender subjectivity is refracted through trinationally circulated neoliberalist values, as well as local gender and sexuality politics, fostering distinct gender ideologies and practices (Wang, 2017; Rofel, 2007; Martin, 2022; Engebretsen, 2014; Zarafonetis, 2017).

Specifically, I have paid particular attention to how the Chinese youth draw from available recourses (cultural and material) to iterate heteronormative conventions and, at the same time, reject certain conventional notions of (hetero)normative gendered norms. In their process of 'becoming', intimacies, as affective 'intra-actions', become certain categories of aesthetics — prioritizing specific normative signs, materials, and bodies in a heteronormative-mediated intimacy, informed by both neoliberal and post-socialist gender norms that extend beyond the university context. Whereas young people have lived in a media saturated world fuelled with a neoliberal rationale and ethos (Rose, 1992), which make the figure of self-responsible, empowered and autonomous gender subjects gloss over structural inequalities.

Conceptualising intimacy as 'affective aesthetics' — where selectively affective forces are aimed at positive transformation of subjects, I couched the analysis of micro-movement with an awareness of the molar fixities – class-gender capitals within the specific territories of post-socialist, neo/non-liberal China. I contended that the ruptures and unpredictable transition of youth subjectivities (Braidotti, 2014), while not always explicitly resistant to dominant gendered norms, nonetheless open up crucial moments of disorientation (Ahmed, 2006). These moments offer spaces where the multiplicity of becoming-subjects slide in — unfixed, unstable, and continually redefined.

Through the narratives of four young people – Bai Xue, Xue Wei, Chen Xiao and Zhu Wen – this chapter uncovers both the reproduction and the subtle queering moments of the normative discourses of heteronormativity, patriarchal gendered norms and neoliberal self-responsibility (see Chapter 4). Through ambivalences, hesitations, reimagining, and fantasies, such as Bai Xue's negotiation of independent womanhood and embodied feminine desirability, and Chen Xiao's queer flirtations with same-sex desire, I highlight the intra-active entanglement of structure and agency within specific space-time-matterings. Their stories and narratives of intimacies reveal affective glitches - small yet powerful disruptions and disorientations that hold the potential to

reshape the aesthetics of intimacies. Ultimately, this chapter gestures toward a glimmer of hope for dismantling entrenched gender hierarchies — not through grand acts of resistance, but through the slow, affective sedimentation of disoriented, queered possibilities for becoming.

The analysis in the chapter contributes to extending the bounded humanist definitions of intimacy with a more-than-human twist (Braidotti, 2019b, see Chapter 2). Rather than viewing gendered and sexual subjects as monolithic and unitary, this chapter's micro-level analysis complicates the processes of 'becoming' gendered and sexual subjects, disrupting hierarchical understandings of normalcy and power. It places gender binaries, queerness, and (hetero)normativity into flux, and moves beyond previously internalised positivist discourses of 'sexual liberalisation' and openness in Chinese sociological studies (i.e. Farrer, 2014), which situate the Chinese gender subjects in a dichotomous of Western/Chinese, masculinity/femininity, and heteronormativity/queerness. The conceptualization of 'affective aesthetics' thus reaches out to an emerging, empirically informed and transformative academic conversation about embedded and embodiment of sexuality, where desire and subjectivity interface with diverse spatial, affective, and discursive-material conditions (Ringrose, 2008; Renold and Ringrose, 2011; Renold and Ivinson, 2015). The next chapter will further interrogate the dichotomies of online/offline and real/virtual in the context of mediated intimacies, dissolving the boundaries of embodied intimacy.

Chapter 6: (Im)mobility and affective aesthetics: Exploring youth mediated intimacies

6.1. Introduction

In early 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic shattered the dreams of neoliberal mobility, impacting not only my research (discussed in Chapter 3), but also expanding the imagination of maintaining and sustaining intimacies during a period of enforced immobility. McGlotten (2013) argues that virtual intimacies are often perceived as 'failed intimacies' that disrupt the ideal narrative of a 'good life' — one typically envisioned as involving heteronormative familial relationship and consumption. McGlotten (2013) raises academic awareness on 'technologic panics' on the potential weakening of social bonds and relationships (i.e. Illouz, 2019; Giddens, 1992; Bauman, 2003). Similar, academic concerns on digital intimacies extend beyond the mere challenges of digital communication to include the commodification of relationships through social media platforms (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013; Kaye, Wall and Malone, 2016; Wong and Dobson, 2019). Mass-mediated intimacies, propagated through both traditional and social media, often reinforce and sell (hetero)normative ideals and lifestyles (Bucher, 2012; Dean, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013; Marwick, 2005). Berlant argues intimate publics, constituted via other kinds of mass media, are intricately woven with complex and ambivalent aesthetics and politics (Berlant and Warner, 1998). The analysis presented in this chapter, using a feminist posthuman analytic lens, moves away from the embedded and bounded humanist views of intimacy and dichotomous portrait of private and public, reality and virtuality, online and offline. This approach

allows for an exploration into the deeper affective flows in the practices of intimacies among young people in the context of pandemic-related immobility, offering a broader understanding of how these dynamics evolve in contemporary society.

This chapter explores everyday use of social media platforms by young people to maintain relationality, focusing on the experiences of two young women, Wu Yin (year 3) and Ju Zi (year 3). From posting stories on Weibo to chatting with close friends in Tencent QQ, from talking overnight to sharing stories of their mundane lives, young people's media practices are characterised by online delivery, portability and smartphone accessibility, and the convergence of the media features such as locative-based services, cameras, multimedia capabilities, and pedometers on smartphones. These young people have predominantly accessed entertainment media through multiple Chinese media providers, including Bilibili, Zhihu, Weibo, QQ, WeChat official accounts, douyin [Chinese Tiktok] and Wangyi Cloud (see appendix for an overview of media platforms) (Wang and Picone, 2023; Lin and De Kloet, 2019; Chen, Mao and Qiu, 2018; Sun, 2015). While specific platforms are preferred, individuals tend to engage in a polymedia environment governed by complex algorithmic architectures that intervene the production of ‘normative’ identities and intimacies (Madianou, 2016; Chambers, 2017; Wallis, 2024; Ringrose et al., 2024). Social media allows for more diverse and transgressive intimacies and attachments (Dobson, Sarah and Robards, 2018). The data analysis is complemented by the participants' self-reporting digital diaries documenting their online communications – how they chat with their romantic others and classmates against the backdrop of the quickly diminishing public space and daily encounters in physical settings.

This chapter turns to the techno-social dimensions of intimacies, adopting a non-media-centric approach that eschews a sole focus on specific social media platforms or predefined digital practices (Pink and Mackley, 2013). Instead, it explores how young Chinese people maintain social lives and contact

with intimates amidst the constraints of an (im)mobile everyday life during the pandemic. The analysis examines how their perceptions and practices of intimacy, informed by and contributing to shared affective aesthetics, navigate the culturally-specific media landscape.

By employing the concept of affective aesthetics, this study illuminates the persistence of (hetero)normative conjugal relationship frameworks that shape young people's engagement with, monitoring of, and emotional responses to mediated intimacies. Wieringa (2015, p.34) defines passionate aesthetics as "a mix of institutions, dynamics, motivations, codes of behaviours, (re)presentation, subjectivity, and identities that make up the complex structure of desires, erotic attractions, sexual relations, and kinship and partnership patterns that are salient in a given context." This affective aesthetics framework is crucial for understanding the impact of digital mediation of intimate relationships, capturing the dynamic interplay of visibility, desirability, and social validation, as well as disorientation, congestion, extension and archive affective flows. It underscores the carefully curated and performatively presented online presence as an aesthetically and sensorially rich experience. Subsequently, this chapter challenges the conventional definitions that often conceptualise intimacy as only occurring between human subjects. It contributes to a broader socio-technological understanding of intimacy, where young people intra-act with both human and more-than-human objects.

6.2 In bed with calls: Ephemerality and extension of everyday

In an era of digital convergence, users engage ‘transmedia navigation’ across multiple media modalities (Jenkins, 2006), crafting intricate mediated identities within a polymedia environment. Early research on mobile media by Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda (2005) observed that mobile emailing fosters an

ambient virtual copresence, sustaining a continuous peripheral awareness of others. Expanding on this, Madianou (2016) defines ambient virtual copresence as a perceived shared communicative space, where interaction remains a constant possibility. Similarly, Baldassar (2008) conceptualises mediated copresence in three forms: proxy copresence, involving tangible or symbolic substitutes for physical togetherness (such as object exchanges); imagined copresence, wherein individuals feel connected despite no direct interaction; and virtual copresence, facilitated through real-time audio-visual communication. The convergence of media, combined with increased portability and instant connectivity, empowers individuals with more autonomous, flexible, and pervasive modes of mediated sociality.

The romantic relationship of Ju Zi and her boyfriend, Ji Lan, started in the autumn term of 2019. Both avid photography enthusiasts, Ju Zi (a third-year student) and her boyfriend, Ji Lan (in his fourth-year undergraduate study) through the photography society at H University, where they participated in photo trips and contributed visual content to the university magazine. During the winter break of 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic struck the heart of Hubei province, the couple, like many others, were physically separated due to the extended lockdown. Although the distance was difficult, especially as they were still in the early, infatuated stage of their relationship, Ju Zi described their connection as growing stronger and more meaningful. In our first interview (March 30, 2020), she spoke with joyful sincerity about the continued efforts both she and Ji Lan made to maintain their relationship across distance.

Facilitated by the ephemerality and immediacy of digital media, digital platforms have created new spaces intimacy practices where corporeal bodies can stay affectively connected despite physical separation (Hinton and Hjorth, 2013; Elliott and Urry, 2010). For instance, when I asked Ju Zi about her daily interactions with Ji Lan during the national lockdown, she described spending extended time “on the line” together; remaining virtually present while engaging in everyday activities like taking photos, walking, or chilling-out and watching

TV shows. This blurred the boundaries between absence and presence, mundane routine and intimacy rituals.

ZZ: What do you usually talk about?

Ju Zi: Almost everything. What happened in our class today? If it is the weekend and we don't have any classes, we stay online to watch TV shows or play mobile games together. We both love photography, and since we haven't had a chance to go and shoot photos together, we sometimes stay on the line while taking photos – sharing moments from spring, such as when I sent him a pic of some lovely flowers I saw.

ZZ: So, how much do you call each other?

Ju Zi: Sometimes, we do video calls, but most often voice calls.

ZZ: How many voice calls per week?

Ju Zi: Almost every day, I don't think there is any interruption.

ZZ: For how long each day?

Ju Zi: If we don't have classes at night, we will watch TV shows or play video games. After the show or games, we wouldn't hang up but stay on the line till we go to bed. Once, I slept while I was still on the phone.

In the bodily absence of intimate others, activities such as watching TV or consuming other media (i.e. games) is interwoven with digital communication. The sociality of Ju Zi's viewing activity echoes the 'traditional promise of intimate happiness' (Berlant, 1998:2) – watching TV, playing games side by side, or cuddling in bed. Being synchronised together and listening to the other person's voice builds a sense of company. Ju Zi and Ji Lan call each other while walking and taking photos together, which appears to be the 'background' of sociality. Berlant and Seitz (2015) argue that people's participation in media practices constitutes a part of an 'aesthetic training' in emotional expression. Such training in 'aesthetic' emotional expression can be both sensory and emotional, which is linked to the tangibility of others, facilitated with affective confirmation

enabled by mobile media and mobile devices (Cefai and Couldry, 2019).

Through the feeling of experiential proximity, through conversations, sharing the mundane, photography walks that afforded by digital platforms (QQ in this case), Ju Zi and her boyfriend Ji Lan could get a sense of 'connected presence' (Licoppe, 2004), close to a similar notion of 'ordinary copresence', coined by Nedelcu and Wyss (2016) to describe the formation of communicative routines that reproduce a family's 'normal' functioning in a transnational context. In this case, the habitual everyday activities, from taking classes together (they signed up for the same Love and Relationship course together), daily walks, and morning greetings to occasional virtual hang-outs, have become an emotional experience of intimacy enabled by the different modes of communicative technologies.

Moreover, the ordinary and mundane aspects of their lives – such as conversations, walks, and sharing feelings that were once fleeting and ephemeral – can now be materialised and endowed with a sense of duration through the exchange of digital images in their chats. Moments like an idyllic walk, a snapshot of “the springs we saw,” or “a picture of a lovely flower” become archived fragments of intimacy, embedded within everyday digital interaction.

> *I did something quite dopey one day. I was about to get ready to go out, but I asked him if he was interested in watching a live make-up show. So, I went on a live show with him while doing my make-up [on a video call while doing her make-up]. I explained every product and procedure to him, like those beauty bloggers. (Ju Zi, interview)*

Video calls make the virtual presence of the significant others more tangible, as the mediated sights enable the expression of care and love and create an experience of proximity. In the above example, Ju Zi narrates her innovative use of video calling as their virtual 'hang-out' activity. The ordinary

routines, such as make-up or going to bed (6.5.1), which were previously performed in a 'private' and nonreflexive way, become visible. Digitally inscribing these behaviours through video calls entails a more significant investment of time and energy as well as an intensive affective experience. The interactions of doing her make-up and sleeping while her boyfriend was present show a sense of comfort and security in sharing personal and intimate parts of her life. Meanwhile, the synchronous sights and sounds of the mediated imagery and reactions of the other person require emotional labour (Baldassar, 2008). For example, Ji Lan, her boyfriend, listened to her introduction of make-up products and procedures to reaffirm the experiential intimacy, as part of his emotional labour.

Apart from Ju Zi's innovative usage of a video calls imitating a make-up streaming show, she and her boyfriend have invested a generous amount of time (figure 6.5.1) in maintaining a sense of copresence or ambient presence (Madianou, 2016) and feeling a sense of company in a relationship. Figure 6.5.2 presents a screenshot of a conversation after an all-night call illustrates the role of emoticons in contributing to sensory and affective expression, which further plays an integral part in creating more emotional and empathic connections.

[Figure 6.5.1: Ju Zi and Ji Lan 'calling' each other for a whole night – 617 mins 53s]

[Figure 6.5.2: A screenshot of their chat the next morning]


08:22
已接通
617:53
静音
挂断
免提


10:30
08:17
我听到了[redacted]的呼吸声
I heard your breathing sounds.
08:22
爱的魔力转圈圈
怕不是呼噜声
probably snoring
反正可可爱爱
早上好嗷
Still so cute
Morning!

08:17 am

Ji Lan: [Gif: cats sending hearts] I heard you breathing

Ju Zi: [Gif: crazy cat shaking its head] Snoring, probably

Ji Lan: [Gif: cats sending hearts] It's still so cute anyway! Morning!

Ju Zi: [Gif: cats sending hearts].

In the second screenshot, in which Ju Zi and her boyfriend greet each other in the morning, the number of GIFs is noticeable, accompanying almost every greeting message. GIFs, akin to memes, emoji/emoticons, or other visual symbols, are frequently seen as effective tools for elucidating the meaning of written text (Thompson and Filik, 2016) or imbuing context with additional significance. Some scholars have characterised the interactive role of memes as involving emotional labour, enriching social bonds and serving as indicators of participants' emotions (Riordan, 2017) or emotive tone (Danesi, 2017; Kaye, Wall and Malone, 2016). Hochschild (2012) suggests that, like any form of communication, emojis may not always accurately convey internal states but often reflect cultural norms regarding acceptable emotional expressions. Tolins and Samermit (2016) argue that GIFs function as substitutes for physical gestures and are manifestations of affective non-verbal communication.

In the screenshot above, visual graphics operate as integral components of affective communication. The playful kittens and flying hearts evoke a sense of affection and tenderness, while the meme of a cat shaking its head captures a moment of anxious vulnerability—expressing Ju Zi’s worry that Ji Lan might have heard her snoring during the night. At the end of the message, Ji Lan replied with assuring and affectionate comments on Ju Zi's sound, adding another emoticon of the playful kittens to help him add the tone. In the absence of bodily presence during the lockdown, digital graphics function as deliberative forms of expression — composed rather than spontaneously emanated. As individuals refine their written communication, often incorporating emotive graphics, these expressions remain distinct from the continuous, involuntary

“signals emitted” through physical presence when people are co-present (Goffman, 1959, cited in Gibson, Huang and Yu, 2018). Digital memorial cultural studies by Döveling (2015, 2017) and his colleagues (Döveling, Harju and Sommer, 2018) have highlighted the mediatisation of emotion, accentuating the role of emotion in the 'digital affect culture' prevalent on social media platforms. at al (2018) suggest that the affective flows construct atmospheres of emotional and cultural belonging through emotional resonance and alignment.

In specific socio-spatial contexts, reconfiguration of meanings attached to existing symbols, such as social sharing and digital commemorative artefacts, encouraging interactive participation and engagement (Döveling, Harju and Sommer, 2018). In the micro level of interpersonal communication, particularly in the global health crisis of COVID-19, individuals' feelings of isolation have instigated flows of emotional communication fostered by digital affect cultures. Grafticons and emojis, the objects and symbols of emotions, generate experiences of emotional proximity where physical interactions have been strictly monitored and censored. In Ju Zi and Ji Lan's conversation, grafticons illuminate the expression of affection and tender emotions through the affordance of the social web, thereby creating a sense of closeness even when they live at a distance.

The following example is retrieved from another participant who frequently used emojis in her conversation with her boyfriend. Wu Yin, a 20-year-old woman living in Zhe Jiang province, described her feelings when her boyfriend, Zhao Tian, replied to her with three ‘hug’ emojis after hours of waiting for his reply.

[Figure 6.5.3] Screenshot of Wu Yin and Zhao Tian’s Dialogue

Friday 16:43
Wu Yin: It is the first day of my period, so uncomfortable 🤣.
It has been the fourth month that I had period cramps since the start of this year. How miserable I am!
[emojis of self-strangling and vomiting blood].
ZhaoPeng: 'hugs' emoji

(April 18th) In her journal, Wu Yin wrote:

> *I have been waiting all day for his reply. I almost thought he would never reply to me, and I felt self-conscious about discussing my period with him. Maybe it is a conversation strictly restricted among women.*
>
> *I received three emojis for hugs today. Surprised yet happy, I liked him so much – I almost felt myself over the moon for his reply. I am like a tiǎn gǒu ('dog who licks', 舔狗[23]) 🤦‍♀️*

In this context, as on WeChat, QQ facilitated the expression of love and affection through emojis to generate practices that represent care and love from significant others. Wu Yin felt her boyfriend's use of a hug emoji responded to her emotional need during her menstruation while also easing the discomfort and awkwardness she felt when she talked about her menstruation to the opposite sex. Costa *et al.* (2022) studied people's experiences of copresence and proximity on WhatsApp during the weeks of strict lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, building on the scholarship of 'polymedia' (Madianou, 2016, cited in Costa *et al.*, 2022). It revealed that people exploited different modes of communication to construct 'scalable copresence' at a distance. Notably, their research finds increasingly extensive use of emojis to express multiple feelings and emotions, mostly love, affection and support, across different groups in three European cities during the pandemic. Therefore, Costa et al. (2022) suggest technological affordance in generating multiple forms of copresence and proximity at a distance in compensation for the lack of physical interaction. They find that using emojis during lockdown, among couples, families, and co-workers, helped express 'care at a distance' at all scales of

[23] Similar to the English word sucker, *tiǎn gǒu* (舔狗) literal translates as the 'licking dog', which is often used to describe someone who pursues another person almost subserviently, like a dog, especially when they receive little to no response from the other person. Here, Wu Yin uses the term to mock herself as she throws away her dignity while waiting for Zhao Tian's response.

sociality. Emojis represent a contemporary method of enhancing copresence, fostering empathetic and emotional connections that text alone may fail to convey, such as facial expressions, gestures, or tones of voice (Paasonen, 2023). Kelly and Watts's (2015) research supports this view, showing that emojis can positively impact communication among peers and non-peers alike. Additionally, emojis function as conversational 'lubricants,' facilitating smoother interactions and maintaining the flow of conversation (Cramer, De Juan and Tetreault, 2016).

However, in contrast to Costa's (2022) research findings on the extensive use of emojis among participants, after the initial excitement that Wu Yin felt when she received Zhao's message, she then interprets the use of emojis as a perfunctory interaction and mocked herself for acting like a *tiǎn gǒu* (舔狗, a dog who licks). Compared with the emoticon-eliciting and emotional expressiveness that Wu Yin set out in the snapshot, Zhao's response lacked both timely feedback and comparable intensity in expressive displays, igniting Wu Yin's sense of self-consciousness and self-doubt. Current research highlights a perpetual and unresolved tension between the sense of connected togetherness and the inherent constraints and pressures of online social contact (Hall and Baym, 2012; Hoffner, Lee and Park, 2016), which can lead to a state of lingering ambivalence and intensified congestion of attention flows (Thulin, Vilhelmson and Schwanen, 2020). This tension reflects the conflicting orders of mediated and situated contexts, marked by unruliness and mutual intrusion.

The analysis of Wu Yin's and Ju Zi's cases highlights the fragility of digital infrastructures in compensating for the absence of attentive and embodied relational presence. It also suggests that the temporality — the (in)synchronicity, along with the rhythms and semiotic elements (such as words, images, and emoticons) of mediated co-presence – coalesce into new affective aesthetics within young people's intimate practices. These digitally mediated forms of connection, while enabling a sense of togetherness, can also produce fractured

emotional interactions and lead to affective congestion — where the intensity of feelings exceeds the communicative capacity of the medium, resulting in misalignment, disappointment, or emotional fatigue.

6.3 Hyper full-time intimacies and affective congestion

Wu Yin (20 years old and a third-year student) sat in her bedroom and called me from her mobile phone for our interview when her parents were both out for work — explaining in detail her struggles and emotional exhaustion during the last few months of strict lockdown which separated her from her new boyfriend Zhao Tian, who was in the same Love and Relationship class. She described her relationship as fragile and "not as good as theirs (other people's relationships)". She constantly felt upset and isolated and tried to convince herself that because "he is not that into online chatting",

> *He was so cold and distant all the time. I once watched a very moving movie, and I was sure that he was awake and online at that time […] Sometimes, I caught him replying to his daily health report to our monitor in our class group*[24] *but not replying to my messages […] This kind of thing happened repeatedly. I realised he didn't want to reply to *me* [her emphasis]."*
>
> *Wu Yin (20, year 3, W)*

There is a common academic belief digital platforms help to generate feelings of being together and intimacy when physically apart. In Wei Sun's

[24] Every day, both teachers and students posted testimonials in their QQ group — a ritualistic practice that became eerily routine. There was something ominous, yet taken for granted, about the steady stream of daily mantras appearing in the class chat: one after another, they submitted templated updates to the university, often in the same formulaic language. For example, *"My daily temperature is 36°C. I am not showing any symptoms. I am currently in Shanghai and staying home as much as possible."*

(2015) the phenomenological study of the Chinese social app WeChat, he (2015) explores how everyday group affiliations—such as those maintained through classmate and alumni group chats—are sustained across mobile contexts (13). He highlights the ubiquity of these group interactions, which accompany users throughout their daily routines and persist across various mobile environments, reinforcing a constant sense of connectedness (Sun, 2015). Following Biocca's notion of hyperpresence (Biocca, 2006), the hyper-accelerated form of social, psychological, and cognitive availability enabled by the rise of interactive technologies. The mediated presence of 'others' does not always correspond with the physical body but is a subjective and sensory impression of another. Therefore, it can be stated that mediated presence is no longer limited to temporal or spatial use of technologies. The immediacy of responding to messages is considered authenticity as accounting for achieving full-time intimacy at a distance (Lassen and Hjorth, 2017).

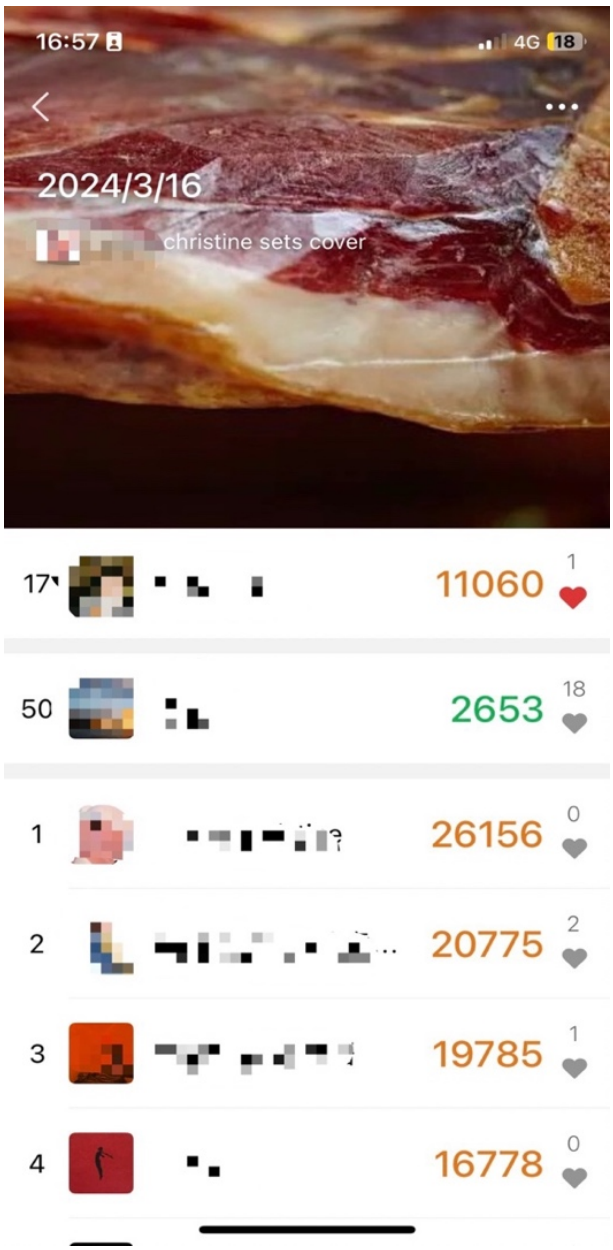
In Wu Yin's case, the affect was intensified in the hyperpresence media environment. The mismatch of expectations between her and her intimate other generated affective congestion, wherein mediated hyperpresence paradoxically hindered timely responses and emotional reciprocity (Thulin, Vilhelmson and Schwanen, 2020). This evoked a heightened sense of isolation and longing in Wu Yin's side. In this digital sexuality assemblage, the affect flows interplay with multiple media channels – chatgroups, private conversations with Zhao Tian, digital infrastructures, platform-specific norms and rhythms of attentiveness, These were further shaped by the other person's cognitive and emotional commitment, collectively co-constituting a heteronormatively coded affective aesthetics. It was this very structure of affective aesthetics that gave rise to moments of emotional blockage and delay.

Underlying Wu Yin's expectation for prompt and immediate reply lies in an affective aesthetics that constitutes the social ethos of intimacies - where conjugal relationships are increasingly codified through semiotic elements, such as signs, visual and textual contents, as well as temporality and rhythms.

In the context of saturated media environments, intimacy becomes materialised through everyday digital traces such as texts, photos, and videos, that render one's presence continually palpable to others. From compulsory daily health check-ins in class WeChat groups, to the casual sharing of reflections on a film, or the habitual monitoring of a partner's WeRun activity (as detailed in the following extract), are all forms of hyper-sociality that generate heightened mutual presence. This near-spontaneous, multi-dimensional interpersonal communication, experienced on the move and across temporal layers, intensifies emotional connectivity while simultaneously evoking anxiety; particularly the fear of disrupting the fragile affective balance or losing the elusive sensation of "feeling right" (Pink and Mackley, 2013).

He is at home preparing for the Postgraduate Admission Test around this time.[25] *He also had a secondary major, so I assumed he was occupied with university-related work. I did not directly ask what he was doing, but instead checked his WeChat step count [WeRun is a daily step ranking feature of WeChat; see Appendix V). He was still taking about two to three thousand steps per day. Noticeably fewer than the over ten thousand steps he had logged daily at the beginning of this winter holiday. Now [since he has lower step counts everyday], I guess he is probably studying at home like he mentioned previously.* (Wu Yin, 21, YW)

[25] [note: a standardised test that is an admission requirement for all graduate schools in China. Usually, in the third year, university students will start to prepare for the exam].



[Figure 6.6.1 a screenshot of the daily WeRun dashboard – example provided by the author]

The screenshot shows the daily step counts become a synchronised competition among the contacts who activate the feature. The winner of today's competition will set the cover. In the dashboard, the first column shows your daily steps, and the column below shows the person you added to the 'special focus'. The 'heart' is a 'like' button, which indicates the number of 'likes' received for one's daily step count.

In the above example (Figure 6.6.1), WeRun – a WeChat social feature based on mobile devices' built-in pedometer data – translates corporal bodies and embodied practices into quantifiable metrics. This process channels

affective intensities into a specific digital sexuality assemblage, where bodily rhythms and digital interfaces become entangled. Mobile phones function as a key infrastructures in youth's mediated intimate lives, offering private communication channels and sustaining an "always-on" ambient co-presence (Madianou, 2016, p.183). As Ito and Okabe (2005) describe, such persistent digital contact forms "tele-cocoons" in which intimacy is continuously enacted (p.137). The state of the "tethered-self", a term coined by Turkle (2015), further captures how individuals remain affectively and technologically attached to others. Dong Hoo Lee (2012) proposed that smartphone devices enable users to maintain multiple connections on the move and to engage in hyper-sociality, where all sorts of mediated communication spaces are easily permeable. WeChat, with its multifunctional and socially immersive features, are particularly "sticky" (Chen, Mao and Qiu, 2018). In this context, WeRun and along with its daily step ranking introduces a subtle form of 'friendly surveillance' (Hjorth et al., 2020, p73), where 'lurking' – often dismissed in some Western contexts as passive or voyeuristic ways of social listening(Crawford, 2009) – is instead reframed as a mode of affective labour. Here, lurking functions as a relational practice that sustains intimacy through asynchronous observation. The affective dynamics at play are not merely measurable or comparable, but rather intensive: they reflect the shifting, ambiguous contours of digital relationality, where care and control, proximity and distance, are continuously negotiated.

By monitoring the step counts of Zhao Tian's WeRun, Wu Yin acknowledges his online presence and validates his words as an affirmation of his words. The technological affordance, particularly location-based services and activity pedometer features of mobile phones, are used to monitor his daily activities (e.g., going out or staying at home studying). Without direct mediated communication, the hyper-presence in the online environment ignites affective milieus that orient people's sensing of others' presence, accompanied by surveillance and (mis)interpretation through inviting affective 'lurking' as new ways of 'watching' and therefore staying affectively connected. For Wu Yin,

WeRun’s step count feature functions as both a tracker of Zhao Tian’s physical activity and a means of verifying his self-reported routines—such as studying at home for the exam. This practice implicitly reveals the ambivalent nature of surveillance, operating simultaneously as a gesture of care and a mechanism of control.

Bodily practices become, in one sense, intertwined with the digital and hyper-present self; as such, they generate different sensory and emotional awareness of being and constantly participate in their surveillance. In Hjorth and Gu's (2012) study on the deployment of locative-based services on a Chinese social app, Jie pang, they highlight the emplaced and multisensorial visuality created by the media or location-based services, reflecting unique forms of geospatial sociality, unlike other technologies, such as video calls or voice calls, which particularly emphasise social presence (Fox and McEwan, 2017) rather than physical presence. Geo-media services built into mobile devices, such as pedometers and GPS, also afford what Chan (2021) calls proximity, through which people can coordinate with each other or monitor locations or physical activity. The in-built architectural framework of digital media and devices, along with the algorithm – the synchronised step dashboard – organise and construct certain regimes of visibilities through ranking, photo covers and other human and material interactions.

This example invites a reimagining of intimacy, not simply as physical proximity or mediated presence, but as a series of affective flows sustained precisely through the absence of others. These flows are shaped and intensified by the algorithmic and quantified presence of individuals on social media platforms, entangling online and offline experiences into affectively charged, postdigital realities. In this sense, the lingering traces facilitated by digital infrastructures such as WeRun data or archived messages, have a profound and enduring impact on young people’s postdigital bodies (Ringrose et al., 2024). Wu Yin’s experience resonates with emerging scholarship in media studies on death and digital afterlives, where scholars contend that the

metaphysics of media fundamentally shapes how absence is experienced (Alasuutari, 2021; Graham, Gibbs and Aceti, 2013). In this context, digital infrastructures, such as WeRun, serve not only as records but as symbolic substitutes for physical presence. Thus, in an era that characterised by hyper-connectivity and ubiquitous digital contact, affective flows emerge through the dynamic interplay of presence and absence, intimacy and distance—redefining how relationality is felt and lived in postdigital cultures.

6.4 Writing a public diary: Ethereality and archival affect

Through the digital inscription of intimacies, young people engage in a continuous process of romantic world-making, where the ordinary becomes saturated with significance and the ephemeral acquires the weight of emotional truth (Lasén and Hjorth, 2017). At the beginning of this relationship, Ju Zi diligently documented her love story with Ji Lan on platforms such as Wangyi Cloud (a music streaming app with built-in social features) and Weibo[26]. By sharing 'highlights' of romantic life — virtual anniversaries, affectionate exchanges, carefully composed photographs — young people not only preserve the affective charge of a particular moment but also actively participate in crafting a symbolic archive of intimacy (Kyrölä and Paasonen, 2016; Renold and Ringrose, 2017; Liu, 2021). These mediated practices imbue fleeting emotions with cultural legibility and relational value, contributing to the aestheticisation of romance and intimacies in digital life. The act of posting, tagging, and narrating thus becomes a form of affective labour through which love is not only remembered but socially validated and rendered real.

[26] See Appendix VI for an overview of the Chinese social media platform mentioned in this research.

ZZ: You mentioned that you have been recording your thoughts on your relationship and love stories, right?

Ju Zi: yes, […] I want to record the exciting things that happened in our lives, the Mr Ji's quirky moments (her nickname for Ji Lan), so I can one day read them in my leisure. Or if we fought each other, my digital diary would remind me of the precious and happy memories we had, you know, so I wouldn't act on impulses that end this relationship. It (the diary) is like an album he gave to me as a present.

(Ju Zi, year 3, woman, in a relationship)

[2020 March 15th, Ju Zi wrote in her diary entry]

Sometimes, I also wonder why I am recording these stories or want to write them down. Maybe I simply want to share moments of happiness, but I don't want many people to see it. Therefore, I choose to write in a place where there are fewer acquaintances so that I can feel comfortable writing something for my closest friends or complete strangers.

The archiving functions of social media, particularly its capacity to preserve fleeting emotional intensities, enable young people to curate aestheticised narratives of idealised intimacy. When she referred herself as the only intended audience–"a diary and memorial record" — she means Weibo is a private space where she can express opinions and keep stories for herself. Initially, keeping a 'public diary' drew my attention, as it sounds contradictory, given the hyperpublic feature of Weibo (a tweeter-like text-based social media application now featuring pictures, videos, and live streams; see appendix IV). In this case, the technological affordance of Weibo (i.e. persistence and anonymity, see boyd, 2014) enables Ju Zi to record and archive her feelings and the moments of love and joy in her digital profile.

Following the notions of somatic archive (Kyrölä and Paasonen, 2016), the Weibo posts that Ju Zi refers to as her 'album' become more than a mere

collection of memories. Her posts extend the affective presence of past moments through their relatability, which is sustained by the dynamics of mediated witnessing among followers and close friends. These performative practices incorporate multiple temporalities and reconfigure the emotional architecture of memorialisation (Papailias, 2016). Ju Zi's The posts encapsulate an archive of feelings marked by ephemerality, affectivity, and a trajectory of potential that challenges the everyday 'normalcy' of relationships. Ju Zi's blog writing also functions as a highly affective memorial, witnessing the quickly fleeting moments of joy and flirtatious interactions with her boyfriend. These digital records therefore, not only document transient happiness but also become a source of solace during potential downturns in the relationship. Hence, the archival affordances of social media allow her to permanently capture the intense affect, thoughts, and archive of ephemera, offering a poignant counter to momentary distress. This archival process, which is rich with affective and temporal investments, transforms social media into a dynamic arena where intimate experiences and emotions are both preserved and performed, contributing profoundly to the lived experiences of intimacy. The affective charge once experienced somatically is re-inscribed through writing and digital sharing, allowing emotions to circulate anew. In this sense, her digital archive is both a personal refuge and a performative site of intimate becoming.

Given that the potential audience is overloaded and increasingly unstable in social media, Ju Zi's emphasis on "me" as the audience does not necessarily mean a rejection of the public audience. Weibo operates on norms of public anonymity whereby most of the content uploaded by its users is publicly available but under pseudonymous accounts. Like Twitter, Weibo collapses formerly distinct social contexts—friends, acquaintances, colleagues—into a unified audience, a phenomenon Marwick and boyd (2011) term context collapse. The flattened context means that individuals need to navigate their self-presentation, adopting various strategies, such as using multiple accounts, nicknames, and flexible privacy settings accordingly, to obscure their real

identities with the imagined audience (Marwick, 2005). This process creates tension in how individuals negotiate multiple digital personas, as it become harder to distinguish who they are speaking to in any given post. Despite her claims that the account serves as a private corner for recording personal feelings and love stories, Ju Zi's "memoir-like" narratives of self-disclosure ultimately function to generate and sustain emotional connectedness within her close circle of friends. Her pseudonymous Weibo account is only accessible to those who know her username—primarily her closest friends—thereby allowing her to selectively control the visibility of her intimate expressions.

ZZ: Who else would read your stories on Weibo?

Ju Zi: I only have a few close friends and a few followers on Weibo. They (her friends) would give me a like and comment on the post. They teased me once, saying my posts were too sweet to read.

(Ju Zi, year 3, 21 W interview)

"#does Mr Ji like Ju Zi#. 2020-3-15 Reads 847.[27]

I couldn't sleep tonight, so I think I might write something…

We fought the other day, and I deleted him on every social media platform, including QQ, WeChat, Wangyi Yun (Music Cloud), and Weibo. I recently removed him from the block list, but I need to decide whether to add him back to my Weibo follower list.

It may be the right time to continue the story I left out about Mr Ji's flirting with me last time.

Anyway, I will write whatever comes to my mind […]".

(Fieldnote, 2020 March, extract from Juzi's Weibo)

The affective aesthetics of using Weibo for digital diaries — through

[27]The wording of this blog has been altered slightly to protect her anonymity.

imagery, sentiments, language, and narrative — create a public space where private feelings and carefully curated experiences are shared, fostering communal emotional resonance. Facilitated by affirmative interactions—such as likes, comments, and views from 'friends'[28]—online story sharing becomes a catalyst for social interaction among physically absent yet digitally connected peer groups. Although Ju Zi asserts ownership over her 'love stories' online, framing them as private entries, the interactive features of Weibo create a social atmosphere that compensates for the diminishing physical spaces traditionally used for socializing, such as dormitories, classrooms, and university canteens. These digital interactions not only bridge the gap between private expression and public engagement but also redefine the boundaries of personal and communal spaces in the digital era.

Ju Zi's regular updates and narratives of her everyday love stories with Ji Lan form an essential aspect of her daily life, intertwining electronic spaces with social, emotional, and geographical realms. These narratives not only replicate traditional practices of social-spatial connectivity, such as engaging with friends during social gatherings, but also actively affirm and empower her romantic relationship. Encouraged by her friends' interactive gestures, such as likes, comments, number counts for attention/read, the attention economy of participation/visibility, the body and the ‘self’ become sources of value that one can utilize for personal exhibitionism. Carefully curated texts and images on social media challenge conventional understandings of visibility and transparency—especially those reinforced by platform infrastructures designed to commodify users' time, data, attention, and affective capacities. Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) argue that integrated social buttons reshape the architecture of the web by transforming users into fleeting yet trackable objects of

[28]The concept of 'friends' on Weibo is ambiguous; as a public social platform, it amalgamates diverse audiences into a flat structure where private and public boundaries blur (boyd and Marwick, 2011).

engagement. Rather than simply fostering connection, these tools produce a participatory environment in which visibility is algorithmically managed and affective engagement is continuously extracted. These infrastructures facilitate what Koskela (2002) terms empowering exhibitionism, referring to the technical affordances that encourage the public promotion of the self under the guise of agency.

Following their socio-technological perspective, social media infrastructure transforms a privately intended diary into a publicly accessible artefact. For instance, the use of a hashtag such as '#does Mr Ji like Ju Zi#' along with an attention metric (the number 847) collectively contribute to the dynamics of affective flows among bodies, materials, and the immaterial. Specifically, the materiality of the body (the flirtatious moments of the couple) meets the materiality of the social media (posts) and intra-act with the materiality of other user's bodies (affirmative comments, likes, and attention in general). The tech-social infrastructure of Weibo facilitates these affective relational loops among these discursive-material bodies, 'generating intensities that accumulate and layer within somatic archives as personal and cultural knowledge systems concerns embodiment, desire and sexuality' (Kyrölä and Paasonen, 2015, p.608). By inscribing the moments of their chat into public diaries and social media platforms, bodies multiply their presence in different spaces and times, as once they enter the space of the 'digital super-public', they outlive the time and place in which these texts and images were produced initially, viewed or circulated (Chun and Friedland, 2015).

Therefore, posting her love stories on her Weibo homepage also serves as an initiative to maintain the sociality of Ju Zi's friendship group. In a few of her posts, a friend of Ju Zi's commented by saying, "Keep updating, I am still waiting!" to which Ju Zi replied with a smiley emoji, and said, "Coming soon!". Maintaining a public-facing narrative for her potential readers, ideally friends, she fashioned herself as a microcelebrity and sought 'attention' by documenting the routines of her mediated love life (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2015).

Now, the ordinary routines, habits, and chat history with her boyfriend (Ji Lan), which were once performed in a nonreflexive manner, have been digitally inscribed, becoming visible, replicable and measurable. This increased legibility opens the possibility of being subject to personal and collective interpretation. These practices produce archival affect—a mediated sensibility that renders ephemeral feelings more tangible and memorable, while also shaping a visual and emotional grammar of what intimacy ought to look and feel like. In this way, digital traces do not merely document a relationship but actively participate in its aesthetic construction, reinforcing normative imaginaries of love as emotionally intense, visually performative, and publicly shareable. Within this process, affective aesthetics mediate the flows of emotion between bodies and practices, while heteronormativity continues to exert a powerful structuring force that channels and constrains these affective relations.

6.5 ‘To share or not to share’: Digital networked public performance and reversible panoptic gaze

The performance of the self and construction of digital identity have long been central to media studies. Goffman (1959) conceptualised self-presentation as a form of impression management, where individuals curate their public persona for social interaction. In digital spaces, this staging of the self extends beyond character to include performance within platform-specific architectures, where technological affordances and audience dynamics serve as modern-day props (Papacharissi, 2002). Papacharissi (2002, p.374) emphasises that online self-disclosure is highly selective, shaped by the expressive possibilities and constraints of each platform. Building on this, Bucher (2012) introduces the notion of 'algorithmic friendship', wherein algorithms influence perceived social compatibility and subtly guide user interactions, often resurfacing past connections. Meanwhile, Miller et al. (2016)

describe 'scalable sociality' to capture the polymediated nature of digital communication, highlighting how users negotiate audience visibility and platform affordances to manage their social image. Together, these frameworks reveal the deliberate and dynamic process of digital self-fashioning, shaped not only by imagined audiences (Marwick and boyd, 2011) but also by the algorithmic and aesthetic logic that governs what, and who, is made visible. In this context, users construct a carefully curated persona, navigating both social expectations and platform design to maintain a desired affective presence.

I designed a program that could write his name using Python, which I recently self-taught, and I recorded a video of my program running for my boyfriend's birthday gift. I secretly hoped he might share a screenshot of it in his Moments feed[29] *"朋友圈", and let everyone know that we are together [as a couple] [..], but he didn't.*

Wu Yin (20, year 3, W)

ZZ: Did you mention that you use it [Weibo] as a digital diary? Write for yourself.

Ju Zi: Yes, if I intended it for a broad audience, I would have chosen Moments (WeChat) or QQ zone[30]*, not on what I call the 'corners' [referring to her Weibo account as a corner which is less frequented by people she knows]*

The two extracts illustrate the nuanced intentionality of sharing (or not

[29] A feature on WeChat functions as a "feed" where users share updates and interact with friends' posts.

[30] WeChat and QQ, owned by the prominent Chinese tech company Tencent, have seen a rapid and sustained increase in active users since late 2012. WeChat has grown to become the third largest social media platform globally, following Facebook and WhatsApp. Most people have their friends and relatives in these two apps, or including the most sensible acquaintance, such as colleagues, and classmate/teachers since primary schools.

sharing) and the dynamics of selected audiences across different digital spaces. Specifically, Wu Yin's desire for her boyfriend, Zhao Tian, to showcase her birthday gifts on his Moment feed clashed with his digital identity in his networked public on WeChat, which led to a subsequent disappointment. Meanwhile, Ju Zi's choice of platform – opting for Weibo over WeChat – also suggests a strategic approach to self-presentation and management of sociality in her selective networked friendship (boyd, 2014).

In this instance, both Wu Yin's boyfriend and Ju Zi craft their public persona, and tailor it to the specific 'networked publics' that are afforded and constituted by the privacy settings, anonymity, media convergence, interface and algorithm of the social media platform (Chan, 2021; Papaharissi, 2013). Wu Yin's case is particularly illustrative of how digital performativity extends beyond mere posting to marking a relationship milestone intended for wide visibility to a different networked public through her boyfriend's social groups in his WeChat accounts. This resonates with Ringrose's (2011) theorisation of social networking sites as relational and 'affective assemblages', further dissolving the boundaries between online-offline and human-non-human dimensions of distributed agency. Such a concept is crucial for understanding young people's decisions of 'sharing or not sharing' on specific social media networks in the post-digital context. Elsewhere, through a feminist-inspired posthuman assemblage theory, Ringrose's (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013) analysis of selfies and relationships elucidates the affective complexity between bodies and images of young people. Their research explores the operation of the phallic forces–patriarchal mechanism operating through digital affordances, channelling affective movements into material manifestations of control within an assemblage of 'compulsory coupledom' (ibid.).

Similarly, social media platforms like WeChat can be understood as assemblages where bodies, operating as desiring machines, connect through virtual interfaces such as Moments feeds. Wu Yin's implicit desire to be 'presented' in her boyfriend's social media reflects not merely a personal

longing for recognition, but an alignment with (hetero)normative scripts of visibility and relational legitimacy. This dynamic underscores the sentimental architectures of social platforms and resonates with what Berlant (2008) terms “aesthetic worlds... just political, flourishing in proximity to the political” (p.3). While these platforms ostensibly function as tools for self-presentation, users are continually negotiating not only with peers but also with the discursive-material logics of the platforms themselves and the aspirational selves they mediate. These infrastructures channel desire through algorithmically curated affective flows while simultaneously constraining movement and expression via platformed norms and algorithmic self (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013). As such, users are compelled to participate in aestheticised performances of intimacy and success, selectively curating what to share or conceal in order to approximate a vision of the 'good life' that conforms to dominant social imaginaries.

> *Wu Yin: I remember I mentioned a girl I know on WeChat. She recorded videos of her singing and dancing for her boyfriend's birthday and posted the videos on her Moments (similar to her Facebook wall). It's great; that's how being in a relationship should be. But personally, I feel it's unnecessary […]*
>
> *Wu Yin: I'm not into showing off our relationship. There is a saying, 'The more you show off your relationship, the faster it [the relationship] may die (xiù ēn ài sǐ de kuài“秀恩爱死得快”[…] I feel if you're constantly posting about your relationship online while you're in it, it might be embarrassing if you break up later.*

Public displays of affection - what Wu Yin refers to as *xiù ēn ài* - function as affective rituals of attachment and legitimation, emblematic of technologically mediated performances that aim to secure and display one's romantic relationship. Within the affordances of networked media, such acts resemble

what boyd (2011) terms "publicly networked displays of dedication," whereby the sharing of relationship milestones signals commitment not only to the partner but also to a wider audience or imagined public. These affective publics cohere around shared digital rituals such as videos, photo collages, and birthday celebrations, where intimacy is collaboratively constructed, aesthetically curated, and affectively validated through likes, comments, and reposts (section 6.4).

From a more-than-human perspective, these practices can be conceptualised as relational assemblages, wherein intimacy is both materially and affectively produced through the acts of recording, editing, and posting of the romantic moments in social media platforms. These curated performances do more than declare and affirm a heterosexual relational status; they also generate affective intensities of belongings that tether romantic visibility to future-oriented heteronormative imaginaries (see also Renold and Ivinson, 2015). In their study of the digital affordance of Facebook ‘tagging’, Renold and Ringrose (2017) reveal how digital relational practices materialise new forms of sexual objectification, where the flesh and the digital co-constitute one another. These relational assemblages transgress normative boundaries of dis/embodied gender, sexuality, and age, producing digitally mediated intimacies that resemble a form of compulsory coupledom within youth digital cultures (Renold and Ringrose, 2017). Through these affective and machinic entanglements, digital platforms become not merely sites of expression, but generative spaces where normative scripts of gender and sexuality are both reproduced and contested.

However, Wu Yin’s ambivalence about whether or not to post romantic content reveals the contradictory affective economies of *xiu en ai*. While such posts are meant to affirm emotional bonds and signal relational ownership, they also risk post-breakup embarrassment, peer scrutiny, and loss of control over one's digital narrative. As Cefai and Couldry (2019) argue, in today's media-saturated environment, the ambient awareness of others’ lives cultivates a

background presence that recalibrates how intimacy, status, and attention are negotiated. This hyperpresence - enabled by the persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability of digital content (boyd, 2014) - transforms romantic expressions into socially risky performances. While digital platforms can intensify social interactions through the visible display of relationships, they also magnify issues like drama, gossip, and cyberbullying, revealing the performative and often public nature of online interactions (boyd, 2014)

Indeed, digital platforms alter the temporal rhythm of social life, making even ephemeral moments endure, and inviting intensified scrutiny over one's relational visibility. As digital content becomes persistent and easily accessible, digital platforms, as Brubaker (2020, p.2) notes ‘altered the basic rhythms of our being in the world’ – rendering even ephemeral moments enduring and intensifying scrutiny over one’s relational visibility. Therefore, young people are, exposed to heightened social stakes and affective intensities in the ongoing negotiation of status, visibility, and belonging in online interactions. For instance, despite channels that may seem 'private', information often becomes public through actions like sharing screenshots or copying and pasting conversations, contributing to the spread of drama and increasing incidences of cyberbullying in school settings (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Ringrose and Rawlings, 2015; Pascoe, 2021). As such, the hypervisibility of networked intimacy not only enables new forms of connection but also reshapes young people's affective landscapes, entangling love with fear, display with risk, and celebration with surveillance.

[She also continued to express her complicated feelings about the act of ‘xiù ēn ài’ and the reasons why she hasn’t posted anything about her relationship]

Wu Yin: I haven't publicised my relationship with my classmates. I was worried that if we broke up once I publicised my relationship, others would laugh at me, like what I felt about others [when they broke up]. It is expected to have a relationship during college and feel jealous about

others' relationships. However, these thoughts have had a negative impact on my relationship, and I can't change anything about it. As soon as there are friends who tuō dān (literally meaning: getting rid of singlehood and starting a relationship), I feel jealous.

ZZ: Are you afraid that others will compare yours to theirs once you publicise your relationship?

Wu Yin: Yes, also, I always believe that when they compare, they will find that mine is less sweet than theirs, and our relationship is not as good as theirs.

In Wu Yin's account of her social media practices and reactions to others' posts, the mediated presence of others oscillates between ephemeral glimpses and enduring impressions. Sensing her own embedded insecurity and judgmental perspective — particularly in response to others' idealised displays of romantic relationships — Wu Yin carefully navigates her own visibility in her Moments feed, concealing negative feelings from her imagined audience. This negotiation is not simply a reaction to top-down surveillance but reflects a more complex form of mutual monitoring in networked publics.

Drawing on Foucault's notion of the 'panopticon' as an internalised gaze that governs conduct (1979, p.155), I conceptualise Wu Yin's experience as part of a "reversible panoptic gaze" — a horizontal mode of social scrutiny that is affectively embodied and circulates among peers in digital interaction. Foucault (1979) describes the panopticon not as a force of arms or physical constraint, but rather as an omnipresent gaze that instils a sense of perpetual surveillance, leading individuals to internalize this oversight, impacting their psyche more than their physical actions. Unlike the traditional panopticon, which entails a top-down, asymmetrical gaze, this form of visibility reflects the mutual and affectively charged monitoring characteristic of digitally mediated youth sexual cultures. Unlike traditional surveillance premised on asymmetric power (Mann and Ferenbok, 2013), or its inverse — sousveillance from below (Mann, Nolan and Wellman, 2003) — this gaze operates not through

institutional power, but through shared emotional labour, aesthetic performance, and self-scrutinized regulations in digital youth cultures.

Expanding on Marwick's (2012) concept of social surveillance and Foucault's capillary power, I argue that this gaze is not merely disciplinary, but also aestheticised and affectively charged. It constitutes a mutualised mode of visibility in which individuals simultaneously watch and are watched, shaping one another's behaviours, emotions, and self-presentation through continuous and reciprocal observation. Surveillance becomes internalized as users consume user-generated content, continuously shaping and reshaping community norms and expectations (Trottier, 2012a), As users navigate social media, they self-regulate their behaviour to strike a balance between visibility and privacy while engaging with the content of others, which influences perceptions of normalcy and acceptability within the community (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2015). Wu Yin's narrative reveals the contradictory emotional landscape of such performances: she both desires to participate in the normative aesthetic of love (e.g. "xiù ēn ài") and resists the commodified self-display such posts entail. Her account thus reflects what I term the affective tensions of aestheticised heteronormative performance, where norms of compulsory coupledom, feminine affectivity, and social desirability collide.

The example here brings together the notions of 'exhibitionism' and hyperpresence, which explore the compulsory imaginaries of heteronormativity via ritualized speculation, to explore a related form of self-scrutiny in which young people are exposed through public display of love. These contradictory dynamics of confession and concealment, self-affirmation and judgment, underscore the ambivalence of mediated intimacy under heteronormative and neoliberal conditions. Wu Yin's love-and-hate relation to public romantic posts encapsulates the emotional labour of living in what Ringrose and Coleman (2013) call a postfeminist visual economy: a space where femininity is simultaneously hyper-visible and trivialised. In this context, the aesthetics of intimacy do not simply mirror existing norms; they co-constitute the terrain on

which young people negotiate agency, belonging, and emotional credibility that entangled with the bio-technological landscape in young networked peer cultures (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013; Marston, 2020).

6.6 Conclusion: Re-envisioning mediated intimacy as affective aesthetics in techno-social assemblages

As the pandemic halted transnational and national mobility, young people sustained continuous connections with their social circles, including classmates, friends, and significant others, irrespective of physical distances. The pandemic-induced space-time 'distanciation' (Giddens,1990), has accelerated our reliance on institutions and organizations for mediating everyday life. Moving away from the prevailing technologic moral panic (McGlotten, 2013), digital technology devices and networks extend the affective capacities of the human body, dissolving the embodiment of intimacy into a nonlinear, transparent, and enduring experience (Alasuutari, 2021; Kyrölä and Paasonen, 2016). The concept of intimacy is, therefore, expanded beyond physical proximity and flesh-bonded interactions to include the affective and spiritual human-machine mediated interactions within techno-social-cultural assemblages: a dynamic techno-social-cultural 'relational affective assemblage' (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013).

A central theme running through this chapter is the re-imagination of mediated intimacy as *affective aesthetics* in youth digital cultures. This conceptualisation helps to encompass participants' narratives about embodied experiences of intimacy and 'aesthetic training' in emotional expression' in techno-social assemblages (Berlant and Seitz, 2015). This aestheticisation of intimacy is deeply embedded in heteronormative codes, patriarchal structures, and platform logics that encourage a 'good life' narrative: monogamous, middle-class, and emotionally expressive coupledom. As the cases of Wu Yin and Ju

Zi reveal, hyperpresence — being constantly seen, validated, and emotionally available — produces both affirmation and anxiety. Therefore, every time Ju Zi and Wu Yin use communicative media, they are not only plugging into a more extensive technological-afforded network but also into different multi-modal and multi-directional assemblages that evoke bodily and affective experiences which are shaped by a multitude of external relations shaped by heteronormative scripts, platform algorithms, and neoliberal ideals of self-responsibility and visibility. Through participating in highly stylised performances of love, young people are subject to what I term the reversible panoptic gaze — a dynamic of mutual surveillance where users not only curate their romantic image but simultaneously judge and internalise others' displays. This gaze is not unidirectional (as in Foucault's panopticon, see Foucault, 1979), but distributed and relational, shaping both the moralisation of the intimate and aesthetics of digital self-presentation. This gaze governs the affective economy of digital intimacy, producing contradictory feelings of affirmation, comparison, and shame.

From this perspective, intimacy is not simply defined by who we relate to, but how power circulates through affective and aesthetic norms that govern what intimacy should look and feel like. Through curated presence, affective gestures, and digital rituals such as *xiù ēn ài*, intimacy emerges as a site of affective circulation that move through the rhythms, temporality, and visibility regimes of the broader techno-social assemblage. Young people's entanglements with techno-cultural environments do not simply mediate intimacies, but they also actively shape, modulate, and intensify affective flows, producing sensations of connection, disorientation, ambivalence, and aspiration across human and more-than-human interfaces (Kolehmainen, Lahad and Lahti, 2021; Evans and Ringrose, 2025; Ahmed, 2006). I argue that such affective tensions was generated through a dynamic of mutual surveillance where users curate their own presence while scrutinising others, internalising norms of romantic display and respectability (section 6.5). This

chapter, therefore, maps an affective landscape of digital intimacy — one that simultaneously promises belonging and induces anxiety, while exposing the entanglements of desire, surveillance, and heteronormativity. At the same time, by tracing moments of ambivalence, hesitation, and affective rupture, it also opens space for the reimagination of intimacies and gendered subjectivities; within, against, and beyond the frames of both digital and non-digital worlds.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Coda

I awakened from my trance state and was stunned to find that the world I was living in, the world of the present, was no longer open to Love […] I write of Love to bear witness both to the danger in this movement and to call for a return to Love. Redeemed and restored, Love returns us to the promise of everlasting life. When we love, we can let our hearts speak. (bell hooks, All about Love, 2018, p. x-xi),

Finally, I arrived at Tianhe airport in Wuhan almost at midnight. The humidity and heat of a regular summer day in Wuhan welcomed me after three and half years since the last time I visited. Wuhan, famously described as *Jiang Cheng* — 'river town' or 'river city', sits at the juncture of the Yangtze and the Han Rivers.

Wuhan holds all my summer memories — afternoons spent by the 'looking-glass' river, the tranquil nights filled with the monotonous chant of cicadas, and the scent of osmanthus sweetening the first breeze of autumn as summer fades. After leaving Wuhan to study abroad, all my memories of my hometown condensed into summer, as my last visit home was in 2018, and this trip marked my first return since the COVID-19 pandemic. Wuhan's summer felt no different this time, with its stifling heat and almost unbreathable air, just as I remembered.

Nothing had changed, yet everything had changed. After the initial shock at how many changes had occurred while I was away, I found myself getting used to monstrous high-rise buildings that seemed to pop out of the ground overnight, the heavily pregnant friend to whom I had broken my promise to be bridesmaid due to travel restrictions, and the new lines and grey hair on my parents. Over time, despite all the changes, I sensed certain anchors that pulled me back to

the Wuhan of my memories: the comfort of finally sharing meals with my parents and walking alongside them in their daily routines, and reconnecting with friends I had known since middle school. Yet, there were moments when I couldn't escape the residual weight of the past three years – the fear, the uncertainty, and the lingering sense of agitation and concerns, subtly etched into everyday conversations and into how people perceived both themselves and the ‘other’.

It was not long before I realised how many questions I received about my life overseas. Among all these inquiries, one stood out repeatedly: my best friend, my parents' friends at dinner tables, my former undergraduate professor and Ju Zi, the student participant with whom I remained in close contact after the interviews, all asked: "So, are they [Westerners/foreigners] discriminating against us?"

At that very moment, I seemed to be put into a position to represent millions of Chinese who live overseas. Discreetly and warily, people were waiting for me to confirm what had been reported in the Chinese media about the 'West'. My answer was not important on those occasions.

Meanwhile, when I recalled the first few months of the pandemic, it was still surreal. Indeed, I can speak about the random yelling and calling out on the street every time I went to get groceries or introduced myself as from Wuhan, adding, “but I have not visited it this year [in 2020]”. I also remember the bi-weekly long walks with my friends and colleagues through the eerily quiet streets of London and the countryside and visiting my friends' digital 'islands' in Animal Crossing.[31] while we would talk about our life concerns, our hopes, and the things we wished to do once everything was getting back to 'normal'. I can still vividly retrieve from my memory and senses the laughter and tears at every gathering at my friends' houses and the hugs from my supervisors when they first heard of Wuhan in the news. However, I could not explain all these feelings

[31] A game on Nintendo Switch in which you can visit each other's islands, decorate, and send gifts. It was once a hit during the pandemic

and experiences to people who remained in Wuhan at the start of the pandemic, only nodding, smiling and saying, 'It is not that bad'.

These very entanglements, tensions, and gaps are what I experience — both bodily and emotionally — in my everyday life. To the people in my hometown, I seem ‘foreign’ enough, pursuing a future that diverges entirely from what they expect of a woman my age: starting a family, buying property, and having a baby (mostly in this order). Our memories of the pandemic also differed slightly. I couldn’t mention that I was going on long city walks with my friends, going to grocery stores and hanging around in the park every other day. Meanwhile, they lived through drastic social upheavals in the pandemic's eye of the storm, facing the strictest restrictions one can imagine. Wuhan, had previously been known for its insufferable summer weather, the Xinhai revolution against the last Chinese imperial dynasty, and the devastating floods in 1998, which gave the city a unique spirit. It now carries a new legacy of severe lockdowns, strict quarantine measures, and the White Paper Protests (*bai zhi ge ming*)[32] against the harsh zero-Covid rules (BBC News, 2023; Guan et al., 2025) — oscillating between hope and fear. These have left deep imprints on minds, bodies, and memories. However, to "Western foreigners," I seem to be too ‘Chinese’, too ‘Wuhan’ – as if I existed on a small utopian island formed by my chosen family abroad and a handful of warm-hearted colleagues. But one thing remains the same: rampant Wuhan-phobia existed. It lingers in the daily rituals [33] of temperature checks, travel history declarations, and

[32] At the end of November 2022, the White Paper Revolution (Chinese: 白纸抗议; pinyin: Báizhǐ kàngyì), also known as the A4 Revolution, broke out across major Chinese cities. The movement was named after the blank white sheets of paper that protesters held up—a powerful symbol of the silencing of dissent and the impossibility of open expression under strict censorship .

[33] These routines became a highly regulated form of self-surveillance, where residents were required to log their movements, report symptoms, and submit to repeated mass testing—enforced through the *juweihui* (local neighbourhood committees)—in the name of collective safety under China’s stringent Zero-COVID policy. These protocols remained in place until the sudden reversal of the policy in December 2022, following

compulsory mass swab tests — organised by the *juweihui* (the local neighbourhood committee responsible for residential management and pandemic enforcement), and in the subtle awkwardness that surfaces every time I mention my hometown to others. What was once a city's name has become, for many, a symbol that evokes discomfort, suspicion, or silence. Each trajectory we choose to follow shapes part of our 'self,' determining our relationship to our country, our identity, and our past, yet there is still something that anchors us together. Therefore, I begin this final section by returning to the central theme of the thesis, *love,* which evokes intense emotion and compelling actions as a crucial part of our subjectivities, the socio-cultural and political positions we take, and how we see the world. It also has driven my curiosity and sympathy throughout this research about young people and their practices of intimacy(ies) amongst the same fear and uncertainty we both experienced in the global turbulent time.

It is essential to acknowledge that my study, research participants, and I are embedded within a turbulent social context shaped by shifting biopolitical policies, particularly concerning how our bodies and identities are governed. Between 2018 and 2024 — during the research period — various events, incidents, and social movements have subtly shaped our understanding of rights, morality, and responsibility, particularly concerning class, race, and gender hierarchies. As Rosenberg (1989, p.2) notes, epidemics provoke "understandings of the relationship among ideology, social structure, and the construction of particular selves". During the pandemic, we all shared fears of the contagious illness and the fluctuating media and government narratives surrounding it. For instance, Li Wenliang, a whistleblower in the winter of 2019, when he privately alerted colleagues about the outbreak on WeChat and was subsequently detained, died in February 2020 working on the health frontlines, and this became one of the darkest moments of the crisis. Simultaneously,

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widespread social protest– the White Paper Revolution.

significant shifts occurred in China's gender and sexuality landscape. The one-child policy, officially replaced by the three-child policy in May 2021 to counteract a shrinking and ageing population, was paired with a pro-birth agenda. Meanwhile, LGBTQ+ rights were increasingly restricted, with university and high school LGBTQ+ groups being blocked on WeChat in 2021 and the Beijing LGBT Centre ceasing operations in 2023. Furthermore, media crackdowns on sexual harassment cases — such as Xianzi's allegations against television host Zhu Jun in 2018 and the civil suit against billionaire Liu Qiangdong in 2019 — galvanised women's activism, though both faced censorship and state resistance.

Though this research did not cover these events in detail, it is essential to recognise that it is an assemblage of entanglements across time, space, and social realities, shaping our shared and individual experiences. These events reflect deeper intersections of social identities and values, influencing how we perceive our bodies, our understanding of ourselves, and our imaginations of the future. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (2004 [1987]) concept of "lines of flight," this study reflected the processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, revealing how my research, alongside the shifting sociopolitical context, continuously shapes and reshapes my academic pursuit. In the following section, I will draw together and discuss the findings from previous chapters and consider their implications in relation to the wider literature on Chinese youth gender culture and mediated intimacies.

7.2 Inside university love and relationship classes

In March 2024, coinciding with the final stages of writing the conclusion, a news story went viral on Weibo and sparked widespread media attention. Screenshots from a university course, titled Love Psychology circulated online, containing statements such as: “Key strategies for women pursuing men include outvoicing her claims to want children,” “Makeup can increase

attractiveness to men, but it should be understood correctly — the goal is to appear younger," and "Women can significantly increase their appeal to men by appearing conservative" (Peng and Zuo, 2024). These blatantly sexist remarks, delivered in a university lecture, triggered a wave of public criticism. In a rare move, the university responded swiftly by removing the lecturer and suspending the course for the term.

Yet beneath the viral headlines and institutional response lies a deeper tension that reflects ongoing gendered discontent and the increasingly fraught terrain of political sensitivity surrounding feminism and gender discourse in China. Rather than representing isolated moments, these events exemplify the entangled relations between human and non-human agencies: media outrage, digital virality, institutional politics, and gendered affect. These forces flatten the binary between digital and non-digital domains (Evans and Ringrose, 2025), demonstrating how gender discourse circulates, mutates, and materialises both online and 'in real life.'

For me, this event was not external to the research; it interacted with my fieldwork and writing process. Each time I conducted interviews, wrote fieldnotes, or revisited transcripts, I was 'plugging into' a larger research assemblage where gender and sexual discourses were constantly being made and unmade. These assemblages — shaped by affect, media infrastructures, institutional responses, and everyday speech — enabled the articulation of troubling narratives around intimacy, femininity, and power. In this sense, the research itself was always already embedded in the political and affective atmospheres of the university and its mediated public spheres. This final incident during my thesis writing stage powerfully illustrates how the micropolitics of everyday intimacy are entangled with broader sociocultural, technological, and institutional forces, reminding us that the struggle over gender and sexuality is not only conceptual but profoundly lived.

This incident was neither the first media controversy surrounding university-level "love courses" nor an isolated case of such courses drawing significant

public attention. As early as 2013, the East China Normal University [34] introduced an elective course named "Marriage and Love," which saw an overwhelming number of applicants (Deng, 2011; Bi, 2024). In 2014, Nanjing University launched five sequential love-related lectures. Wuhan University also offered a course on love psychology that covered the fundamental theories and practical examples of relationships; from initiating romantic connections to navigating their maintenance and dissolution. Several university lecturers have since gained national fame for teaching courses on love and intimacy. For instance, Professor Shen Yifei from Fudan University, who has researched gender relations and family sociology for over 20 years, offers public elective courses like "Intimate Relationships" and "Visual Culture and Gender Relations" at Fudan University. In 2020, Shen began offering courses on video platforms, covering topics on love and intimacy. Her online course, 'Sociological Thinking on Love with Shen Yifei,' which rapidly attracted thousands of viewers and was eventually adapted into a bestselling book. Professor Shen quickly rose to fame with her sociological perspective on Love, garnering millions of followers and becoming a public figure invited to participate in romance-related reality shows on TV. Another prominent public figure and ‘love guru’, Professor Liang Yong'an, from Fudan University’s Chinese Department, became famous for the videos he uploaded on Bilibili, covering concurrent topics including fear of marriage among women, *Fènghuáng Nán* [35], long-distance relationships, blind dates, and

[34] Chinese universities designated as “normal universities” trace their origins to the French term école normale, which emerged in the 17th century. The term referred to model institutions established to train teachers according to established pedagogical norms and standardized curricula. This naming convention reflects the institutions’ foundational role in shaping educational orthodoxy and professional teacher training. Examples of such institutions include National Taiwan Normal University and Capital Normal University, among others.

[35] *Fènghuáng Nán*, meaning "Phoenix Man," is a term used in contemporary Chinese culture to describe a man who comes from a poor or rural background but achieves significant success through education, hard work, and upward social mobility. The term "phoenix" metaphorically suggests that the man has risen from humble beginnings, like

loneliness in marriage. His content quickly attracted young people's attention and online traffic, garnering him over a million followers across different social media platforms. Before being widely recognised for his love courses, Liang published numerous books on comparative literature. Still, he is best known for his works related to love, including '*Liang Yong'an: The Course on Love You Can't Fail"* (Liang, 2023)

The production and widespread reciprocity of this content among young people reveals an overarching theme in the realm of love, through which the consumerist market, neoliberal culture, and media technology collectively assemble and reconceptualise the promise of heteronormativity within modern institutions. Whereas most of these courses start with a presumed idea of heterosexual monogamous relationships, attempting to tackle the love anxieties of this generation of young people, the problem remains unresolved. Love experts, workshops, and self-help books all resonate with a series of recurring concerns: uncertainty about emotional life, interpreting our own and others' feelings, and naturalising and navigating delicate power relations in intimate relationships (Gill, 2009; Sun and Lei, 2017). Facing the grand theme of love, the course can potentially overlook the diverse cultural contexts and individual needs and continue to produce rather than reflect upon century-old gender stereotypes to students (Du, 2020; Cui, 2020). How do young people navigate new dilemmas regarding gender and relationships amidst transformative social development and media technologies? It was sensible for feminist educators to ponder if the past experiences still apply.

This research has probed into the three Love Psychology courses and young people's lived experiences of love and intimacy; and dissected their intersectional process of 'becoming' gender and sexual subjects. This thesis

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the mythical bird reborn from ashes. However, the term is often used with a slightly negative connotation, particularly when referring to men who, despite their success, maintain traditional values or family dynamics that may clash with the more modern, urban lifestyles of their partners or peers.

employed a feminist posthuman theory, as both a conceptual and political lens, to critically trace the 'normative' discourses of Chinese youth gender and sexual practice. This thesis therefore, moves beyond Eurocentric and modernist narratives while acknowledging the historical and social peculiarity of Chinese contexts. Moreover, I drew on the posthuman concepts - including affect, assemblages, and feminist 'figuration' - that have de-centred humans and affirm differences, broadening the concept of subjectivity and intimacy(ies) beyond the human into technology and other non-human forces (Ahmed, 2013; Fox and Alldred, 2015; Ringrose, 2011). This research, therefore, challenges the prevalent framework of gender and sexuality research, policy and practices in China, which is limited to understanding the expansive range of intimacies of young people. This concluding chapter provides a retrospective summary of my dissertation and the implications of the growing importance of education on Love, relationships and sexuality.

Taking place in the eye of the storm of the global pandemic, Wuhan, this research explored young people's gendered subjectivity and practices of intimacy in contemporary China, particularly in the contested post-socialist and neoliberalist Chinese context. Incorporating a range of ethnographic research methods, I devised a longitudinal and open-ended exploration of young people’s practices of intimacies. I conducted the research in two main phases over approximately ten months. The first phase took place in August 2019 and involved initial online interviews with lecturers who taught Love and Psychology courses. The second phase followed from March to August 2020 and consisted of online ethnographic fieldwork, including course observations, student interviews, and the collection of digital diaries. When universities were notified to shut down indefinitely, my fieldwork had at this point shifted from the initial on-site research to a digital research. The exploratory process still generated surprising findings that deepen understanding of the complexity of the process of 'becoming' gender and sexual subjectivities and the redefinition of intimacy(ies).

Situated in a posthuman performative framework, I believe this thesis has made several contributions to the existing literature and relevant knowledge relating to the studies of intimacy(ies) and youth gender subjectivities. In the following sections, I will summarise my findings and address the contributions of this research.

7.3 Key contributions

7.3.1 Intra-active conceptualisation of youth's 'becoming' gender subjects and analytic reflection on youth gender cultures

This research adopts a conceptual frame of 'becoming' (Braidotti, 2022) to theorise youth subjectivities as relational and continuously in flux, shaped through intersectional axes of analysis such as race, ethnicity, age, able-bodiedness, and class. These intersecting dimensions inform not only one's sense of self but also one's modes of relating to others and to the broader world (Braidotti, 2022). Following feminist posthumanist notions of situated knowledge, my ethnographic research—as well as the subsequent phases of data analysis and writing—has been a continuous exercise in mapping that seeks to exceed, unsettle, or reconfigure dominant discourses. Such a posthuman lens exceeds poststructuralism and comprises a new ontological understanding of the subjects who were going through, embodied in and making meaning of different social elements – the process of 'becoming' of gender and sexual subjectivity. Therefore, instead of presenting the participants' accounts from a 'God's eye view' (May, 2011, p.145), I grounded the discussion of young people's 'becoming' gender and sexual subjectivities in lived experience. I connected the youth's gender and sexual subjectivities and discourses with broader social surroundings and personally embodied realities

as I discussed in Chapter 5.

The research also speaks back to entrenched debates on neoliberalist ethos and discursively produced subjectivities. By bridging postfeminism and neoliberalism in China's non-Western and post-socialist context, this study has contributed to developing an alternative ethic-onto-epistemology and methodology in sociology studies on gender and sexuality (Connell, 2009; Butler, 2006; Hershatter, 2020). Opposed to ideas of subjectivity as a rational self that is capable of autonomous decision-making, I grounded the exploration in the lived experiences of my participants and explored how phallic power shapes the reconfiguration of gender and sexual subjectivities/*zhutixing*. This research focuses on the subject's rupture with 'normativities' in a transformative social environment with a quotidian neoliberal sensibility.

Subsequently, in Chapter 4, I unpacked the discursive discourses and controversies reflected in the Love Psychology courses – a student-targeted relationship advice course in two universities in Wuhan. I contended that the course content replicated the wider heteronormative environment and narrow social expectations of (hetero)normative marriage, or at least committed conjugal relationship, gelling with overarching Chinese sexuality and gender politics. The finding partially resonates with the previous literature on sexuality education in Chinese higher education institutions, illustrating the prioritisation of institutional heteronormativity (Wei, 2020; Cui, 2023; Liao, 2020; Huang et al., 2009). The Love Psychology course and it similar kinds constitute an alternative trajectory of sexuality education in China where the intersectional impact of political climates. However, the entrenched 'scientific' approach to sexuality research and institutional heteronormativity remains as implicit active actors in courses and classrooms. Specifically, my analysis of the emerging intimacy discourses points to the rationalisation of gender differences where both romanticised gender inequality and rhetorical pro-egalitarian discourses are present in the prescriptive dating etiquette taught in the courses. These discourses echo the widespread postfeminist sentiments, framing gender

inequality in terms of romantic or 'natural' differences, which are presented in the course contents as scientifically validated with little critical reflection.

Meanwhile, as the research is situated in the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the uncertainty of campus shutdowns and distant learning/teaching environments further added to the layers of complexity. The courses became a crucial space for addressing young people's anxieties surrounding intimacy and lack of social encounters in uncertain times; meanwhile, the courses provided a glimpse into the potential for more gender-inclusive sexuality education in China, moving away from the focus on the dangers and restrictions of youth sexuality. My research reflects upon the courses highlighting the fragility and vulnerability of relationship and sexuality education in China and emphasised the delicate balance these courses must maintain in higher educational contexts. The sectioned freedom – rooted in and benefiting from the 'scientific' approach to sexuality topics and the need for self-censorship due to political and digital surveillance - are the underlying themes of the courses. Walking a tightrope between embracing limited freedoms in light of potential context collapses and online scrutiny, the course lecturers also bore the speakers' burden in unique COVID-19 and mediated digital interactions, where fear of misinterpretation, backlash and censorship loomed more significantly than ever before (Irvine, 2005, p.236).

Subsequently, in Chapter 5, instead of viewing gendered and sexual subjects as a monolithic and unitary entity, the analysis reaches a micro-level that allows me to complicate the process of 'becoming' gender and sexual subjects, dismantling the hierarchal understanding of normalcy and power. The chapter, therefore, further put gender binaries, queerness and (hetero)normativity in flux. Specifically, I worked on the micro-level movement of power in the process of 'becoming' desiring subjects and brought the neoliberal incitement of managing one’s self and intimate relationship to a deeper level. Neoliberalism's discursive and psychic effects cut across gender, age, and class positions (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Capturing the fine

'lines of flights' of each case, Xue Wei, Bai Xue, Chen Xiao, and Zhu Wen, I elaborate on the ruptures of normativity where queering moments of age/gender/sexual norms happened. I argued that young people's practices of intimacy are an ongoing negotiation with normative ideas of beauty, desirability and respectability that underlie a hegemonic vision of ‘good life’ (Berlant, 2011). In young people’s process of ‘becoming’ desiring subjects, intimacies as affective intra-actions are constantly assembled and reassembled through various social, cultural and materials resources – prioritising some while abject other cultural signs. This framing allows for a nuanced analysis of how the aesthetics are internalised, reproduced, and rejected, informed by neoliberal and post-socialist gender norms that extend beyond the university context in China.

My view, in general, is that 'heteropatriarchy' or 'male privilege' remains widespread in the prevalent postfeminist, neo/non-liberal and heteronormative context. However, social progress, through patchy and nonlinear, is still happening. In Chapter 5, I demonstrated in the case of Bai Xue and her discourses of compulsory marital norms that, whereas marriage continues to be viewed as a rite of passage to seniority and identity formation (Lahad, 2024; Fincher, 2016), this young woman tends to defy the subjectivity of an obedient and hyperfeminine subject against the regulatory and normative rhythm of heteronormative conjugality, which reveals a glimmer of dismantling hierarchal patriarchal gendered norms. In Chapter 5, I particularly unpack these self-responsible and empowerment narratives in their discursive discourses of intimacy. Through these discourses, I then reveal a conservative penchant of university youth against the backdrop of the frightening possibility of insecurity and seductive neoliberalist discourses of freedom of choices and responsibilities (Xie, 2020, 2021b). Therefore, couching the analysis in the specificity of Chinese contexts, I argue that certain molar fixities remain – particularly gender-age-class apparatus which channels the youth’s ‘becoming’ gender and sexual subjects back into the specific heteronormative apparatuses

of meaning-making and matters.

With a posthuman twist, this study offers an analytic perspective of youth subjectivity and gender culture that is less prone to neoliberal individualisation and bounded modernist depictions of youth sex culture and practices of intimacy (Farrer, 2014b; Yang, 2011; Zarafonetis, 2017; Zavoretti, 2016; Liu, 2019b). The study provides a unique posthuman critical reflection on youth gender culture, highlighting the tensions between feminist activism, misogyny, and traditional gender norms within discursive-material and techno-socio-cultural spaces, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7.3.2 Posthuman re-imagination of intimacies:

By focusing on young people's everyday lived experience of intimacies, I developed the concept of affective aesthetics to elucidate the heterogeneity of 'normativities' in digital and 'real life' contexts. Reconceptualising intimacy allows us to explore both collective tendencies and individualised fantasies, aspirations, and motivations surrounding the Chinese "good life", a life that is frequently associated with middle-class, entrepreneurial values and heterosexual, monogamous coupledom, which has now become entangled with technology and digital gender cultures. Lauren Berlant (2008) defines scripts of intimacy as normative expectations or inherited narratives produced through the circulation of cultural products. In an earlier work, Berlant (1998) theorises intimacy as an aspirational attachment to a "good life," shaped by normative fantasies, practices, and ideologies that organise everyday life (p. 282). For Berlant (2008), intimacy 'unfolds within the banal and often precarious conditions of everyday life, always entangled with proximity to power and the desire for recognition from others' (p. 10). As I have discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, the gender subjectivities are framed within a 'near perfect' 'aesthetics' – a heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-classed coupledom characterised by reflexivity and closeness — meticulously curated and

recirculated through digital and popular media (Berlant, 1998; Sun and Lei, 2017; Wang and Lim, 2017; Gill, 2007). For example, Zhu Wen's case illustrates how entrepreneurial selfhood and competitiveness — a core neoliberal ethos — shape his aspirational masculinity and imagined intimate futures.

Building on Berlant (1998, 2008) and recent work on more-than-human digital cultures (Braidotti, 2019; Evans and Ringrose, 2025), I conceptualise intimacy as affective aesthetics — a framework that captures how intimacy is shaped, perceived, and performed within specific cultural, social, and techno-social contexts, punctuated by affective flows. This perspective highlights how intimacy is mediated through aesthetic forms such as rhythms, discourses, temporalities, semiotic cues, and mediated presence, which are entangled with power structures that determine which intimacies are legible, legitimate, and desirable, and which are marginalised. This conceptualisation extends the current scholarship on 'digital intimacies', 'virtual intimacies' and 'mediated intimacies' (Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018; Attwood, Hakim and Winch, 2017; McGlotten, 2013; Andreassen et al., 2017). Here, the intimate in digital spaces has long been shaped with material-discursive infrastructures of digital platforms such as likes, shares, and clicks (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013; Marwick, 2015), but also reimagined through new forms of connections, presence, synchronicity, space and time (Hjorth and Lim, 2012; Lasén and Hjorth, 2017). Aesthetics here refers not merely to representational or symbolic styles, but to the molecular lines of energy flow that emerge through intra-active processes, where bodies, technologies, and affects co-constitute one another (Barad, 2007). Rather than reducing young people's gender and sexual subjectivities to discursive performances, I affirmatively attuned to the precise mechanism which reinforces or challenges heteronormativity in a cultural and techno-social context.

The concept of affective aesthetics allows for a more nuanced understanding of how visibility, desirability, and social validation are intertwined between the digital and non-digital agencies. For example, in Chapter 6, Wu

Yin's experience illustrates the tensions between the ephemerality of media (e.g., WeRun, Moments) and the enduring affective attachments they produce. The mediated presence of the 'other', as Lasén and Hjorth (2017) suggest, therefore exceeds spatial and temporal limits, entering cognitive, sensory, and even spiritual realms (Alasuutari, 2021). Social media facilitates new intimate imaginaries, and forms of connections and solidarity that are 'less bounded forms of intimate care and pleasure (Dobson et al., 2018, p.7). These postdigital bodies blur boundaries between online/offline, absence/presence, public and private, producing intimate affects shaped by both individual performative acts and the aesthetic logics of digital platforms (Ringrose et al., 2024). I therefore consider affective aesthetics in the broader implications of this cultural moment, where young people's experiences and practices of intimacy are increasingly governed by the incessant forces of visibility namely, hyperpresence and the pervasive dynamics of digital spectatorship (Manokha, 2018; Galič, Timan and Koops, 2017; Brubaker, 2020). These dynamics simultaneously provide affective confirmation and highlight the limitations encountered in moments of disconnection and absence during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In sum, by reimagining intimacy as affective aesthetics, this research offers a posthuman account of digital intimacy that explores how affect flows between bodies, platforms, and spaces, while remaining attentive to the structuring forces of heteronormativity, neoliberal individualism, and techno-social regulation. Following a posthuman ethico-onto-epistemological lens, this reimagination of intimacy enables us to move beyond dichotomies of resistance and conformity, and instead trace the affective glitches, micro-movements, and disorientations through which new intimate subjectivities and collectivities might emerge.

7.3.3 Distinctive methodological approach and contribution to youth sexuality research

The distinct methodological approach and feminist ontological paradigm in which this research is situated significantly contributed to a growing body of feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship. Methodologically, this thesis is based on a feminist-ontological paradigm that not only gives voices back to young people who were previously viewed as the researched objects in the earlier Chinese sociological research (Pan and Huang, 2013) but also takes accountability for the 'embodied' accounts of the truth (Haraway, 1988:578). From the posthuman performativity perspective, the particularities of this work – the 'space-time-matters' of the research encounters (Barad, 2007, p.149), have been co-constituted in the production of 'knowing'. As introduced by Karen Barad, 'knowing' is an embodied process, co-constituted by the interplay of human and non-human forces, as I discussed in Chapter 3. In that chapter I highlighted how the pandemic, the physical environment, and technology all come together to produce knowledge.

Specifically, space-time-matters are highlighted by the circumstances of my research, from the pandemic-related immobility which reshaped human relations and the environments in which the interview took place (e.g. unlocked doors, disruptions of family members, inconsistent internet connection). These factors are not just background conditions but active participants in how knowledge is produced – an entangled process rather than a linear or human-centric event that is full of unpredictable agencies. Therefore, this research offers an original and refreshing perspective on young people's everyday negotiation of gender culture in China and adds to the growing body of ethnographic research on China (Rofel, 2007; Engebretsen, 2014; Wang, 2017; Zarafonetis, 2014), which fractures the 'objective' positivist epistemology in the previous scientific research (Pan and Huang, 2013).

This research employs a feminist new materialist methodology that helps dismantle traditional ontological and epistemological binaries, such as the subject/object and researcher/researched divides (Barad, 2007). This approach not only incorporates reflexivity to consider the researcher's position but also

recognises intra-actions within the research process, treating the researcher's emotions and positions as legitimate sources of knowledge (Stanley and Wise, 1993). Here, the cultural specificity of feelings and emotions is constructed within historical and cultural circumstances and between different cultural groups (Chodorow, 2001; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Ahmed, 2013).

Therefore, contextualising both participants and myself within the contemporary Chinese landscape of shifting sexual and power dynamics, I realised that our research assemblages are also intertwined with our class, gender, and age positions, as well as a deep-rooted patriarchal background and sexualisation. I, therefore, acknowledge the socio-cultural baggage that both my participants and I brought into this research. Therefore, introducing affective research assemblages, this research offers a critical examination of the frames of knowledge deployed and the structures of power in which they were created in the 'knowledge' production of sexuality. In a rapidly transforming Chinese society—especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic—we are compelled to reimagine previously taken-for-granted notions of mobility and to renegotiate the power relations between the 'local' and the global, the East and the West, China and its perceived ‘outside.’ These reconfigurations unfold within a shifting landscape of post-globalisation and post-/decolonial debates. Situated within the local cultural context and historical legacy of Chinese society, this study reflects on my own positionality—one that was often aesthetically, politically, and emotionally linked to the young people I was writing about (Richardson, 1993). By analysing young people's everyday practices as pivotal to the construction of gender and introducing an alternative epistemology and methodology to Chinese sociological research, this research enriches the intellectual interpretations of gendered practices in China. In this regard, it brings China's ‘situated knowledge' into critical conversation with global knowledge, developing a deeper understanding of Chinese realities and contributing to a more nuanced global discourse on gender and sexuality (Haraway, 1988, p.578).

Situating my research within feminist ethic-onto-epistemology and queer feminist inquiries, I argue that the distinctions between 'Western' and 'local Chinese' knowledge are not always helpful or accurate. While the production of sexuality knowledge in China has been historically rooted in the legacies of colonial domination, it is also intertwined with Chinese nationalism and the exclusion of external knowledge, which are part of a linear, progressive narrative of modernisation controlled by the Chinese state (as discussed in Chapter 2). Qi argues that 'local' knowledge is often marginalized, displaced, or undermined by dominant power structures, rendering it less relevant or overlooked (Qi, 2014). This is particularly evident in the context of Chinese historical and social transformation, where Chinese sociology has historically mirrored the trajectory of Western societies. This influence is particularly marked in the adoption of sexological research frameworks and sexual selfhood frameworks that draw on Western psychological theories (Li and Wang, 1992; Li, 2002; Pan, 2006; Guo, 2016). The global pandemic has further exacerbated the distinctions between 'us' and 'others,' stigmatising foreign influences as a source of risk and portraying them as disruptions to local values by foreign intruders (Butler, 2024). This dynamic underscores the complex interplay of local and global discourses in shaping the sociological landscape of sexuality in China, challenging us to reconsider the bifurcating frame of academic discourse and public perception.

Specifically, as I discussed in Chapter 4, sexuality education practices in China's higher education institutions are not only ambivalently constrained by university authorities, but there is a rather abstract idea of 'Western' which is paradoxically symbolic of both progress and a source of risk. I have considered the digital technologies and particular space-time-matterings of the COVID-19 pandemic through an in-depth and detailed digital ethnographic observation of the mediated classroom. I argued that the communicative technologies inhibit discursive-material assemblages which link the mediated classroom to broader socio-political, gender and sexuality politics, university ethical conduct, Chinese

feminist movements and neo/non-liberal contexts. The adaptation of techno-social assemblages have further complicated the complex interplay of institutionalised heteronormativity. I, therefore, call for attention to documenting pedagogical discourses emerging in sexuality education are marked by friction and stigma, and which highlight the complex entanglement – at the levels of micropolitics – of discursive forces in the space-time-matters in the mediated university classroom.

Another knowledge contribution of this study is that it focuses on ordinary young people's practices of intimacy, negotiations with the contemporary gender discourses in the conditions of compressed modernity in which neoliberalism and post-socialist systems, gender essentialism (eugenic gender ideologies) and egalitarianism co-exist (Chang and Song, 2010, p.541). There has been a small body of ethnographic research on Chinese young people's gendered discourses which has addressed these conflicting discourses amid the booming economy, and the societal transformation in China (Engebretsen, 2014; Cao, 2018; Zarafonetis, 2014). However, such research is scarce, and most focus either on young women or young men, with a particular focus on heterosexual relationships in urban areas (Engebretsen, 2014; Zarafonetis, 2018; Cao, 2018). In this regard, this thesis complements young people's narratives of intimacy formed by the current gender dynamics. Moreover, the uniqueness of this study lies in its departure from the more macro-level historical perspectives on shifting patterns of intimacy (Farrer, 2014b; Yan, 2003; Zarafonetis, 2017). Instead, it delves into the micro or even molecular-level dynamics of power movements, offering a rich theoretical space to explore the lived and bodily experiences of intimacies.

7.4 Limitations and implications for future research and policies

Situated within the academic field of youth sexualities, with a feminist posthuman lens, this research integrates discursive discourses, affect and performativity theory to examine the ‘in-betweenness’ of youth gender subjects. I have highlighted how the youth's gendered bodies interface with techno-social-cultural environments, creating new patterns of discourses and ruptures from the normative discourses of gender and sexuality. The findings of this research also complicate the assumed 'progressive' culture by spotlighting ambiguities and controversies in youth narratives of intimacies against backdrops of feminist backlash, saturated media culture, and neoliberal culture (Pan, 2006; Huang and Pan, 2013; Farrer, 2014b). Recognising the 'messiness' in youth gender and sexual cultures, I identified a significant knowledge gap that could bridge the lack of 'language' needed to explain these phenomena to diverse audiences. Future research requires more expansive and more profound analysis and methodological tools that capture the complexities and diversity of young Chinese people in sexuality studies.

Secondly, to advance Chinese sexuality education, it is essential to understand the campus climate shaped by courses like ‘Love Psychology’ and the attitudes of young people. In my research, I acknowledged the agential forces shaped by invisible surveillance, which generates ongoing pressures on educators to narrowly frame sexuality education around risk, thereby sidelining any meaningful exploration of young people’s desires (Zhu, Liu and Elley, 2022; Setty, 2023; Bragg et al., 2021). The current narrative around youth sexuality promotes the idea that it is beneficial for girls to assert their desires and make responsible choices (see Chapter 4). However, this narrative may obscure the reality of a neoliberal context in China, where the regulation of young people's sexuality is subtly endorsed through neoliberal and postfeminist discourses (Xie, 2020, 2021a). Therefore, the findings of this research suggest a need for a more comprehensive understanding of gender and sexuality. Specifically, there is a critical need to address currently neglected or ambiguously handled aspects in sexuality education courses. This includes complicating the concepts of sexual

agency and consent, particularly within the context of young people's dating experiences; and involves tackling the subtle power dynamics and enhancing digital literacy to better prepare students for more gender-equal and genuine connections. More importantly, there is a pressing requirement for significant curricular innovation to move beyond the genital-centric and heteronormatively focused content currently prevalent in these courses (Ringrose et al., 2024; Allen, 2015; Renold and Ringrose, 2017). Addressing these gaps can be achieved through the adoption of creative pedagogical strategies and by actively involving students in the curriculum design process, ensuring that the education they receive is relevant, inclusive, and responsive to their needs.

Finally, in response to academic calls for innovative methods and theoretical frameworks, incorporating a feminist posthuman framework in this study heralds a new beginning for socio-cultural research and methodological inquiry in Chinese sexuality studies. My approach, deeply influenced by my personal gendered struggles and confusion, as discussed in the introductory chapter, inevitably interplays with the research assemblages (Fox and Alldred, 2015b, 2017). My analytical perspective and interests have evolved throughout the data analysis and writing process, intrinsically informed by my personal experiences and evolving understanding of relationships (Ringrose and Renold, 2014). By recognising the importance of the researcher's agential cut and ethico-onto-epistemological position, I am calling for a more open, inclusive, non-binary, and queer methodologies in examining Chinese youth gender subjects.

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