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Relationships with opposite-gender peers: the ‘fine line’ between an acceptable and unacceptable ‘liking’ amongst children in a Chinese rural primary school

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Abstract

This article offers new empirical data examining how Chinese children construct their understandings of heterosexuality and opposite-gender relationships with school peers. Gender differences and separation between girls and boys are commonly argued to be a ‘gender rule’ central to children’s peer cultures at school. However, this is rarely explored from children’s perspectives in China’s relatively conservative school context. Drawing on rural primary school ethnographic fieldwork with children aged 11-13 and teachers in mid-West China, the research unearthed children’s curiosity about opposite-gender relationships and unpacks how their articulation of a ‘fine line’ between acceptable ‘liking’ and unacceptable ‘liking’ between boys and girls sits within school cultures. These are evidently shaped by Chinese socio-cultural norms and teachers’ conservative attitudes towards gender. This causes children to paradoxically experience both curiosity and anxiety around romance and practicing heterosexual relationships in school. Significantly improving sexuality and relationship education in the conservative Chinese school context is also discussed.

Keywords: Children, Heterosexuality, Gender, Relationships, China, Primary School

Introduction

Gender differences and separating girls from boys are often referred to as the ‘gender rules’ which govern and regulate children’s peer cultures at school (Delamont 2012). Such ‘gender rules’ have been observed in Chinese school settings for a long time. Evans (2007, 148) study draws on the memories of Chinese women born from the 1950s-80s to highlight how gender separation was customary in Chinese schools, starting at primary level. Here girls ‘did not often speak to boys’, girls and boys had to enter the classroom in different groups and sit at separate tables’. Two reasons underpinning children’s practices of gender separation at school include the fear of different forms of heterosexual teasing found to be common amongst children (e.g. spreading rumors that a heterosexual romantic feeling or relationship exists between a boy and a girl) (Mellor 2006), and the fear of being criticised by teachers and parents if their interactions are suspected as ‘*zaolian*’ (early love) (Shen 2015). Such phenomenon still exists in Chinese school settings (Liu 2015) and can be linked to the Chinese conservative context that is embedded with traditional virtues such as Confucian moral values (e.g. Guo 2004; Rosenlee 2006) including the expectation that ‘an ideal child should behave and concentrate at school’ to maximize educational performance (Xu et al., 2006).

While the fear of teasing and criticism contributes to drawing a gender boundary between boys and girls in the school setting, opposite-gender relationships, interactions and friendships are still commonly noticed between boys and girls (Moore and Reynolds 2018). Relationships with opposite-gender peers, primarily heterosexual romantic relationships, such as courtship or dating, is a topic that also causes children considerable curiosity, excitement and anxiety at school (Shen 2015). In this sense, it seems like children can hold ambivalent feelings and ideas about heterosexual romantic relationships. However, because of specific socio-cultural and historical reasons, which will be discussed in the following sections, limited studies have explored children’s understandings of heterosexual relationships with opposite-gender peers in school settings. As such, this paper contributes to these debates and extends our understandings of Chinese children’s views and experiences by newly highlighting how the acceptable and unacceptable ‘liking’ of one

another regulates children's interactions across a rural primary school context. This research raises concerns pertaining to children and enables significant adults, such as teachers, parents and education policy makers, to offer children effective support regarding children's excitement and confusions about opposite-gender relationships.

Before moving forward, there are two terms which require further clarification. Firstly, in order to respect children's own words, the term 'liking' (*xihuan*) which was the most commonly used term by child participants in discussions about relationships with opposite-gender peers at school, will be used to refer to a heterosexual romantic feeling between a boy and a girl. Secondly, the term 'gender' used in this paper does not engage in debates about differences between 'sex' and 'gender' because in children's discussions in the field, 'sex' and 'gender' were not separated out. This similar situation is noticed by other scholars as well, for example, Rocha (2010) indicates that in China's context, the division between the use of gender and sex is usually unclear. The reason for choosing 'gender' rather than 'sex' in this paper was because when children discussed 'boy and girl', they not only discussed the biological differences but the socially constructed gendered expectations, such as the patriarchal gender norms discussed in the latter sections.

To contextualise our discussions about children's understandings of the acceptable and unacceptable 'liking' amongst children in a Chinese rural primary school, the paper begins with a historical review of the norms of sexuality and opposite-gender relationships in Chinese culture. Chinese cultures are diverse. In this article, Chinese culture refers to Chinese traditional culture as embedded with Confucian virtues and conservative moral values which emerged in Mainland China's particular social, cultural and political contexts (e.g. Guo 2004; Rosenlee 2006). In this section, we mainly review how Chinese socio-cultural norms and political ideology are ambiguous in relation to sexuality education in the public domain. We then introduce the research methods. As a child-centred study, we mainly focus on how the ethnographic study used different data collection methods and managed different research roles in the field to ensure children had the opportunity to fully participate. Subsequently, we then turn to the empirical data and discussion

of how Chinese schoolchildren articulated a line between the acceptable and unacceptable ‘liking’ of opposite-gender peers. After that, we further explore how teachers, who are significant role models in schoolchildren’s lives, and socio-cultural norms shape these children’s constructions of opposite-gender relationships and heterosexuality. We then argue that the insufficient sexuality education in Chinese schools and harmful or even stigmatising attitudes toward children’s romantic adventures can cause children to experience anxiety in talking about and practising romance and heterosexual relationships at school. In this section, we particularly indicate our concern that current approaches, such as the surveillance and punishment used by teachers in dealing with children’s curiosity and excitement about heterosexuality and opposite-gender relationships, were problematic. Finally, we make some specific recommendations for improving sexuality and relationship education in China. For example, teachers’ need to place more emphasis on proactively and openly communicating with children, as well as collaborate with children to find the most effective approaches of supporting them.

Sexuality education and opposite-gender relationships in the conservative Chinese school context

Children’s excitement and confusion about opposite-gender relationships have been researched extensively in Western schooling contexts (Moore and Reynolds 2018). For example, through observing American pupils’ play at school, Thorne (1993) thoughtfully discussed gendered play, including exciting and stressful opposite-gender interactions. Walton and colleagues (2006) work with American pupils also discovered the close emotional connections between children’s friendships and romance. Mellor (2006) also conducted ethnographic work with British pupils to explore their narratives and actions in romantic adventures at school. However, very few articles, particularly targeting primary school students, detail how Chinese children understand and practice heterosexuality and opposite-gender relationships at school. In fact, in China, sexuality used to be regarded as a ‘forbidden zone’ and excluded from public discourse (Liang, Tan and O’Halloran 2017). One reason is that Chinese people’s understandings of sexuality and opposite-gender relationships have been significantly shaped by both socio-cultural norms and political ideology,

such as patriarchy and Confucian morality which thrived in the relatively conservative and feudal sexual culture that still has significant impact today (Guo 2004; Jeffreys and Yu 2015, 13).

In conservative Chinese contexts, conservative moral values and some traditional sexual and moral norms, such as '*nannv shoushou buqin*' (males and females should not interact directly and intimately) have been (sub)consciously internalised (Liu 2006) to strictly govern the contact and distance between males and females (Shen 2015). As such, Chinese so-called civilised sexual morality still privileges men's gendered and sexual status as 'superior' to women's (Shen 2015). Therefore, sexual morality in China still carries the traditional gender expectations of female chastity (Liu 2016), representing 'a singular focus on the female body as the locus of normative standards of sexual and moral conduct' (Evans 2007, 159). Specifically, in Chinese society, traditional gender expectations widely influence and regulate female chastity, for example, discussions about the hymen, virginity, and extramarital affairs are often found in media, rumor and gossip (Jeffreys and Yu 2015). Often women are targeted rather than men and can be blamed, humiliated or stigmatised for any non-conforming behaviours. Correspondingly, the (re)construction of (hetero) sexuality and sexuality education are highly moralised and politicised topics.

Some Chinese politicians during the revolutionary times in the 1960s and 1970s believed, for example, that both revolution and sex exhausted people's passion and energy (Pan and Huang 2011, 23). Thus, to let people focus more on socialist society's needs (Evans 2007), people at that time were more likely to be encouraged to practice self-control when they were coping with sexuality-related issues. These strict norms impacted peoples' thoughts about sexuality for the next decades. Thus, any discussion of the importance of sexuality education for children became postponed until more recently and partly due to the development of a new plethora of readily available media.

Recently such trends are evidenced in the '...wide range of highly (hetero)-sexualised visual representational practices and products [...] in advertising, music videos and mainstream

entertainments’ (Mulholland 2015, 732) observed in Chinese society (Jeffrey and Yu 2015). The destigmatisation of sex and sexuality in broader public discussions has still been a slow process. However, it is also a positive sign as they increasingly appear ‘in different forms across media and educational materials’ (Evans 2007,157). Greater visibility of sex, gender and sexual practices has led Chinese-based organisations, such as the National Health and Family Planning Commission of the People’s Republic of China, Marie Stopes International China (MSIC), and the Rural Women Development Foundation Guangdong, to increasingly develop local sexuality education provisions, including online and offline sexuality education courses, learning materials, and services.

There are various definitions of sexuality education worldwide. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2001,13) declares that sexuality education should not purely be about ‘education’ or biology. According to the definition given by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2018, 16), comprehensive sexuality education:

... a process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to realise their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their well-being and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.

This suggests that educating children about how to understand, express and practise social and sexual relationships with others appropriately is one significant part of sexuality education. Likewise, the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2010 created a framework for holistic sexuality education. In this case, robust sexuality education should equip and empower children ‘with information, skills and positive values to understand and enjoy their sexuality, and have safe and fulfilling relationships’ (Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA), UNFPA and WHO, 2015, 1). Internationally, many countries have echoed these requirements regarding the importance of relationships in sexuality education. For example, in some countries, such as the UK, there has been a move toward focusing more on the relationship aspect of sex and relationship education

particularly with the introduction of new Relationship and Sex Education (RSE from 2019 onwards) in statutory government guidance (Department for Education 2019). Nonetheless, in China, sexuality education has confronted many barriers in recent decades.

Most adults such as schoolteachers, parents and government officials who control educational provision worry about the inclusion of sexuality education in schools because they believe that once children receive knowledge about sexuality, they will engage in sexual activities (Pan and Huang 2013, 273). Consequently, in the Chinese compulsory education (primary school and junior high school) system, the provision of sexuality education is limited (UNFPA 2018). For example, schools do not always have stand-alone sexuality education courses. Issues about sexuality and gendered relationships mostly focus on biology and moral aspects, such as ‘abstinence, “good” morals and “appropriate” gender roles’ (Jeffreys and Yu 2015, 45). Also schoolteacher’s different attitudes influence practice. For example, some schoolteachers may deliberately avoid talking about knowledge regarding sex, gender and sexuality due to schoolteachers’ insufficient training both culturally and professionally; and may think it is unnecessary to impart sexual knowledge to students because it is superfluous to examination syllabi (Pan and Huang 2013). As a result, many children in China only receive minimal sexuality education from schooling (Gao et al. 2001).

Therefore, as argued by some scholars and relevant organisations, such limited sexuality education can cause problematic consequences in Chinese society (Chen and Wu 2013). For example, when children move into middle childhood between 7/8 years old and 12, a period within which children likely experience increasing interest in extended peer groups and engaging in various peer relationships, they can experience confusion, uncertainty and distress when developing relationships with others (e.g. Fawley-King et al. 2017). Furthermore, due to globalisation, Chinese children can currently obtain far more information than older generations via social media (Jeffrey and Yu 2015). Diverse information brought by the processes of globalisation, to a certain extent, has influenced children’s sexuality education experience. For

instance, globalisation introduced the ideas of gender equality and feminism to China in the early twentieth century (Wesoky, 2002). Feminist developments in China have challenged the gender inequality and traditional gendered moral norms, such as sexual morality, that targets women in China (Chen, 2011). However, Chinese feminism itself has some limitations due to its gendered and classed biases, for instance, it was first brought back from other countries (e.g. Japan, United Kingdom, United States) by very well-educated male intellectuals (Wang, 2006) in the early twentieth century. Therefore, the development of feminism in China did not follow the widely-recognised Western three-waves pattern but had its own pace and different variants (Chen, 2011). The traditional Confucian and patriarchal gendered ideas are two of the most vital impacting factors in this regard, and they still commonly exist in society, playing a significant role amongst people's interpersonal relationship (e.g. Rofel, 2007). Conflict between different sociocultural norms enable students to both broaden their views but also become more confused (Manduley et al. 2018). It is particularly worth mentioning that the revised Law of the Peoples Republic of China on the Protection of Minors (passed October 17, 2020) officially required schools and kindergartens to conduct 'age-appropriate' sexuality education for pupils. However, it is still slowly and progressively changing. In this sense, if children cannot receive impartial scientific and systematic sexuality education and gain professional and robust support from adults, the extent of children's anxiety and confusion might be intensified. Therefore, to understand Chinese children's' views, experiences and coping strategies, this article draws on ethnographic evidence and focusses on exploring how Chinese children and their teachers construct opposite-gender relationships and heterosexuality in a rural school setting and the mechanisms at work.

Methods

Since there is a great concern about rural school-aged children's social and emotional capacities to deal with relationships with others in today's Chinese society (UNICEF 2019), this research aimed to focus on rural Chinese school children as a response to an urgent call for an immersive understanding of these children's views and experiences with others. Focusing on children in a

rural area of China is particularly meaningful for this topic about children's understandings of heterosexuality and opposite-gender relationships in childhood because sex education is relatively underdeveloped in rural areas and limited literature exists. Since Chinese schools are strictly managed and a politicalised institution (Guo 2004), gaining official access and permission to conduct the research was also one of the key criteria for choosing the research setting. Through support from both personal networks and the local educational authority, a five-month ethnographic fieldwork study was conducted in a rural primary school (pseudonym 'Central Primary School') in the mid-Western area of China in 2016 to explore children's peer relationships at school. The core research participants were 49 Primary Year 5 (P5) children (25 boys and 24 girls), aged 11-13 years old. Since teachers are significant adults in these P5 children's everyday school life, the researcher also spent time and observed 7 teachers on a daily basis. The sex ratio amongst these teachers was almost balanced and, as in other rural Chinese school settings (Wang 2013), the majority of teachers in Central Primary School were in their late 40s and 50s with only two in their 20s and 30s.

The data collection methods used included participant observation, informal ethnographic conversations, formal interviews, participatory methods (e.g. 'diary programme') and related materials (e.g. school displays and textbooks). Individual or paired semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 children, lasted around 30-minutes and focused on their understandings and experiences of relationships with school peers. The 'diary programme' was designed for those children finding it stressful to express themselves in an interview to privately share their thoughts and experiences. A total of 36 children participated in the diary programme using a notebook to record their thoughts and experiences of relationships with peers, and sporadically handed their diary books to the researcher who read and replied by writing back in the books. The decision of using this combination of data collection methods was made for three reasons including helping to avoid narrow understandings of children's language, enhance rigor through triangulation and cross-checking, and for practically maximising short periods of research time (Punch 2002). This

enabled the collection of more extensive and diverse perspectives and experiences, which also increases the intensity of ethnographic data (Pink and Morgan 2013). All collected data were analysed using thematic analysis and coding (Braun and Clarke 2006). As the research focused on children's peer relationships in school, different types of relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships, were captured during fieldwork. During the process of generating themes from the data, gendered differences between boys and girls frequently emerged out of the data set, and particularly in relation to early love (*zaolian*) which scholars, such as Thorne (1993) and Mellor (2006), also find to be important themes in the process of understanding children's peer relationships at school. Through following coding and analysis strategies offered by Emerson and colleagues (2011), themes such as 'liking', emerged in a grounded-up approach. The translation of data was done verbatim and, since both children and teachers used local dialect in daily communications, it included two stages – dialect to Chinese and Chinese to English. In short, children and the local English teacher were involved in the process of translation to ensure the translated words respected the participants' original meanings. When one Chinese word cannot be matched with an English word, such as 'liking', the basic principles used involved keeping the Chinese word, then providing detailed explanations with support from both child participants and an English teacher to avoid any misinterpretation.

Ethical considerations have been carefully deliberated throughout the research process. Informed consent was given by Central Primary School's authority team, schoolteachers, especially P5 teachers, children and their guardians (e.g. parents or grandparents) after attending a hosted research introductory sessions, which included a presentation introducing the research topic, methods, and ethical principles, and Q&A sessions to answer potential participants' questions. Information leaflets and further information was provided, and consent forms signed (Gallagher 2009). To ensure the participants' anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms are used to refer to the school and participants' names, and any potentially identifiable characteristics or contextual data have been removed.

Related to ethical principles, particular attention has been paid to the importance of managing multiple roles and relationships with locals. Inspired by Svensson's (2006) conclusion, relationships (*guanxi*) between fieldworkers and people in the field, as well as between different groups of people in the field, can cause ethical dilemmas. Therefore, careful attention was paid to managing multiple relationships with participants and power dynamics. During this process, a particular focus was placed on highlighting the role of 'unusual adult' (Christensen 2004) and minimising power relations. This strategy meant distinguishing the researcher role from the teacher role, and the participant observations from surveillance. For example, the children were encouraged to refer to the researcher as "older sister" (*jiejie*) rather than "teacher" (*laoshi*). Although researchers cannot fully divest themselves of the power of an adult and take on the role of a child (James, Jenks and Prout 1998), ethnography offers the space and time to continuously clarify 'unusual adult' roles through the process of building, maintaining and adjusting relationships with research participants. Over time, the children appeared to accept the researcher as a friendly older sister, rather than a teacher or 'spy'. Through attempting to adopt the 'least adult' role as 'older sister', the study gained access to children's private worlds, conversations and practices of gender and heterosexuality. This strategy included gaining insight into how children negotiated their surrounding contexts and constructed understandings and practices of opposite-gender relationships and heterosexuality. Moreover, since romance is a sensitive topic in this context as discussed in the following sections, the researcher paid a particular attention to keep confirming children's informed consent during the entire fieldwork, highlighting the right to withdraw, maintaining confidentiality of sensitive data and ensuring the anonymity of children in all written works, including fieldnotes.

'Liking' between boys and girls: normal or abnormal?

In the field, children's expressions of curiosity and excitement about heterosexual romantic feelings and relationships became apparent during observations, chats, interviews, and diaries after establishing a strong rapport with participants. For example, in private conversations (e.g. one-to-

one chats, interviews and the ‘diary programme’), heterosexual romantic feelings and relationships were often mentioned by children, alongside notions of ‘liking’ which ‘should’ be (self) regulated will be discussed in the following.

Interestingly, many children seemed to draw a line between ‘liking’ with a ‘child’s mind’ and with an ‘adult’s mind’. For them, ‘liking’ with a ‘child’s mind’ was acceptable while ‘liking’ with an ‘adult’s mind’ was unacceptable. For instance, when children answered a question of ‘what would you do if an opposite-gender peer liked you?’ in a group chat, other peers commonly agreed with Jieyu’s (a P5 girl) answer. She said: ‘It will depend on whether he has a child’s mind or an adult’s mind; if his liking were an adult one, I would reject it’ (Fieldwork note, 10th May 2016). Also, according to most P5 children, they were afraid of being viewed as a person, who liked or were liked by opposite-gender peer(s) with an ‘adult’s mind’, by peers and teachers, who were continuously ‘witnessing’ their behaviours. Therefore, these children decided to pay careful attention to gender boundaries, especially physical distance, when interacting with opposite-gender peers at school.

Therefore, what is the difference between ‘liking’ with a ‘child’s mind’ and with an ‘adult’s mind’? It emerged from children’s explanations of how romance gossip stigmatises them as having an ‘unhealthy/abnormal’ mind. This understanding included how the most prominent complaint was that some peers liked to add some fake information to the romance gossip to suggest a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship that included physical intimacy (e.g. kissing, holding hands, hugging or having sex). In children’s talk, expressing and performing their interest in opposite-gender peers, such as sending love letters or gifts; pursuing building a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, were ‘improper’ practices. If a child put their interest in opposite-gender peers into such ‘improper’ practices, such “liking” would be unacceptable. For example, a group of P5 girls’ complained about a P5 boy called Ouyang’s inappropriate behaviour of ‘liking’ girls with an ‘adult’s mind’ as captured below in the following group discussion:

[...] Wang said: 'Ouyang always pursues girls, we think his heart is not like children, he is precocious.' Qian and Hong agreed. Qian said: 'Yes, his mind is unhealthy.' Hong added: 'He is very gross; he is not only attracted to girls but also wants to touch and hug girls!' (When she said: 'touch girls', Hong used her arms to hold her shoulders and shake her body). Zhang added: 'Not only touch! They said Ouyang also wants to kiss girls! He is a 'liu mang' (rogue). Duan said: 'Yes, the teachers have asked him to the office to have a serious talk about his bad behaviour to stop him. The teachers told us that it is normal to feel that you like an opposite-gender peer, but it is unhealthy and unacceptable if you do something about this. Since we are young children, we need to bury this feeling deep inside our hearts and wait until we are 18 years old, then we can pursue the ones we like.' Ru: 'Yes, because we are not yet 18 years old now. So, now, we can like people, but it is the liking among friends, not between men and women. (fieldwork notes, 20th April 2016)

This example summarises the 'regulation' of understanding and dealing with 'liking' between boys and girls, followed by most P5 children. The rule was: the feeling of liking opposite-gender peers is 'normal', but it is 'unhealthy' and 'unacceptable' for children to put this feeling into practice. This rule suggests that, in China's relatively conservative school context, although the feeling of interest in opposite-gender peers in puberty is emphasised as 'natural', 'the need for self-control (*zìkòng*)' is also stressed (Bakken 2000, 364). One of the reasons for children to be self-controlled, as suggested in this example and several other conversations with other children, is - (sexual) physical intimacy in the romantic adventure sense is characterised as an 'adult only' practice, which is 'forbidden' in children's worlds (Reeder 2000). For example, these P5 children repeatedly unearthed the age of 18 as a significant landmark to clarify why they were too young to be eligible to perform heterosexual relationships, which might then lead to the possibility of experiencing (sexual) physical intimacy. Therefore, burying the feeling of "liking" inside hearts and 'purifying' the heterosexual 'liking' as 'liking' between friends were suggested by Duan and Ru as appropriate ways of dealing with their interest in opposite-gender peers. Performing the desirability of heterosexual relationships with less self-control and self-regulation was deemed inappropriate. If a child, like Ouyang in the above case, does not follow the rule of self-control (e.g. Ouyang wanted to touch and hug girls), this child might risk being stigmatised as "*liu mang*" for his/her precocious behaviour transgressing the 'red' boundary line between children and adults. Therefore, he would be breaking the taboo on heterosexual physical intimacy among children.

The term “*liu mang*” used by children is historically used in mainland China to refer to ‘improper’ behaviours in opposite-gender interactions and relationships. In the 1970s, China’s central government introduced “*liu mang zui*” (the crime of indecent assault) in the Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China. This made it illegal to have “improper” sex, including non-heterosexual, non-marital, non-monogamous, and so forth. Although “*liu mang zui*” was abandoned in 1997, remnants of these socio-cultural norms are still persuasively impacting current Chinese people’s views and behaviours. Inter-generational socio-cultural transmission can be one reason that extends the ‘life’ of some socio-cultural norms throughout history via social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1990[1974]). For example, in the field, “*liu mang*” was a term commonly used by significant adults in children’s everyday lives, such as teachers, parents and grandparents, when they judged some children’s precociously sexually intended behaviours. Apart from the use of words, some ideas about the acceptable and unacceptable ‘liking’ amongst children claimed by these P5 children can also be traced back to these significant others, such as teachers. For example, following conversations with children often disclosed that 18-years-old was the permitted time-knot for heterosexual relationships as advocated by their teachers. Many other scenarios revealed by children during fieldwork also clearly suggested that teachers significantly influenced children’s perceptions and constructions of the right and wrong ways of managing heterosexual relationships (Mellor 2006). Therefore, in the next section, we will further discuss how teachers contributed to constructions of ‘liking’ between school-aged boys and girls as ‘dangerous’ to academic achievement.

Dangerous ‘early love’ (*zaolian*)

Several discussions with teachers revealed a commonly shared attitude to ‘liking’ between boys and girls and how feelings of interest toward opposite-gender peers were normal, but ‘early love’ not allowed. This attitude was also frequently conveyed to children. As such, in one lesson about dealing with relationships with classmates, the Morality and Society teacher (*pinde yu shehui*) said:

It is normal and ok that you feel you like an opposite-gender peer, but boys and girls must have a sense of propriety when interacting. Do not cross the red line by doing things that children should not do. (Fieldwork note, 29th March 2016)

Teachers typically referenced ‘early love’ as an example of ‘things that children should not do’. ‘Early love’ was a term frequently used by children, teachers and parents to refer to ‘courtship or dating among young people in elementary and secondary school systems’ (Shen 2015, 86). For teachers, the main concern was that ‘early love’ brings with it the risk of pre-marital sexual behaviour and could undermine the students’ academic progress. One teacher outlined her concerns regarding ‘early love’ as follows:

Early love has a bad influence on studying. Everyone has limited time and energy every day. If the time and energy are spent on early love, where can you get the time and energy for studying? Without good academic performance, how can you gain access to a good university and a good job? Also, if the girls do the things that should not be done...do not protect themselves...and get pregnant, their futures will be destroyed. (Fieldwork note, 14th March 2016)

Notably, ‘early love’ is a ‘bad influence on children’s study’ because it costs time and energy. In the Chinese context, educating school-aged children, and their hard work and academic achievements are of the most considerable importance to teachers and parents (Xu et al. 2006). This idea has a long-term tract in Chinese history. In China, since approximately the 6th century, the imperial exam and the imperial examinations system (*keju zhidu*) was used to select candidates. Since the key criteria of the imperial examinations system are candidate’s academic performance rather than their family status, being successful in the imperial examination system was viewed as the most straightforward social mobility opportunity for people born in a lower class to move up the social class ladder (Chen, Kung and Ma, 2020). Even though a cultural discursive idea which is advantageously highly male-dominated and elitist, it has still been preserved and passed down for several thousand years in China. In modern China, examination-oriented education is still the mainstream educational model in the rural areas of China (Wang 2013) because it is understood as the most effective or even ‘the only real way’ for rural children to escape their forebears’ identities as rural people (Dello-Iacovo 2009, 246). Therefore, in China’s academic-oriented

assessment system, ‘study is students’ most important task and duty at school’ and ‘good students should not allow other things to influence their study’ were beliefs commonly expressed by children, teachers and parents in the field. Moreover, good academic performance is constructed as a child’s obligation to his/her family (Huang and Gove 2015). In this case, as noted by Liu (2006, 429), parents and teachers are always concerned that interest in opposite-gender peers ‘may divert the child’s attention from school work’. Therefore, ‘early love’ is labelled as something that costs study time and energy, therefore, prohibited. Additionally, the most severe risk posed by ‘early love’ was sexual behaviour.

Children’s sexuality is always a sensitive topic among adults because of the assumption of children’s inherent innocence and naivety (e.g. Mellor 2006) which requires preservation and protection. Therefore, both in conversations with teachers and in daily observations, physical intimacy between boys and girls was labelled taboo. This taboo is maintained not only to police the line between adults and children in heterosexual relationships but also to defend Chinese traditional sexual and morality norms (Shen 2015). As discussed earlier, because of a series of socio-cultural and historical reasons, certain sexual and moral norms, such as ‘*nannv shoushou buqin*’ (see Liu 2006), have been produced in the conservative Chinese context that is embedded with Confucian virtues and traditional moral values. These norms not only suggest a conservative attitude toward physical intimacy in opposite-gender relationships and interactions but also show their focus on moral expectations to women (Evans 2007; Liu 2016). Such characteristics of these traditional sexual and moral norms were also noticed in Central Primary School. Teachers, such as the one in the above example, always emphasised the dangerous consequences of ‘early love’ faced by girls. Girls themselves also tended to show obedience to such discourses. For instance, during observations, more girls than boys used ‘*nannv shoushou buqin*’ to explain how they used materials to create a physical boundary between themselves and boys in interaction. An example is rolling a textbook into a tube, then placing the ‘tube’ between their mouths and the boys’ ears when they need to say something privately. Because of these concerns, Central Primary School,

like most Chinese schools, views managing ‘early love’ among children as one of the core tasks of sexuality education (Bakken 2000).

In this case, because Chinese adults view ‘early love’ as a threat to the younger generations’ futures, a link had evidently been built between ‘early love’ and disciplinary punishment or criticism. For example, in Central Primary School, criticising children and/or arranging a meeting with their parents for a ‘serious talk’ was the most common approach used by teachers. This measure was particularly so when they noticed children’s engagement in inappropriate heterosexual interactions and relationships. Other scholars, such as Shen (2015) also report such a punishment-oriented strategy as existing in most Chinese schools. Besides, the rules and regulations against ‘early love’ are documented by other scholars who highlight how so-called ‘offenders’ receive disciplinary punishment, such as warnings. However, both interviews and observations of children’s conversations and behaviours when teachers were absent suggest that punishment and criticism did not stop children from expressing and performing their interest in opposite-gender peers (e.g. sending love letters and gifts). Hall’s (2018) ethnographic research exploring English primary school students’ gender and sexualities education experiences usefully highlights how children’s subjectivities in school’s context is spatial. In this respect, some children employed various strategies for practising romantic adventures away from teachers’ surveillance. For example, these children chose particular periods and places to engage in interactions with the ones they liked. For instance, one specific period and place was after evening self-study time on the playground. These children explained that they chose this time and place because very few teachers were on campus in the evening (four on-duty staff in total to supervise more than 200 children), and the playground was dimly lit. In this case, due to teachers’ conservative and unsupportive attitudes, children tended to ‘hide’ such sexual practices away from the gaze of watchful adults and unwitnessed in the relative darkness.

Although adults have significant impact on children’s thoughts and behaviours, it does not mean children are passive receivers of adults’ education and control. Children often finding ways

to express and perform their interest in opposite-gender peers away from teachers' surveillance (e.g. Holford et al. 2013; Author, forthcoming) suggests that children actively and subversively challenge adults' authority to gain control over their lives. In this case, as reflected by some teachers, only relying on punishment or criticism cannot effectively support them to deal with their concerns about children's involvement of 'early love'. Therefore, the following section will discuss teachers' understandings of the challenges in the process of preventing children from 'early love'.

Children as 'sexual becomings' or 'sexual beings'?

In the field, many teachers mentioned that it was increasingly becoming difficult to stop children from 'early love' partly due to the increase in sexual content found in media exposure. The media were commonly blamed for the changing context and circumstances which led to how, in one teacher's view, 'children now are getting more and more mentally precocious (*zaoshu*)' (as stated by one P5 teacher, Fieldwork note, 23rd June 2016). Different from 'early love (*zaolian*)', a term that refers to a particular sociocultural construction of children's 'unexpected' behaviours of courtship, 'precociousness (*zaoshu*)' focuses on a negative evaluation of children's advancing psychological development, which resulted in attitudes and behaviours that could undermine the sociocultural expectation of children's innocence. For instance, during conversations, most of the teachers complained about the Internet's negative influence on children, and how they had sometimes heard boys using 'nasty' and pornified words about sex which the boys since confirmed they had learnt via the Internet. Similarly, some scholars increasingly discuss the fact that children are more and more exposed and sexualised in the Internet era (Mulholland 2015). Within this context, teachers might feel under more significant stress because of children's easy access to the Internet and how media use challenges their authority as they try to control access to sexualised images (e.g. 'what sexual knowledge children should have access to, in what form and at what time': see Moore and Reynolds 2018, 122-123). Treating children as knowledgeable and curious

subjects growing up in the context of ‘pornified’ media (Mulholland 2015) was a reoccurring theme shared by P5 and P6 teachers as shown by the following class teacher:

Only relying on forbidding is not enough. It is impossible to forbid all children. Students are at the age to start to be curious about this [heterosexual romantic relationships]. The more you do not allow them to do, the more they want to try; the more you do not allow them to talk, the more they want to talk. They are smart; they do not allow you to find them. They do it privately behind you; how can you know everything? We cannot follow them for 24 hours. So, I think we need to guide students, to help them to transfer their focus on ‘liking’ to something else. To guide them to make ‘liking’ become their motivation to improve themselves. (Fieldwork note, 23rd June 2016)

Similar to the interviewees in Evans’s (2007, 157) work, these teachers also recognised the importance of communication because exclusive reliance on attempts to control ‘early love’ was often ineffectual. Apart from patrolling and criticising children engaged in suspicious behaviours that might suggest ‘early love’, during observations many teachers tried to communicate with children in such a way as to guide them to ‘transfer’ their attention from (hetero) sexual practices to something deemed more ‘appropriate’ at school. For instance, in many observations of conversations between teachers and children on the subject of ‘liking’, the teachers constructed good academic performance as an advantage in attracting opposite-gender peers. Thus, teaching children to hold on to their desirability concerning ‘early love’ and, at the same time, to concentrate on studying. This idea is illustrated by one teacher talking with a P5 boy about his behaviour of continually pursuing girls:

You need to improve your academic performance to be outstanding. Having high scores in examinations is the only way that the girls would like you. If you do not have a good achievement, why would they like you? (Fieldwork note, 13th April 2016)

Because of the academic-oriented assessment system, a child with ‘good academic performance’ was commonly voted by both boys and girls as an attractive proposition among opposite-gender peers. In this case, by building a connection between popularity and academic performance, the teacher tried to convince the boy that study could enhance his romantic experiences in the future. This way of building a connection between popularity and academic

performance was not only used by this teacher in this episode but also by many other teachers and children. Both this strategy of trying to ‘transfer’ children’s attention from (hetero) sexual desire to something deemed more ‘appropriate’ at school, and teachers’ statement that feelings of interest toward opposite-gender peers are normal but ‘early love’ not allowed suggest these significant adults’ conceptualisations of children as both ‘sexual beings’ and ‘sexual becomings’. On the one hand, teachers admit that children are ‘sexual beings’ whose interest in opposite-gender peers is a ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ happening; on the other hand, they also even more strongly prefer to construct children as unready ‘becomings’ (Renold 2005), who need to be protected from dangerous sexuality (Moore and Reynolds 2018, 3).

Through building up this link between heterosexual attraction and study, these teachers might simultaneously achieve the two most wanted outcomes of sexuality education in Chinese schools: reducing ‘early love’ among children and improving their academic performance which then advances the quality of the school ethos (Bakken 2000, 356). However, this strategy of trying to ‘transfer’ children’s attentions from (hetero) sexuality to other ‘more proper’ issues (e.g. academic performance) also has its limitations. For example, the nature of this strategy is avoidance. Children are still left unsupported in terms of developing a comprehensive view about how to understand and cope with their curiosity and excitement about sexuality and opposite-gender relationships. In this case, as suggested by this section, although some Chinese teachers were aware the limitation of relying on forbidding when combined with children’s interest in opposite-gender peers, they have not found any effective alternative methods. While some of them tried to communicate with children, the purpose of communication was still mainly couched in persuading children to control themselves and to ‘transfer’ their attention to more ‘appropriate’ things such as study. Therefore, it suggests an urgent need to develop a more neutral, systematic and scientific sexuality and relationship education system and relevant teacher training programmes. For example, educational authorities may find it useful to offer teacher’s sexuality and relationship education training to ensure teachers can effectively support children to

understand and deal with their curiosity, excitement and anxiety around romantic and heterosexual relationships and practises.

Conclusion

This article gives insights into Chinese children's understandings of 'liking' between boys and girls, explores the impact on their understandings and how this relates to teachers. Teachers concerns about children's involvement of 'early love' articulates adults' conceptualisations of children as both 'sexual beings' and 'sexual becomings' and consequential tensions between the two. Children's curiosity about heterosexual 'liking' and teachers' responses (e.g. surveillance, punishment and deflection) suggests the need for a more balanced, neutral and systematic sexuality programme, including relationship education, to be developed. Importantly for children, their understandings and experiences of opposite-gender relationships and heterosexuality are highly shaped by significant others every day. A well-established sexuality and relationship education programme can challenge negative traditional sociocultural norms to protect children from being stigmatised by others. Teachers approaches to reducing 'early love' (e.g. surveillance and punishment) or 'transferring' children's attention from sexuality to other issues (e.g. academic performance) need to be improved. For example, being more open and collaborating with children to find out the most effective approaches of supporting them to deal with their curiosity and excitement about heterosexuality and gender relationships.

The evidence in both children's and teachers' talk shows how curiosity about heterosexual 'liking' is viewed as 'normal' in China's conservative school context whereas practices of heterosexuality, especially those involving physical intimacy, are criticised as 'abnormal' and 'unhealthy'. In Central Primary School, as in most other Chinese schools, practices of heterosexuality were labelled as problematic with 'early love' not permitted among children. Although some new impacting elements (e.g. social media and pornification) have significantly shaped Chinese children's knowledge and experiences of 'liking', attitudes and reactions toward children's 'liking' held by significant adults surrounding children have still been influenced by the

historical view of conceptualising children's sexuality (e.g. children as sexual becoming rather than being) and 'duties' in childhood (e.g. study). Although, as the teachers' noted, children challenged adult authority and sometimes engaged in romantic liaisons despite adults' expecting them to remain 'innocent' (Mellor 2006). Under the pressure of continual surveillance and judgement from both peers and teachers in crowded school settings, gender separation, especially physical separation between boys and girls, is assumed to be 'something desirable, rather than problematic' (Liu 2006, 428). Therefore, children commonly paid particular attention to gender boundaries, especially physical distance, during interactions with opposite-gender peers in public spaces at school and used different approaches to express and perform their interest in opposite-gender peers away from teachers' surveillance. This finding suggests that although significant adults shape children's understandings and experiences of heterosexual attraction in childhood, they are not passive receivers of adults' education and control, and develop strategies to negotiate with their surrounding environments to gain control over their lives.

Regarding China's socioeconomic and cultural background, it is hard to deny the historical complexity involved when we advocate for a change in teachers' attitudes and expectations through, for example, quality education and training. Many scholars have proclaimed that facilities and teacher-training in rural schools are always underdeveloped (Zhang, Liu and Xue 2015). Therefore, it is essential to ensure that rural teachers can receive systematic and high-quality training to prepare them with the capabilities to support children to deal with issues around sexualities and relationships. Fortunately, there are increasing numbers of international and domestic organisations, such as UNESCO, WHO and MSIC, issuing highly influential guidelines and approaches to localise and implement sexuality education in China. These practices hopefully can challenge the existing negative socio-cultural norms and taboos to effectively provide Chinese children (especially those in rural areas) with the robust systematic and scientific sexuality and relationship education they deserve to enhance their lives. Some commentators have progressively addressed some of the challenges found in providing good sexuality education in relation to the

Chinese context (see Liu et al., 2011; Liu and Su, 2014; Liu, Dannis and Edwards, 2015) yet there is still a need to acknowledge children's subjectivity, autonomy and agency in meaningful way. This includes building collaborations between children and educational practitioners as a conduit to delivering excellent sexuality and relationship education and services which appropriately address specific cultural contexts and improve children's lives more broadly.

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