ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE: TENSIONS REGARDING PARENT-ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION AND PERCEPTIONS IN THE CHINESE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

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SUMMARY

Adolescents are in a transitional stage of their lives, in which they explore sexuality, which manifests in the development of romantic experience (RE) and engagement in sexual behaviours. Their sexual practices are influenced by an array of socio-ecological factors in Bronfenbrenner's model, which shows parents are situated in the microsystem. Chinese adolescents are living in a context with the clash between Chinese traditional cultural ideologies about sexuality and parenting, and increasing Western influences. This clash shapes a diversity of sexual attitudes and behaviours of adolescents. Parental communication has been identified as one approach to supporting adolescent sexual health; however, generational and cultural gaps make this problematic in contemporary China. There is only limited understanding of how Chinese parents and adolescents perceive and communicate about RE and sexuality. In response, this thesis explores understandings of adolescent RE and the associated parent-adolescent communication practice within the Chinese socio-cultural context.

Underpinned by the theoretical frameworks of social constructionism and interpretive interactionism, in-depth interviews with 38 adolescent students (aged 15 to 18 years), and 27 parents from urban North-Eastern China, were undertaken. A thematic analysis of the data identified a number of key themes around perceptions of adolescent RE and related communication, including the similarities and differences between parents and adolescents, as summarised below.

Firstly, parents and adolescents expressed a range of views about RE, including adolescents' development process and its educational and health implications. Parents primarily took an adverse consequence-oriented approach, and conveyed messages shaped by warnings and prohibition, which functioned to deter their adolescents from romantic and sexual engagement. However, adolescents tended to address the positive components of RE and were eager to experience RE under the influence of school peers and the mass media. Secondly, parents expressed an intention to communicate in order to benefit adolescents' sexual health and to strengthen parent-adolescent connections; however, personal, interpersonal, and socio-cultural constraints inhibited effective communication. These constraints encompassed the parental assumption of adolescent non-sexual involvement, adolescent concern about parental suspicion, low levels of parental self-efficacy in communication, power relations, the generation gap, and socio-cultural norms about sexuality and parenting in China. Adolescents

displayed resistance against these constraints and expressed a desire for more open and interactive communications with their parents. Furthermore, this study demonstrated tensions within, and between, parents and adolescents in communication about sexuality which stemmed from the developmental process of adolescents, environmental influences, and parenting practices. These tensions simultaneously created challenges and potential opportunities for more productive communication.

This study suggests that, currently, the parental role in adolescent sexuality is primarily to transmit sexual beliefs and values to, and to impose monitoring and supervision on, their adolescents. However, parental communication only serves a limited function in providing specific relationship and sexual information, including safe sexual practices. The findings of this study have a number of implications for how health professionals, including community and school nurses in China, can support parents and adolescents to engage in conversations about sexuality by embracing positive intentions and considering the identified constraints and tensions.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed.....

Date.....

PREFACE

In this preface, I as the researcher will briefly discuss my personal background and experience of growing up during adolescence and early adulthood in the Chinese socio-cultural context. This preface sets up a background to the study, and provides a brief exploration of the motives for conducting this study about adolescent romantic experience (RE) and parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in China.

Born in the 1980s into a family with two siblings, in a rural county of Shandong Province in North-Eastern China, I recall that my parents, and other adults around us, seldom discussed sexual-related topics. At primary and secondary school in the 1990s, little knowledge about sexuality was offered in the school curriculum, except for a biology class that included content about the human reproductive system and secondary sexual characteristics in the textbook. However, the teachers skipped this topic by assigning it as a self-learning task rather than giving a lecture as they do in other topics. In general, people at this time were silent about sexual-related issues, including students. During my adolescent years, romantic issues were a popular topic among students in middle and high school, while a minority of students engaged in romantic relationships which often carried a label of 'shame' or 'bad student things'. Schools and teachers emphasised the importance of study to prepare for the national college entrance exam, which had the power to change one's destiny. Teachers were highly vigilant about the interaction between female and male students to prohibit their romantic involvement. For example, even in mixed-gender classrooms, the seats were arranged according to gender, with only rare cases of a boy sitting next to a girl. These rules were part of the school policy, reflecting the prevalent belief of educators that romantic relationships negatively influenced academic performance, and thus, were not appropriate for adolescent students. The major responsibility of teachers was to ensure that the students obtained high test scores and to improve graduation rates; therefore, they embraced these rules.

However, romance was a common topic of discussion among the students, particularly in relation to who liked who, who was an ideal partner, and so on. However, such conversations did not touch on issues of sexuality. In addition, the high school curriculum was crammed and there was no space for a class or program on sexual and relationship education. At this time, the major source of sexual knowledge was novels or magazines, with only very limited access to computers and the Internet. My parents did not discuss RE and sexuality with me during

my adolescent years. In secondary school, I developed the notion that sex was taboo, with little sexual knowledge and related communication about it with other people. In addition, computers and the Internet were starting to be used in metropolitan areas in the 1990s, but I did not have the opportunity to even touch a computer before I attended high school.

After graduating from high school and entering university to study nursing in 2003, I learned more about sex and sexuality from medical textbooks, including the potential risks of sexual intercourse occurring at an early age with multiple partners, particularly without contraception. Meanwhile, the mass media, including the Internet, became more accessible to school students who were more exposed to a diversity of information as a result, including from the West. Despite access to competing ideas about sexuality, the social norm of premarital virginity remains highly-valued by wider society, especially among adults. I observed that some students at my university who engaged in romantic relationships expressed their sexual intimacy through light sexual behaviours, such as kissing or hugging in public, but may not have engaged in sexual intercourse. For example, some of my roommates in the dormitory claimed that they refused to have sexual intercourse with their boyfriend because they considered it to be inappropriate to engage in sexual intercourse as a student. However, younger students, particularly those in middle or high school, were more frequently observed to be engaged in romantic relationships and to take part in more sexual behaviours in public than previously. Anecdotes or news from the Internet and newspapers also indicated that adolescent sexual activity was becoming more prevalent and was occurring at an earlier age. For example, it was reported that sexual intercourse occurred among junior middle school students at around 13 or 14 years of age, more young adolescents were seeking abortions, some girls gave birth without realising that they were pregnant, and some delivered their baby secretly, such as in a toilet, without using health services (Yu, F 2011). These stories have raised my awareness about current adolescents becoming more open to sexual issues and behaviours.

Since 2000, Chinese society has become more open through socio-economic development and increasing globalisation. My perception is that life has changed dramatically over this period, including people's sexual values and behaviours under the influence of information from the mass media and peers. People around me tend to be more comfortable with talking about sexuality, and appear to know more about these issues. The norm of premarital virginity among young people, including adolescents, is not as strict as it was previously. Adolescents born around 2000 are growing up in an age with richer available materials from, and greater

openness to, the West, while traditional Chinese sexual culture is also changing. The sexual attitudes and behaviours of adolescents have been more liberal than in previous generations, which are reflected in their earlier engagement in risky sexual behaviours. Nevertheless, the increasing sexual involvement of current adolescents does not appear to be accompanied by the provision of sexual information and skills through education, which threatens their sexual health.

Inspired by the concept of the sociological imagination, defined by Mills (1959, pp. 5-7) as self-consciousness of the relationship between personal experience and wider society, I connected and shifted these personal experiences to a wider perspective related to my professional responsibility of undertaking research on the health-related outcomes of adolescent sexuality. When undertaking clinical placements in the hospital system during my undergraduate and postgraduate study in China from 2006 onwards, I witnessed, and heard of, instances of teenage girls becoming pregnant and having an abortion in the hospital. The social stigma of abortion for unmarried women, particularly for adolescent girls, persists. Most abortions were therefore undertaken in a clandestine manner without the knowledge of parents or anyone else, except for a few female friends or their boyfriends who accompanied the pregnant girls to the hospital. I observed these girls suffering both bodily harm and mental distress. Perhaps, they lacked sexual health knowledge about safe contraception, the risks of abortion, self-care after abortion, and sexual-related negotiating skills, especially considering that the main focus of secondary schooling was on the academic work of the students rather than providing sexual information.

In relation to communication, my parents did not discuss sexual issues with me until 2007, when I was in my senior year of university and was in a romantic relationship at 21 years of age. I told them about my RE to seek their opinions and support. Thereafter, my mother asked me about my boyfriend, such as his level of education and family background, and reminded me not to ‘sleep together’ before marriage. My father stayed silent in front of me about this issue, and sometimes, my mother would pass on his opinions to me. At this time, I remember that my mother spoke to other adults about these issues, and commented that young people now cohabited before marriage when I was present in their conversations. The adults displayed disapproval of, and ‘blaming’ attitudes towards, these issues. Maybe they are traditional and conservative in the contemporary era. However, I feel that I was influenced by my parents through their words and attitudes in relation to my views about sexual behaviours and marriage.

Most current adolescents in China are the only child in their families due to the one-child policy which was implemented in 1979. Given the strong family values of China, parents devote more time and energy in cultivating their only child in every aspect, including efforts to ensure adolescent sexual well-being and the completion of university to improve their prospects. At the same time, current parents of adolescents appeared to be more highly-educated than in previous generations, and thus may shift away from traditional sexual beliefs and be equipped with more knowledge and skills to communicate with their adolescents about RE and sexuality. Overall, I assume that parents can play a role in adolescent sexual well-being through communication, and thus, intend to explore how parents and adolescents perceive and communicate about adolescent RE and sexuality in contemporary China. This assumption means that the focus will be more on how parents can influence adolescent sexual development through communication rather than on the parent-adolescent communication itself.

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NOTATIONS USED THROUGHOUT THE THESIS

The raw qualitative data, in the form of direct quotations, is placed in italics and in a different-sized font to the body of the thesis; for example,

> *Somebody liking me is a proud thing because this means I have some attractive aspects and strengths that they have noticed* (Tian, female, aged 16).

When these quotations are less than 30 words in length, they are cited within the text of the thesis in italics with quotation marks, and remain the same-sized font as the thesis text.

Pseudonyms are used to refer to the adolescent and parent participants in this study in order to protect their identities. Information about the gender and age of each participant is included following the pseudonym. For parents, the gender and age of their adolescents[1] are also indicated. To distinguish between adolescents and parents, (M) and (F) are added after the name of the mother and the father respectively. For example,

> *When she (my daughter) tells me that someone is having a relationship in her class, I talk with her explicitly, 'Now the most important thing for you is study. Being in a relationship only influences you, distracts your attention from study. This does nothing good for your future'* (Ping (M), aged 42, with an 18-year-old daughter).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. However, to assist with an understanding of the quotes, the annotations used in the thesis are explained below:

- Words in square brackets [] are added to make a sentence complete and readable; for example 'corridor [of the school building]'.
- Words in parenthesis () are used to explain some terms or to clarify the wording; for example, 'It (romantic experience) is …'
- The use of ellipses … shows a break in the quote by the interviewee during the interview, and indicates the removed words that are irrelevant in the context of the quote, to increase readability; for example, the word 'umm'.

[1] 'Their adolescents' in this study are used to refer to adolescent children of parent participants to differentiate between the two concepts of 'adolescent' and 'child', which are classified into two human developmental phases.

Further, the two high schools in which the study took place have not been identified, and are simply referred to as School A and School B. All correspondence on letterheads has also been removed to ensure that the schools remain anonymous and that the participants are de-identified.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
MOH	Ministry of Health
NCEE	National College Entrance Examination
RE	Romantic Experience
STIs	Sexually Transmitted Infections
WHO	World Health Organisation

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This study focuses on parental communication about adolescent romantic experience and sexuality in China, and this chapter provides an overview and background to the research inquiry. An overview of adolescent sexual development and sexual health problems in China will be presented. Subsequently, the central concepts of the study: adolescence, sexuality, and adolescent romantic experience will be defined from both a Western and a Chinese perspective. The contemporary Chinese socio-cultural environment related to adolescent sexuality is described to provide a contextual basis for this study, while the research question for the study is stated as, "How do Chinese parents and adolescents perceive and communicate about adolescent romantic experience?" The aim, objectives, and significance of the study will then be presented, followed by an overall outline of the thesis.

1.2 Adolescent sexual development and sexual health in China

Adolescents are a healthy group with lower rates of morbidity and mortality than other age groups (Call et al. 2002). Nevertheless, they face a number of common problems, such as injuries, mental illnesses, and sexual-related issues, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Sexual and reproductive health has become an important issue for adolescents in developing countries, including China (Bott et al. 2003; Hindin & Fatusi 2009). Within a rapidly changing economic and social environment, Chinese adolescents are increasingly engaging in romantic experience and high-risk sexual behaviours with adverse consequences, such as unwanted pregnancies and STIs, which can jeopardise their future health (Yu, J 2012; Yu, XM, Guo & Sun 2013; Zhou, Y et al. 2013).

Adolescent sexual development in relation to sexual activity has a biological basis that is associated with the hormone-driven process (Dixon-Mueller 2008). The earlier onset of puberty and sexualisation among adolescents is now evident across many countries, largely due to improvements in childhood hygiene, nutrition, and health (Dixon-Mueller 2008; Sawyer et al. 2012). In China, the timing of puberty for young girls and boys is now two years earlier (now 11-13 years of age) than it was 50 years ago (Yang, X 2006). Many studies have argued that there is a disjunction, or a 'maturity gap', between current adolescents' biological sexual maturity and their relatively immature psychological development (e.g., limited cognitive capacity) (Dong et al. 2005; Tao, FB, Sun & Hao 2010). This maturity gap

contributes to current adolescents exploring their sexuality at an earlier age by engaging in a range of sexual activities, including the viewing of pornography, masturbating, and so-called 'premature love' or 'early sex' in China (Dong et al. 2005; Li, L, King & Winter 2009).

Adolescents' earlier biological and psycho-social development shapes their sexual and reproductive health in China. Previous research has identified that young Chinese people are having sexual relationships at an earlier age, and that adolescents are becoming far more sexually-liberated than they were in the last century (Gao, Y et al. 2001; Hong, J et al. 2010; Hoy 2001; Lou, CH et al. 2006; Song et al. 2011; Wu, L 2010). One quantitative survey involving high-school students (aged 15-20) in a city in northern China showed that 26.6% of the participants reported having engaged in some form of sexual activity, including kissing, hugging, and sexual intercourse; over one-third of the sample had experienced, or were experiencing, romantic relationships, and the average age of the first romantic relationship was 15.3 years (Zhang, ZH, Cao & Zhang 2000). A more recent investigation conducted in a southern Chinese city demonstrated that the average age of adolescents first involvement in a romantic relationship was 13.6 years, and 10.5% and 15.6% of the junior- and high-middle school students, respectively, reported having had sexual intercourse (Anonym 2010).

The increasing prevalence of sexual behaviours and romantic experience among Chinese adolescents is accompanied by a rise in the undesirable outcomes of sexual activity, including pregnancy and STIs. Statistical data show that the number of young Chinese people contracting STIs, including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), and unsafe sexual practices is increasing (Gao, Y et al. 2001; Kaufman & Jing 2002; Song & Ji 2010). In 2011, there were 780, 000 people infected with HIV, of whom 49.0% were young people aged 20-24, up from 20.3% in 2006 (MOH, UNAIDS & WHO 2011). Meanwhile, the report also showed that unprotected sex (63.9%) has increasingly become the major route of HIV transmission in China. Song and Ji (2010) conducted a study on a national urban Chinese adolescent sample (aged 14-24), finding that only 49.7% of those who had engaged in sexual intercourse used a condom, and 24.2% experienced an unintended pregnancy. In addition, most adolescent pregnancy (nearly 97.9%) led to an induced abortion, which is legal and permitted in China (Zhou, Y et al. 2013). Few pregnant adolescents choose to be a single parent to protect their reputation and future marriage, especially considering the social stigma of premarital pregnancy (Zheng, W et al. 2011). Therefore, adolescents in China are increasingly faced with romantic and sexual health issues in the contemporary era.

1.3 Definitions of adolescence and adolescent sexuality

The definition of adolescence varies depending on the history, culture, and society in which it is situated. A brief description of the emergence and evolution of adolescence from a Western perspective and in China are presented to introduce the characteristics of the adolescents who are part of this study. Adolescent romantic experience and sexuality are defined to ensure that they are appropriately used in this study.

1.3.1 Definition of adolescence from a Western perspective

The term 'adolescence' comes from the Latin *adolescere* meaning 'to grow up', or come to maturity (Bahr & Pendergast 2007). In the Western world, adolescence was not recognised as a unique period of development until the early 20th century (Mandleco & McCoy 2012). From a human development perspective, adolescence is viewed as a critical transitional stage in the life cycle from childhood to adulthood, during which adolescents experience dramatic changes in their biological and psycho-social development as a result of internal hormones, and external factors, such as socio-cultural pressures (Crosnoe & Johnson 2011; Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder 2011; Smetana, Campione-Barr & Metzger 2006).

Societies typically define and distinguish adolescence in terms of chronological age, developmental changes, and social role transitions (Gentry & Campbell 2002; Sawyer et al. 2012). Adolescence begins with puberty and ends when the individual is physically and psychologically mature and able to assume adult responsibilities (Tolan & Titus, 2011). The beginning of adolescence is consistently recognised as puberty with the characteristics of biological growth spurts and gradual sexual maturation (Call et al. 2002; Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder 2011). Key social role transitions that historically signal the end of adolescence include the completion of education, employment, marriage, and childrearing (Sawyer et al. 2012; Tolan & Titus 2011). The nature and timing of these transitions varies substantially across cultures and according to the era (Arnett 2010). For example, historically, and in tribal and village societies, children moved directly into adulthood as part of the workforce when they attained puberty, leaving only a brief transition between childhood and the full assumption of adult roles (Crockett 1997; Dixon-Mueller 2008). In contemporary industrialised nations, prolonged education and decreased employment among youth make the transition from childhood to adulthood more gradual, and thus the period of adolescence is more extended than previously (Berk 2011; Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder 2011).

In addition, there is little consensus about the standard age range to define adolescence across the world. The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2015) defines adolescence as a period from ages 10 to 19. In the United States, individuals can begin adolescence from the onset of puberty earlier than the age of 10, and end with the characteristics and roles of adulthood (e.g., economic and psychological independence, marriage) when they turn 18 or above (e.g. aged 21 or 25) (Gentry & Campbell 2002). From a chronological perspective, some researchers divide adolescence into three phases, i.e. early (aged 10-14), middle (aged 15-17), and late (aged 18-20), reflecting the changing abilities, priorities, and developmental tasks over the different phases (Auslander, Rosenthal & Blythe 2006; Dixon-Mueller 2008; Smetana, Campione-Barr & Metzger 2006). Nevertheless, some researchers have criticised these age-based categories, viewing that physical and behavioural attributes, rather than age, should be regarded as the markers of adolescence (Bahr & Pendergast 2007). The varied definitions of adolescence across countries, cultures, and organisations reflect the fact that adolescence is a socially- and culturally-constructed phenomenon (Arnett 2010). Overall, Western scholars recognise adolescence as a transitional stage of physical, psychological, cognitive, emotional, and social development between childhood and adulthood (Commendador 2010), and a complex period of life with individual differences in these developmental domains (Hutton 2007).

1.3.2 Adolescence in China

Compared with the well-established concept of adolescence in Western countries, adolesence in China is a relatively new and emerging term. The origin of adolescence in China is closely linked with the terms ‘youth’ and ‘youngster’ (Hu, Y et al. 2011). In China, youth (aged 10-24) is a term that emerged in the 1910s when the New Culture Movement occurred (Dikotter 1995). The New Culture Movement was considered as a ‘thought enlightenment movement’ which advocated democracy and science by rejecting the feudal culture, in which the youth held important roles (Fairbank & Goldman 2006). Ngai et al. (2001) stated that, before the 1980s, the concept of youth in China was mainly politically- and ideologically-oriented when young people were viewed as a political and social force closely associated with Chinese modern history with the transition from feudalism towards modern socialism. Discussions about youth mainly focused on their social status and responsibilities in the social and political realm, and thus they were considered as adults prior to the 1980s (Chen, X & Chiu, 2010; Huang, Y 2009). At this time, the concept of adolescence was included in the youth age group, but was not yet identified as a unique group (Xi 2006). Before the 1980s, adolescence lasted for a very short time for both boys and girls. Boys were involved in work for their

livelihood at the early age of 10 years and above, while girls got married and gave birth between 15 and 19 years of age, with no distinct transition from childhood to adulthood (Hannum & Liu 2006; Yang, X 2006). Therefore, Chinese adolescents in the previous era took on adult responsibilities earlier than do current adolescents (Hu, Y et al., 2011).

Caldwell et al. (1998) stated that the emergence of adolescence in the developing world is a result of massive economic, institutional, and social changes influenced by the global economy and westernisation, and China is no exception. The concept of adolescence in China has been ambiguous or even non-existent prior to the1980s. Since the late 1970s, when the Chinese government enforced the full-scale economic reforms[2], including the opening-up policy[3], China proceeded from a centralised planned economy[4] into a socialist market economy with more openness through international economic cooperation, investment, trade, and exchange (Tisdell 2009). The market reform has generated dramatic economic and social progress, and also brought more protection to the adolescent age group (Hannum & Liu 2006; Nelson & Chen 2007). For example, the current Chinese Labour Law declares that people below 16 years of age cannot be employed legally because of their non-adult identity (*Labour Law of the People's Republic of China* 1994). As well, the legal age for marriage has been extended to 20 years for women and 22 for men (*Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China* 1980). These changes allow young people to stay in the transitional stage before adulthood for longer than previous generations. Nevertheless, there is little literature that can be accessed to track when the term 'adolescent' started to appear and was adopted in China.

Goldfield (1984) indicated that medical professionals began to pay attention to adolescence in China from its founding in 1949[5], but this was largely confined to medical issues. There is still no sub-specialty of adolescent medicine in China (Hesketh & Tomkins 2003). Professor Yeh Gong Shao, a medical educator who is recognised as an authority on adolescence in

[2] The economic reform began in 1978 and introduced a market-oriented economy to China to increase national wealth and promote economic modernisation, including the decollectivisation of agriculture, opening up to foreign investment, and permission for entrepreneurs to start businesses (Lin, JY, Cai & Li 2003).

[3] The opening-up policy is a strategy established in 1978 to expand China's opening to the outside world by adjusting foreign policies (e.g., developing relations and cooperation with other countries) to change the prior isolationist economic development from the rest of the world and to revitalise the domestic economy. The opening is multi-dimensional to both developed and developing countries, and is not only limited to the economy, but also covers other fields such as science, technology, education, and culture (Zhu 2008).

[4] In the centralised planned economy, the Chinese central government controlled and regulated production, prices for products, and resource allocation. They also owned all industry enterprises, banned regular financial market activities, and closed international trade. This economic system was enforced before the late 1970s and resulted in low economic efficiency (Lin, JY, Cai & Li 2003).

[5] It refers to the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

China, provided a definition of adolescence which referred to the transition period from childhood to adulthood (Goldfield 1984). Shao pointed out that the period of adolescence involves various changes in human development in degree and quality, "such as morphologic and functional, physical and mental, intelligence as well as sexual characteristics" (Goldfield 1984, p. 21). This early definition indicates that Chinese medical professionals emphasised both the physical and psychological aspects of adolescence, yet did not focus on emotional and cognitive development. The developmental tasks of adolescents cited by Chinese researchers come mainly from the West. However, there is a difference in how developmental tasks are socially- and culturally-constructed between the West and in China. Specifically, the West views adolescence as a time when children begin to establish independence from their parents, while in China, children entering adolescence are expected to fulfil the responsibility of filial piety to their parents as a mark of progressing towards maturity by their parents and wider society (Pomerantz et al. 2011). This difference implies different parental expectations and adolescent practices in China.

At present, the term 'adolescent' is often used as an equivalent for 'minors' to distinguish them from adults in China. Puberty is widely recognised as the initial stage of adolescence, but there is no standard concept of adolescence or a specific regulation for the adolescent age range in China (Hu,Y et al. 2011). Within China, current researchers tend to utilise the WHO definition of adolescence as being aged from 10-19, or classify adolescents as a group from the age of puberty to the commencement of employment (aged 10-22). Studies focusing on Chinese adolescents primarily categorise secondary school-age students into the adolescent group (Cao & Su, 2007; Hong, J et al 2010). This is partly because of the Chinese Law on Nine-Year Compulsory Education, which took effect in 1986, that requires school-age children to receive at least nine years of education (six years of primary education and three years of secondary education, from 6~7 to 15~16 years old) (*Law on Nine-Year Compulsory Education* 2006). Accordingly, in China, it is widely accepted that adolescence coincides with entry into secondary school. Thus, secondary schooling is an ideal setting in which to study adolescents in China.

1.3.3 Concepts of sex, sexuality, sexual health, and romantic relationships/ experiences

During the transitional stage of adolescence, it is widely acknowledged that adolescents are faced with a variety of developmental tasks, some of which are related to sexuality, such as forming romantic relationships and developing sexual identities (Auslander, Rosenthal &

Blythe 2006). With rapid growth and development during adolescence, internal and external forces, such as the onset of reproductive maturity, biological sexual desires and impulses, and a range of socio-cultural factors, contribute to adolescents constructing their own 'sexual identity' (Gao, E et al. 2012; Li, L, King & Winter 2009). During this period, adolescents start to become interested in sexuality and attempt to develop romantic relationships or experiment with a range of sexual behaviours (Commendador 2010; Sawyer et al. 2012). For this reason, adolescence is also the period of life in which the individual starts to experience new types of relationships, such as romantic and sexual relationships, as ways of exploring their sexuality (Engels, Kerr & Stattin 2007; Moore & Leung 2001).

To ensure the terminologies associated with sex, sexuality, sexual health, and romantic relationships/experiences are used appropriately in this study, their conceptions and the interrelations are presented below. Sex "refers to the biological characteristics that define humans as female or male, especially in the context of sexuality and sexual health discussions" (WHO 2006, p. 5). In many languages, the term 'sex' is also often used to mean 'sexual activity', including sexual intercourse (Bay-Cheng 2003). In this study, sex is used to refer to sexual activity. Sexuality is a critical component of human beings' quality of life and overall well-being (Zeng et al. 2011), which "encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction" (WHO 2006, p. 5). Hisley and Clements (2003) stated that sexuality consists of biological, psychological, socio-cultural, and ethical components of behaviour. Zeng et al. (2011) claimed that sexuality broadly includes a multiplicity of dimensions encompassing sexual activities, body image, sexual function, role identities, and relationship issues.

Sexual health includes all aspects of health that are related to sexuality (Hisley & Clements 2003). In a more recent definition of sexual health formulated by the WHO, the term refers to "a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity" (WHO 2006, p. 5). Based on this definition, as well as the scope of sexuality, sexual health is not confined to a purely bio-medical framework, but requires a holistic approach in order to gain a full understanding (Allen 2011). In other words, sexual health problems, such as unintended pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are important issues, but should not be the only focus in addressing sexual health. Rather, relationship issues should also be considered as an integral aspect of adolescent sexuality and sexual health. Among adolescents, romantic experience are increasingly common, and are often central in adolescents' lives (Furman

2002), with most sexual activities occurring within the context of romantic experience (Royer, Keller & Heidrich 2009). As one component of adolescent sexuality, romantic relationship/experience might involve sexuality in the form of sexual feelings or activities. Notably, romantic relationship and romantic experience have different definitions, and these are explored below.

Furman, Brown and Feiring (1999) asserted that individual, developmental, cultural and historical variability determine that fixing a definition of, or confining adolescent romance to relationships alone is unadvisable. They proposed that romantic fantasies, infatuations, conversations with friends about romance and potential partners, and relationships of short and long duration are all important parts of adolescent romantic lives, and thus need to be addressed in theory and research practice. Consistently, Collins, Welsh and Furman (2009) stated that there is no standard operational definition of adolescent romantic experience/ relationship due to their varied frequency and duration. They differentiated between 'romantic relationship' and 'romantic experience' as follows:

> *The term 'romantic relationship' refers to mutually acknowledged ongoing voluntary interactions, with characteristics of a distinctive intensity through expressions of affection and current or anticipated sexual behaviour. Whereas, 'romantic experience' refers to a larger category of activities and cognitions that include relationships and also varied behavioural, cognitive, and emotional phenomena with romantic content; this may or may not include direct experiences with a romantic partner. Romantic experience includes fantasies and one-sided attractions ('crushes'), as well as interactions with potential romantic partners and brief non-romantic sexual encounters (e.g. 'hooking up' and 'making out')* (Collins, Welsh & Furman 2009, p. 632).

These notions help to broaden the concept of romantic experience from the narrower sense of romantic relationship. 'Romantic experience' has a broader and more heterogeneous range of romantically-relevant activities and cognitions. Given the broader scope of romantic experience proposed by Collin et al. (2009), in this study, the term romantic experience (RE) will be used which will also include adolescent relationships.

Although the concepts of sex, sexuality, sexual health, and romantic experience are different, they are also closely inter-related in relation to adolescent health and well-being. Romantic experience as one expression of adolescent sexuality, and as a part of adolescent sexual development, will be a major focus of this study. In the Chinese context of a conservative sexual culture (Zeng et al. 2011), romantic experience can serve as an entry point for

exploring people's perceptions of adolescent sexuality in a less sensitive way, compared to explicitly using the words 'sex' or 'sexuality'.

1.4 The contemporary Chinese socio-cultural environment

According to ecological theory, adolescent sexual health is influenced by a wide range of factors located in multiple dimensions, such as wider social and environmental forces (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The socio-cultural contexts in which adolescents live and interact provide a broad setting for adolescents to explore their sexuality. The following sections will illustrate the crucial social contexts of current Chinese adolescent sexuality in terms of social development and globalisation, particularly the changes to the sexual culture, family structure, and family values. These socio-cultural contexts serve as a premise for the research questions to be answered in this study.

1.4.1 Social development and globalisation

In mainland China, adolescents live in a very different era from previous generations as a result of economic advances and social progress. Since the establishment of economic reforms and the opening-up policy of 1978, China has experienced rapid urbanisation and commercialisation (Chen & Chiu 2010), which have brought momentous changes to people's lives in relation to the economy, politics, culture, and education. For example, people's living standards have improved from a situation of many having inadequate food and clothing, to a moderate level of prosperity with rising incomes. Equipment such as telephones and computers have become more available to residents, and a compulsory education system has been implemented in both urban and rural areas (Xu, C 2009). At the same time, individualistic Western values and ideologies, such as liberty and individual freedom, have been introduced to China and have been increasingly accepted by many Chinese people, especially among the younger generation (Nelson & Chen, 2007; Nelson et al., 2004; Zhang, K et al., 1999).

Alongside these changes in China, globalisation has accelerated since the 1990s and has increased interconnectedness across the globe through a variety of processes, innovations, and changes (Lee, FLF et al. 2014). Economic globalisation has generated the expansion of new information and communication technologies, such as the Internet and multimedia. This process creates a global village where the traditional boundaries of time and geographical space have been negated (Bahr & Pendergast 2007), and China is no exception to these trends. In many ways, Chinese adolescents are at the forefront of globalisation, and thus, are strongly

influenced by it. Being interested in innovation and technology, adolescents are more likely to engage with international forms of media, such as the Internet, through which they can experience, export, and import cultural information from diverse regions, and exchange value systems and other lifestyle choices (Musacchio & Forcier 2008). A recent investigation into Internet users in China identified that the number of Internet users in the 10-19 year age group amounts to 148 million people. This number represents 79.6% of the youth population and 22.8% of the 649 million users in total (CNNIC 2015). In the context of rapid modernisation and globalisation, and greater access to worldwide information through the Internet and social media, Chinese adolescents are now facing unprecedented changes to their lives that are transforming and influencing their social and sexual development.

Mass media constitutes a context for the daily interaction of adolescents that can promote both health-compromising and health-enhancing behaviours (Call et al. 2002). Mass media, including the Internet, can help adolescents to broaden their vision, and change their ways of accessing information (e.g, about love and sexuality) and social interaction (e.g., online dating) (Farrer 2006; Gao, YY & Zhang 2008). However, the media is also accompanied by potentially negative, or inappropriate, information such as eroticism and violence, which may directly influence adolescents' lifestyles, values, and behaviours (Sawyer et al. 2012). In addition, exposure to multiple international forms of media may undermine traditional Chinese cultural values and enable a form of cultural pluralism, resulting in the acceptance of individualistic-oriented Western values, especially among young people (Chen, X & Chiu 2010).

1.4.2 Changes in sexual culture in China

Social development and globalisation not only have an impact on adolescents' lives generally, but also serve to transform the sexual culture away from historical and traditional beliefs, values, and practices (Li, L, King & Winter 2009). Before the 1980s, sexuality (*xing*, in Chinese) was a subject of cultural taboo, and public discussion was suppressed, or regarded as inappropriate (Zeng et al. 2011). The suppression of discussion about sexual matters is associated with Confucian and Taoist philosophies which are the major belief systems of China and which emphasise the procreation and social order aspects of sexuality (Pan 2006). These philosophies remain influential among Chinese people to the present day (Leiber et al. 2009; Zheng, W et al. 2011). However, since the 1980s, the economic and social reforms that have occurred in China, and the increasing Western influence, have given rise to a sexual revolution in which social norms about love, sexuality, and marriage have changed (Higgins

et al. 2002; Parish, Laumann & Mojola 2007). The research indicates that sexual behaviours and sexual attitudes among the general Chinese population have changed substantially over the last three decades (Li, L, King & Winter 2009). Chinese people are now more open about sexuality, which differs from the previously conservative and closed sexual culture in which sexuality was a taboo subject with people 'turning pale at the mention of sexuality' (Gao, YY & Zhang 2008). Many young and educated Chinese people, including adolescents and college students, now view premarital sex, extramarital sex, multiple sex partners, and homosexuality as private, acceptable, and tolerated behaviours (Li, L, King & Winter 2009; Zhang, H, Stanton, et al. 2004).

In addition to these shifting sexual attitudes, sexual practice is changing from being limited within marriage into more open and diverse forms. Farrer (2006) found that Chinese high-school students consider sexual interests as far more normal, and engage in different forms of romantic experience and sexual activities, despite 'interference' from their teachers and parents. An investigation of Chinese adolescent romantic relationships indicated a relatively high rate of adolescent romantic involvement in comparison with the previous generation (Li, G et al., 2010). The researchers speculated that Chinese youth are exposed to, and incorporate, Western romantic norms and values through the global media into their own lives. However, even with these influences, many young people in China demonstrate low levels of sexuality-related knowledge (Liu, WL et al. 2011; Zheng, X & Chen 2010). Further, the associated health consequences have been exacerbated by the lack of effective sexual health promotion programs being conducted, and this is manifested by growing numbers of teenage pregnancies, induced abortions, and the re-emergence of STIs, including HIV/AIDS (Gao, Y et al. 2001; Li, L, King & Winter 2009).

Despite the changes towards more liberal sexual attitudes and behaviours, the conservative and private nature of sexuality-related matters still influences the public discussion of sexuality in China. For example, talking about sexuality in the classroom is considered to be immodest or immoral (Zeng et al. 2011). Hoy (2001) and Li, L et al. (2009) argued that there is a tension between adolescents' sexual needs and the inadequate school-based sex education provided for them. This inadequacy drives adolescents to seek alternative, but often unreliable, sources (e.g., the media) for sex-related information, which poses challenges to empowering them to handle sexual issues. Accordingly, the research suggests that additional strategies beyond the school system are needed to better inform adolescents about sexual issues and to provide them with support. For instance, the family has been claimed as an

alternative space in which to deliver sex education for adolescents, providing that the parents can transmit information which is in alignment with their familial values and beliefs around sexuality (Allen 2011). A number of researchers have identified the positive association between parental efforts, including parental communication, and adolescents' healthy sexual behaviours (Commendador 2010; Jaccard, Dodge & Dittus 2002; Meschke, Bartholomae & Zentall 2002). The family environment in which adolescents live will be discussed below as a context for adolescent sexual socialisation, with a focus on the family structure and family values of contemporary China.

1.4.3 Chinese family structure and family values

The Chinese family structure has experienced considerable change since the one-child family planning policy was introduced in 1979 to relieve the economic and population problems in China (Hesketh, Lu & Xing 2005; Hesketh & Zhu 2005). Before 2015, the policy consisted of a set of regulations, including restrictions on family size, late marriage, and childbearing to limit population growth. The one-child rule was more strictly enforced among urban residents and government employees. There were exceptions for those families who belonged to ethnic minority groups, whose first child has a disability, or where both parents work in high-risk occupations (e.g., mining) (Hesketh, Lu & Xing 2005). In rural areas, a second child is allowed if the first child is a girl because of a traditional preference for boys (*The People's Republic of population and family planning law* 2001).. In October 2015, the Chinese government relaxed the regulations to allow couples to have two children (*The communique in plenary meeting of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China* 2015). The relaxed policy will be enforced from 2016 onwards. Due to the recent nature of the policy change, most of the current adolescents have been raised as the sole child within their families (Gao, YY& Zhang 2008; Xu, Q 2009).

Adolescents from single-child families tend to be the focus and centre of the family, receiving more care and protection, but also higher expectations, from both the parents and the grandparents (Tao, HK 2008; Xu, Q 2009). In particular, parents from single-child families generally place high expectations on their child's academic and career excellence (Chen, Y 2007; Liu, F 2008). Meanwhile, the patterns of parent-adolescent interaction in contemporary Chinese families have changed as a result of the one-child policy as well as the social and economic changes (Xu, Q 2009). Chen et al. (2010) found that parents have shifted their child-rearing attitudes from traditional authoritarian and restrictive styles to increased parental warmth, encouragement of independence, and reduction of control over their adolescents.

These adjustments to parenting practice are designed to help adolescents develop social and behavioural skills and qualities for better adaptation to a market-oriented society, such as self-expression and individual independence (Chen et al. 2010; Way et al. 2013).

Despite the changes in parenting styles, and the influence of substantial westernisation with an emphasis on individualism, the traditional family value of Confucian 'filial piety' remains strong among contemporary Chinese people (Fuligni & Zhang 2004; Pomerantz et al. 2011). Filial piety emphasises that children have an obligation to demonstrate respect and care for their parents (Koh & Koh 2008; Sarkissian 2010). An investigation into Chinese adolescents found that most respondents acknowledged that loving and respecting their parents is one of their obligations, indicating the significance of parents and family in the mind of adolescents (Ji 2005). Adolescents still maintain a connectedness to their parents, and the parent-child relationship continues to be of great importance for Chinese adolescents. Therefore, this family value implies that parents can have an impact on their adolescents' lives, including their sexual health.

The current one-child family structure and the value of the family held by adolescents provide implications for parental practice in relation to romantic and sexual issues for adolescents. Parents in one-child families may need to act in diverse roles of caregivers, educators, and friends (Li, S et al. 2013). In other countries with families with more than one child, adolescents can turn to their siblings for discussion when their parents are not available to provide sexual information (Elley 2010; Tesso, Fantahun & Enquselassie 2012). In China, without siblings in the family, most adolescents may need more, and different, advice from both their mother and their father.

1.5 Statement of research problem and research questions

The aforementioned sections have illustrated that Chinese adolescents are in a transitional stage of exploring sexuality through developing romantic experience (RE) and engaging in sexual behaviours. Chinese adolescents are now living in a pluralistic society under the influence of rapid socio-economic development, as well as traditional and modern cultural ideologies about sexuality and parenting. Under these pluralistic influences, adolescents are faced with increasing romantic and sexual issues, in which their parents are supposed to play a role. Parental communication has been identified in the literature as one approach to promoting adolescent sexual health. However, there is limited understanding of how parents and adolescents perceive and communicate about adolescent romantic experience in China.

Most studies on adolescent RE in China have investigated adolescents' willingness to form romantic relationships, and/or their parents' level of agreement of opposite-sex interaction using a dichotomous scale, i.e. approval or disapproval with several closed-ended questions (Hou 2010; Kong 2010; Tu et al. 2005). However, the investigative tool of questionnaires cannot reveal the internal perceptions of participants (Lou, JH & Chen 2009), and thus, such studies cannot provide a deeper understanding of underlying beliefs about adolescent RE. In the rapidly globalising and modernising Chinese society, how adolescents themselves perceive RE and their needs are somewhat neglected or inadequately captured in the existing literature.

A number of quantitative studies have reported that Chinese parents rarely communicate with their adolescents about sexuality (Wang, B et al. 2007; Zhang, LY et al. 2007; Zhang, LY, Shah & Baldwin 2006). However, the extent to which, and how, adolescents communicate with their parents about RE is insufficiently elaborated in these studies. Therefore, it is important to explore this topic by utilising a qualitative method to obtain a better understanding of communication about adolescent RE from both the parents' and adolescents' perspectives.

The central research question is "How do Chinese parents and adolescents perceive and communicate about adolescent romantic experience?" The central research question encompasses the following six specific research questions:

1. How do parents and adolescents perceive adolescent romantic experience?
2. Do parents and adolescents communicate about adolescent romantic experience?
3. What are the motives of parents and adolescents to communicate or not?
4. What is discussed during the communication process?
5. What strategies do parents and adolescents use during the communication process?
6. What are the factors which influence the communication?

1.6 Aim and objectives

The overall purpose of this study is to understand how parents and adolescents perceive and communicate about adolescent RE in the Chinese context, and then to inform adolescent sexual health promotion. It is important to obtain perceptions about adolescent RE, together

with the motives, content, strategies, and influencing factors on communication from the perspectives of both adolescents and parents.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. Describe the subjective meanings and interpretations of adolescent romantic experience;
2. Explore how parents and adolescents communicate about adolescent romantic experience;
3. Identify the context and factors that shape the extent and content of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent romantic experience.

1.7 Significance of the study

An in-depth understanding of adolescent RE, and the related communication between parents and adolescents, can provide researchers, educators, and health professionals with insights into the development of adolescent sexual health promotion programs. Through the qualitative exploration of both adolescents' and parents' perceptions, their needs can be identified, and then taken into account in the planning and implementation of effective intervention or promotion programs to strengthen parental impact on adolescent sexual health. Educators in schools and health professionals may use the findings as a source of information during their work with adolescents. For policy-makers, the findings from this study could shed light on policy formulation around adolescent sexual health promotion through the involvement of parents.

In addition, by addressing how communication about adolescent romantic experience occurs between Chinese parents and adolescents, this study will add a new dimension to the body of literature about adolescent sexuality and sexual health. Simultaneously, this study will contribute to the existing literature by providing evidence from a Chinese cultural perspective.

1.8 An outline of the thesis

This thesis comprises eight chapters. The introductory chapter provides the background to the study by illustrating the relevant concepts to be explored (e.g., adolescence, romantic experience), and presenting the current Chinese social and cultural environment as the context for the study. The research question about perceptions of adolescent romantic experience and

communication between Chinese parents and adolescents is stated, followed by an outline of the research questions and the aim and objectives of the study.

Chapter Two presents a review of the existing literature across the world as well as in China on adolescent romantic experience, the factors which influence adolescent sexual health, adolescent sexual health promotion strategies, and parent-adolescent communication about sexuality, to identify the research gaps and provide the rationale for this study.

Chapter Three illustrates the philosophical underpinnings of the study, including the ontological and epistemological positioning, which is followed by an exploration of social constructionism and interpretive interactionism as the methodological frameworks. Qualitative interviews were conducted with adolescent students and parents in urban North-Eastern China. The data were analysed thematically through the social constructionism and interpretive interactionism lenses. The strategies used to establish the rigour of this study are then described, including the ways of dealing with the Chinese/ English language issues involved in the study.

Three findings chapters (Chapters Four, Five and Six) are organised based on the research questions and objectives to illustrate the perspectives of parents and adolescents on adolescent romantic experience, the motives for and approaches to communication, and the factors that influence communication. In the three findings chapters, perceptions of parents and adolescents are integrated to describe the similarities and differences between them. These findings display a complicated picture of parents' and adolescents' understandings of adolescent romantic experience from a contemporary social perspective while under the influence of traditional cultural ideologies. The communication between parents and adolescents varies in terms of motives, content, approach, and context. The themes in each chapter are interpreted by referring to the previous research and linking to the Chinese socio-cultural context.

Following the findings chapters, Chapter Seven presents a discussion of the key findings. The main arguments presented are around the tensions within, and between, parents and adolescents in terms of the perceptions of adolescent romantic experience and communication. These tensions are embedded in the Chinese socio-cultural context and discussed by drawing upon the culture of Confucianism about filial piety, education, parenting, and sexuality along with the rapid modernisation process that China is experiencing. Finally, Chapter Eight brings closure to the thesis by providing an overview of

the research questions and findings, and discussing the limitations, contributions, and implications of this study.

1.9 Summary

This introductory chapter has provided the definitions of adolescence and has shown that emerging romantic experience is a form of sexual development. To put Chinese adolescents at the centre of this study, their life context was broadly described. Based on the contemporary Chinese context and the literature, the research question was then proposed to explore how parents and adolescents perceive and communicate about adolescent romantic experience. The following chapter will review the literature and discuss the link between adolescent romantic experience and sexuality, the factors influencing adolescent sexual health, strategies for adolescent sexual health promotion, and parent-adolescent communication about sexuality. The review will establish what is known about adolescent romantic experience and the related communication practice.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will present a literature review on adolescent romantic experience (RE) and sexuality, as well as the associated parent-adolescent communication. There are four major themes in this chapter. The first theme draws on studies from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and health to introduce discourses about adolescent RE, and the link between RE and sexuality. This theme presents the theoretical discussions and empirical studies on the development and contextual factors of adolescent RE, and its association with adolescent sexuality. The second theme will explore the factors which influence adolescent sexuality as informed by Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (1979) to provide an overview of the multiple and interacting factors related to adolescent sexual behaviours and outcomes. The third theme describes strategies for adolescent sexual health promotion to lay a foundation for discussing the role of parents in adolescent sexuality. The fourth theme is parent-adolescent communication about sexuality, in which features, factors, topics, and outcomes will be reviewed.

The first two themes constitute the background to parent-adolescent communication about RE and sexuality. The third theme includes the component of parental involvement in adolescent sexual health, which establishes a basis for discussing parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in the fourth theme, which is the core of this study. Under each theme, studies conducted in China will be discussed together with the international literature. Following these four themes, a discussion about the knowledge gaps in the literature will be presented and the research problem identified.

To retrieve the relevant literature, a range of search terms and their combinations were used, including 'adolescent', 'adolescence', 'teenager', 'young people', 'sexuality', 'sexual health', 'sexual activity', 'romantic relationships', 'romantic experience', 'dating', 'parent-adolescent communication' (parent-teen/child communication), and 'health promotion'. Primary research articles and secondary reviews, opinions, and editorials were included to provide depth to the understanding of the research area. The electronic databases used were CINAHL, MedlineOvid, Proquest, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Proquest Central, and Google Scholar. In addition, considering the specific context of the study in China, two widely used Chinese databases (i.e., Wanfang and CNKI) were searched. By reading the titles and abstracts, only those considered to be relevant were retrieved and read in full-text. Apart from

the articles obtained using the search strategy, articles appearing in the reference list of the retrieved articles were also examined and then further searched.

2.2 Adolescent romantic experience

In the introductory chapter, definitions of adolescence and adolescent romantic experience (RE) have established RE as a normative part of adolescent development. This section will outline the research findings about the developmental process of adolescent RE, the effects of RE on adolescents, attitudes toward adolescent RE in China, and its connection with sexual activity.

2.2.1 The development and effects of adolescent romantic experience

As only limited studies about adolescent romantic experience have been conducted in China (Liu, W & Mao 2011), the exploration of the development and evolution of RE presented below is based primarily on Western perspectives, unless otherwise stated. Adolescent romantic experience has long captured the attention of popular discourse in literature, movies, and music (Collins et al. 1997), while the scholarly investigation of the developmental process, significance, and functioning of adolescent RE has burgeoned since the 1990s in the West (Collins, Welsh & Furman 2009; Tuval-Mashiach et al. 2008). As stated by Furman (2002), romantic experience becomes gradually more significant in the lives of adolescents, as they move from pre-adolescence through to late adolescence.

The development of romantic experience begins during early adolescence and evolves through to adulthood, while early, middle, and late adolescents experience RE differently in terms of degrees of involvement, partner preference, and interaction (Collins 2003; Furman & Wehner 1997; Seiffge-Krenke 2003). From an early stage, adolescents start to have romantic interests in others (Musacchio & Forcier 2008). Crushes and shared infatuations are the typical ways that early/young adolescents express their interest in matters of romance (Connolly & McIsaac 2011). During early adolescence, RE is usually self-focused rather than relationship-focused (Seiffge-Krenke 2003), and is characterised by companionship and affiliation, and thus can be casual, short-lived, and less intense, with an absence of long-term commitment (Arnett 2010; Shulman & Scharf 2000). The early romantic involvement of adolescents serves as an exploration for recreation, sexual experimentation, and status attainment (Bouchey & Furman 2006). In middle adolescence, romantic relationships evolve into the status phase when romantic interests become more important, and romantic relationships are used to obtain or increase peer acceptance through causal dating, or dating in

groups (Seiffge-Krenke 2003). In late adolescence, romantic relationships move to an affection phase in which socio-emotional needs, such as intimacy and care-giving in RE, become more important (Collins 2003; Furman & Wehner 1997). Therefore, the focus, content, and quality of RE vary throughout the various phases of adolescent development.

Adolescent romantic experience has been increasingly recognised as a normal and expected developmental occurrence (Royer, Keller & Heidrich 2009), accompanied by both positive and negative outcomes (Collins 2003). Studies from the West have addressed the psychological and developmental significance of RE for adolescents in terms of individual development and well-being, including self-esteem, socialisation, intimate relationships, and sexuality (Collins 2003; Collins & Dulmen 2006; Furman, Ho & Low 2007; Madsen & Collins 2011). In the Western view, falling in love is conceptualised as part of the process of growing up and discovering oneself and one's sexuality (Moore & Leung 2001). Healthy romantic relationships assist individuals to refine their sense of identity and provide a source of emotional support (Furman 2002; Sorensen 2007). Building good romantic relationships is regarded as a critical component of healthy development (Schalet 2011).

Despite the significance of RE, it also carries potential risks for individuals (Furman 2002; Sorensen 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck 2002), depending on the quality and extent of relationship involvement. Adolescent romantic experience has been found to be associated with internal and external problems such as substance use (Beckmeyer 2015), anxiety and/or depression (mostly due to relationship rejection, conflict, and dissolution) (Davila 2008; Soller 2014; Vujeva & Furman 2011), STIs and pregnancy due to unsafe sex (Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand 2008), and lower academic performance (Frisco 2008; Furman & Shaffer 2003). In unhealthy romantic relationships, dating violence or coerced sexual experience can occur among boys and girls (Auslander, Rosenthal & Blythe 2006). Another study conducted among 10,509 Chinese secondary school students documented the association between early involvement in romantic relationships and depressive symptoms and behavioural problems (Chen et al. 2009). However, the correlations identified in these studies do not indicate a cause-effect relationship between romantic involvement and these various correlates. Therefore, the influences of RE on adolescents are complex and can have both a positive and negative effect on adolescent health. The varied effects of RE are attributable to the multifaceted nature of RE (Collins 2003; Manning et al. 2014) and the diverse outcomes that researchers have sought to examine.

The potential risks of RE can be challenging for adolescents, and thus, they may need external support and assistance to cope with RE to minimise the risks and maximise the benefits. The risks often constitute the reasons why concerns arise among parents, and other related adults, in relation to adolescent romantic involvement (Ballard & Gross 2009; Raffaelli & Ontai 2001). This concern implies that adolescent RE is often perceived as a set of risk-taking behaviours, in which context plays an important role in its formulation and function.

2.2.2 The contexts of adolescent romantic experience

The theories used to understand the context of adolescent RE research include attachment theory (Tracy et al. 2003), relational systems (Welsh & Shulman 2008), and bio-ecological frameworks (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2007). Attachment theory suggests that experience in primary and early relationships with parents and peers influence the nature of interactions with others. During adolescence, intimacy with peers and romantic partners increases while that with parents decreases (Collins 2003), suggesting that RE reflects the needs of adolescents' developing connections outside of the family.

In the framework of relational systems, relationships with both peers and parents shape adolescent romantic development in relation to its nature and quality through influencing the social and emotional capacities of adolescents (Li, ZH et al. 2010; Madsen & Collins 2011). A number of studies have measured the correlation between romantic relationships and other types of social relationships, such as those with family and peers, attempting to find predictive factors for assessing the quality of romantic relationships (Furman & Shomaker 2008; Madsen & Collins 2011; Roisman et al. 2009). Peer groups including friends have been found to play a facilitating role in adolescent romantic development across cultures, such as in China, Canada (Li, ZH et al. 2010), and the USA (Suleiman & Deardorff 2015). The quality of parent-adolescent relationships (Scharf & Mayseless 2008), parental interactions (Stocker & Richmond 2007), family structure (Cavanagh, Crissey & Raley 2008), and parenting style (Auslander et al. 2009; Kan, McHale & Crouter 2007) have been found to influence adolescent romantic development in different domains. For instance, a better quality of parent-adolescent relationships (e.g., warmth, acceptance) have been found to be associated with girls' delayed entrance into sexual romantic relationships, and with the better quality of romantic relationships in general (Scharf & Mayseless 2008). In addition, the framework of relational systems explains the gender differences in how adolescents experience romantic relationships and their expectations pertaining to communication and interaction. In general, female adolescents are more likely to emphasise care and attachment, self-disclosure, and

support in adolescent relationships than males (Adams & Williams 2011; Giordano, Longmore & Manning 2006; Shulman & Scharf 2000).

From a bio-ecological perspective, RE is described as an important source of socialisation for adolescents (Bouchey & Furman 2006; Collins 2003; Furman & Shomaker 2008). Adolescent romantic experience occurs within a social context, where broad cultural messages, practices, and morals in society may have an impact on adolescents' romantic views (Bouchey & Furman 2006). Social norms influence the permissiveness or constraints, occurrence, expected timing, and activities of romantic relationships (Bouchey & Furman 2006; Collins 2003). Therefore, culture is a force that contributes to the diversity of adolescent RE. For instance, comparison studies among different racial-ethnic groups have demonstrated that adolescents of Asian descent have lower levels of romantic involvement than their counterparts in the West, such as in Australia (Moore & Leung 2001), the USA (Chen et al. 2009), and Canada (Li, ZH et al. 2010).

As discussed above, adolescent romance can be very diverse according to the developmental phase in which RE is situated, and is also influenced by the contexts of parents, peers, and the culture. However, in the empirical studies on adolescent romance, the target population is usually adolescents who are in romantic or dyadic dating relationships (Auslander et al. 2009; Scharf & Mayseless 2008). Comparatively little research has been devoted to romantic experience other than actual relationships (Collins, Welsh & Furman 2009; Manning et al. 2014). Specific research in relation to adolescent RE in China, particularly on how adolescents perceive the meanings of RE, is rare. The current available research about adolescent RE focuses on attitudes toward RE, and provides a broad picture about the social acceptability of RE among Chinese people.

2.2.3 Attitudes toward adolescent romantic experience in China

In China, romantic experience during adolescence is often called 'early love' or 'premature love' (*'Zao Lian'* in Mandarin) (Chen et al. 2009), which signifies that adolescents' increasing interest in sexuality and romance has outstripped their emotional and social maturity, as prescribed by wider society (Farrer 2006). Adolescents' attitudes towards RE largely determine their romantic activities. In a national survey, Yang, X (2006) found that around one-third of the adolescent students had a positive evaluation of RE, selecting categories such as 'it brings mutual help', 'it promotes a better understanding of the opposite sex', and 'it is a happy thing'. The majority of adolescents; however, held negative attitudes toward RE

through the selection of items, such as ‘RE hinders learning’ and ‘they are too young to develop RE’. As the survey only offered fixed items regarding views about RE, the findings could not capture a comprehensive picture of adolescents’ perspectives about RE. However, the behavioural data showed that adolescents in secondary schools in China are increasingly engaging in romantic activities (Chen et al. 2009). Wu, J (2007) reported that approximately half of the adolescents (aged 11-16 years) in urban areas developed a special affection, or a particular feeling for someone, which was called ‘good feelings’ as a sort of romantic experience.

More recent surveys have found that approximately 60-80% of adolescents expressed their desire to interact with the opposite sex (Kong 2010; Song & Ji 2010). Another study among high school students showed that Chinese adolescents reported modest levels of romantic involvement, including current or past relationships, at 36.8% for boys and 20.2% for girls (Li, ZH et al. 2010). The existing literature on adolescents’ attitudes toward RE in China largely used survey tools to ask adolescents whether they approved or disapproved of RE, and whether and/or when they have a boyfriend or girlfriend. These studies were therefore limited in providing an understanding of RE from the subjective viewpoints of adolescents in China.

For adolescents, especially for those at school, parents and teachers are important figures as they interact with adolescents for a lengthy period of time, and thus can exert a significant influence on adolescent romantic issues. Chinese parents and teachers traditionally hold unfavourable views toward RE, and tend to exert strong discipline over adolescent dating. Investigations in China have shown that adolescent RE is a topic that most parents disapprove of, or object to, with only a minority (about 20%) showing understanding and support for adolescent RE (Hou 2010; Kong 2010; Tu et al. 2005). A large proportion (97%) of parents of middle-school students disapproved of adolescent romantic relationships, while the majority (70%) showed concern about their adolescent developing a romantic relationship, worrying that RE might encourage premarital sexual behaviours (Tu et al. 2005). A study by Liu, W and Edwards (2007) found that most Chinese parents (64.9%) reported that an acceptable age for adolescents to engage in a romantic relationship is from 21-25 years of age. This parental view is contrary to the reality that many adolescents have been involved in romantic relationships since their secondary school years.

Similar to parents, high-school teachers in China reported that they educated students to avoid having friends of the opposite sex in high school in order to avoid premarital sexual activities

(Zhang, LY, Shah & Baldwin 2006). On the other hand, Meng (2009) stated that middle-school teachers emphasised that developing friendships with the opposite sex, rather than 'love' relationships, was more favourable for students. Hou (2010) identified that parents and teachers disapproved of opposite sex communication because they believed in the prioritisation of academic performance and complied with traditional customs of keeping a certain distance between men and women. Therefore, owing to the extensive control of parents and teachers, as well as the pressure to concentrate on academic achievement, few opportunities existed for school students to explore the area of love (Nelson & Chen 2007). The disapproval of adolescent RE by parents and teachers reflects a risk perspective towards adolescent RE rather than a developmental perspective about sexuality.

2.2.4 The link between adolescent romantic experience and sexuality

Adolescent romantic experience and sexual development are closely related. Within the context of RE, adolescents formulate their own understandings of sexuality and/or determine how they wish to engage in sexual behaviour (Auslander, Rosenthal & Blythe 2006; Manning, Longmore & Giordano 2000). Romantic relationships serve as a precursor and contribute to the initiation of sexual activity among adolescents (Lau et al. 2009; Royer, Keller & Heidrich 2009). As well, adolescents engage in a wide spectrum of sexual behaviours ranging from fantasy and masturbation to various forms of intercourse (Crockett, Raffaelli & Moilanen 2006). A number of studies have measured adolescent romantic relationships as part of adolescent sexual health (de Graaf et al. 2012; Graaf et al. 2011; Royer, Keller & Heidrich 2009).

A study from a longitudinal sample of 536 Dutch adolescents (aged 12-18) showed that 77% of the participants had their first experience of sexual intercourse after engaging in a romantic experience, while 17% of respondents reported that they had their first romantic and sexual experiences at the same age (de Graaf et al. 2012). These findings suggest that the onset of romantic involvement preceded sexual experiences for most adolescents in this study.

Another study involving a group of eighth-graders (aged 13-15) in a US public school who were asked open-ended questions about their understandings of a romantic relationship, one-third of the adolescents described RE as including sexual activities. These activities ranged from less intimate (e.g., holding hands) to heavy intimate sexual activities (e.g., sexual intercourse) (Royer, Keller & Heidrich 2009). This finding showed that adolescents regarded romantic relationships as a source of sexual behaviour.

One prospective study on US adolescents who were followed from birth to the age of 19, found that the earlier initiation of romantic relationships was associated with a history of having more sexual partners (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner & Collins 2004). Similarly, Zimmer-Gembeck and Helfand (2008) reviewed the developmental correlates of US adolescent sexual behaviours, and concluded that dating is a significant correlate of sexual intercourse among adolescents.

Romantic experience provides a context and opportunities for sexual activities, and thus, is a critical part of adolescent sexuality. From an ecological perspective, adolescent sexuality is influenced by a range of factors that might simultaneously influence RE, as discussed below.

2.3 Bio-ecological factors influencing adolescent sexuality

This section provides a discussion about the literature through a bio-ecological framework to review the factors that shape adolescent sexuality and romantic experience. Ecologically, adolescents grow into adults within a complex web of family, peer, community, mass media, societal, and cultural influences that can affect their present and future health and well-being (Viner et al. 2012). The bio-ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2007) suggests that adolescent sexual behaviours, like other behaviours, are influenced by a number of factors at multiple levels of adolescents' social lives. Factors within the macro-system (e.g., the cultural, societal, political, and economic fields) exert their influence through micro-level systems (e.g., peers, family, school, and neighbourhood fields) to affect behaviour (Bronfenbrenner 1979). For example, the norms and expectations of communities, schools, wider society, and even the historical context, exercise influence on the beliefs of parents and adolescents, and also shape adolescent sexual behaviours (Hutchinson & Wood 2007). At exo-system level, the mass media has been consistently reported as an important influence on adolescent romantic and sexual development through shaping their beliefs in romance and sex as well as providing sexual related information (Bleakley, Hennessy & Fishbein 2011; Friedlander et al. 2007; Suleiman & Deardorff 2015). The mass media is often considered to contain potentially negative, or age-inappropriate and unreliable sexual information (Li, L, King & Winter 2009; Sawyer et al. 2012), which is associated with adolescent developing romantic relationships and engaging in earlier sexual behaviours (Bleakley et al. 2009; Cheng, S, Ma & Missari 2014; Fortenberry 2013). As part of the micro-system, the effect of peers is described as more complicated which can be positive or negative, through providing supportive relationship advice and

sexual information for adolescent individuals or encouraging them to engage in risky behaviours (Suleiman & Deardorff 2015; Sullivan et al. 2012).

Personal influence, such as the early onset of puberty, may be a predictor of adolescents' early involvement in dating or engaging in sexual behaviour (Friedlander et al. 2007; Roche et al. 2005). Socio-cultural and psycho-social factors, such as family and peer practice, religious beliefs, and academic performance, are also associated with adolescent romantic and sexual activity (Auslander, Rosenthal & Blythe 2006; Friedlander et al. 2007; Miller, BC et al. 1998). Using a longitudinal design to examine biological, familial, and peer influences on dating among an early adolescent sample (aged 10-13) in Canada, Friedlander et al (2007) underlined that it is the joint effects of pubertal maturation, parental monitoring, and peer group factors that place adolescents at risk of engaging in early dating. Therefore, the impacts from these multi-level systems and their intertwined influences on adolescent sexual health are complex, and yet they provide a holistic insight into understanding and handling of adolescent sexual issues.

Eco-developmental theory, developed by Szapocznik and Coatsworth (1999) draws on social ecology theory, structural systems theory, multi-system interventions, and lifespan development approaches (Perrino et al. 2000). As its name implies, this theory emphasises an understanding of adolescent behaviour through a combination of developmental processes with multiple social contexts within which the risk, protection, and behaviours occur (Perrino et al. 2000). The eco-developmental theory identifies that family is the most proximal and fundamental system influencing adolescent development (Henrich et al. 2006; Perrino et al. 2000), and thus can be the ideal entry point for adolescent risky behaviour prevention and intervention.

Familial influences on adolescent sexual activity can be divided into two primary categories: family structure and family processes (Deptula, Henry & Schoeny 2010; Henrich et al. 2006; Kotchick et al. 2001). Familial structural factors such as single parenting, socio-economic status (SES), and parental education may be related to the sexual risk behaviour of adolescents (Kotchick et al. 2001). However, another study (Miller, KS, Forehand & Kotchick 1999) indicated that family structural variables (including family income, parental education, and maternal marital status) failed to predict adolescent sexual behaviours. In terms of family processes, there are several different mechanisms through which parenting affects adolescent sexual behaviours (Deptula, Henry & Schoeny 2010). Three dimensions of parenting, i.e.

parental monitoring, the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship, and parent-adolescent communication have been recognised as significant variables that have an impact on adolescent sexual behaviours (Crockett, Raffaelli & Moilanen 2006; Kotchick et al. 2001). Deptula, Henry and Schoeny (2010) stated that parental monitoring and parent-adolescent relationships were relatively distal factors compared to parent-adolescent communication. Therefore, the family, as part of the microsystem in the ecological environment, emerges as an important factor (either positive or negative) in adolescent sexual health. At the same time, cultural beliefs and expectations situated in the macro-system influence parental behaviour and the types of messages they deliver to their adolescents.

School and peers are other prominent parts of the micro-system in which adolescents interact directly, while the inter-relations between the different parts of the micro-system constitute the meso-system influencing adolescent sexuality indirectly (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Perrino et al. 2000). Parents have an influence on the different parts of the micro-system through the family-peer and family-school parts of the meso-system. Research has found that parenting practices and behaviours such as communication and monitoring can influence adolescents' peer relations when risks exist in the peer part of the microsystem (Fasula & Miller 2006; Markham et al. 2010). In the school part of the micro-system, which is generally recognised as the natural setting for health education (Thomas & Weng 2008), sex education providing sexual knowledge has been a protective factor for adolescent sexual and reproductive health through helping adolescents to make informed sexual-related decisions (Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2012; Markham et al. 2010). Some school-based sex education programs encourage parental involvement in the development of school policies, and in reinforcing school-based health messages to adolescents (Downing et al. 2011; Grossman et al. 2013; Grossman et al. 2014; Namisi et al. 2015).

Following this exploration of ecological factors, adolescent sexual health promotion strategies are discussed below to illustrate how schools and parents work to promote better adolescent sexual health.

2.4 Strategies for adolescent sexual health promotion

Health promotion is defined as the process of increasing individuals' and communities' control over the factors that influence health, thereby providing opportunities for improving health (WHO 1986). Adolescent sexual health has become a public issue across a range of countries as a result of increasing adolescent sexual behaviours and the subsequent

consequences, such as unwanted pregnancies and STIs (Albarracín et al. 2005). Correspondingly, a variety of strategies have been explored and implemented to prevent adolescent risky sexual behaviours and to promote healthy sexual development.

2.4.1 Overview of adolescent health promotion approaches

In the literature, among the various sexual health promotion programs, health education has been found as a major avenue for promoting adolescent sexual health. The strategies discussed within the literature include sex education in many settings across a range of cultures, such as schools (Schutte et al. 2014), the community (Fisher, CM et al. 2011; Lou, CH et al. 2004), the family (Eastman et al. 2005; Schuster et al. 2008), or a combination of these settings (Akintobi et al. 2011; Grossman et al. 2013), and online through the Internet (Lou, CH et al. 2006). Meanwhile, the facilitators of these health education activities are diverse, including peers, teachers, parents, and health professionals (Campero et al. 2011; Mason-Jones, Mathews & Flisher 2011; Shin & Rew 2010). Strategies include instruction using a variety of materials, as well as case studies and/or role plays through the Internet, mass media, social networking sites, and text messaging (Bertrand 2005; Gold et al. 2011; Lou, CH et al. 2006; Rosenberger et al. 2011; Selkie, Benson & Moreno 2011). These educational strategies produced positive health outcomes, such as increasing sexual knowledge, building sexual-related skills (e.g., negotiating and decision-making), reducing risky sexual behaviours (e.g., postponing sexual intercourse, decreasing pregnancy and the number of sexual partners, and promoting contraceptive use for sexually-active adolescents) (Kirby, Laris & Rolleri 2007).

However, Gavin, Catalano and Markham (2010) proposed that simple exposure to education programs is not enough to promote and sustain healthy adolescent sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Therefore, they proposed a framework known as Positive Youth Development (PYD) to guide program design and implementation. By acknowledging that young people have strengths that can be reinforced with support from external entities, such as the community, schools, and the family, PYD emphasises the empowerment of youth to develop skills for positive behaviours (Bowers et al. 2010; Gavin et al. 2010). Five goals of the PYD framework are summarised as the five Cs. These are: (a) Competence in academic, social, cognitive, and vocational areas; (b) Confidence, or a positive self-identity, and self-efficacy; (c) Connections or positive bonds with people and institutions, such as community, family, and peers; (d) Character or positive values, integrity, and moral commitment; and (e) Caring and compassion (Roth & Brooks-gunn 2003, pp. 170-1).

A number of studies in the USA have used the PYD framework to develop programs to promote adolescent sexual and reproductive health, finding preventive effects on adolescent sexual health (Flay et al. 2004; Haggerty et al. 2007; Lonczak et al. 2002). Gavin et al. (2010) conducted a review of PYD programs and identified that effective programs are more likely to strengthen the school context, deliver activities in a supportive atmosphere, build skills, enhance bonding, strengthen the family, engage youth in real roles and activities, empower youth, communicate expectations, and be stable and long-lasting, compared to ineffective programs. Effective programs most commonly focus on the family context, followed by the school and the community. A range of activities in the family context were included in the effective programs, such as homework assignments to be completed by the students in conjunction with their parents, and parental training in supervision, discipline, and parent-child communication (Catalano, Gavin & Markham 2010; Gavin et al. 2010).

Schalet (2011) proposed a new framework (the ABC-D model) for adolescent sexual health that directs attention to the skills, relationships, and resources that youth need to develop as healthy sexual beings. This framework embraces an approach that is beyond abstinence and risk to deal with the wider notion of adolescent sexuality. The '*A*' refers to autonomy of the sexual self. Gaining sexual autonomy enables adolescents to recognise their own sexual feelings, and thus, exercise control over their sexual decision-making. The '*B*' refers to building a good romantic relationship which is a critical component of healthy sexual development and a means to promoting sexual health. The '*C*' refers to connectedness between adolescents and parents, and other care providers. Building this connectedness enables protective information and assistance to effectively reach the adolescent when they need it. The '*D*' refers to recognising the diversity of adolescents in relation to their sexual and emotional development, and removing disparities in access to resources. Schalet (2011) asserted that the implementation of this ABC-D framework involves helping adolescents to access comprehensive sex education and health services, through joint efforts by adolescents, parents, and health providers. In addition, Schalet (2011) also highlighted the link between adolescent RE and sexuality, and advocated the incorporation of information and skills about RE into the entire quantum of sexuality information provision for adolescents. This framework has been supported by the findings of a review that indicated that programs which followed an integrated model could provide adolescents with the skills to develop healthy romantic relationships and knowledge about the wider construct of sexual health, which enabled them to explore their sexuality in safer ways (Schmidt, Wandersman & Hills 2015). However, the element of adolescent autonomy which is promoted in this framework is not

encouraged by the Confucian value of filial piety in the Chinese culture (Liu, YL 2013).

Connectedness is a component emphasised in both the ABC-D framework and PYD programs. The connectedness between adolescents and their school and family, where they spend most of their time, have both protective and preventive effects on positive adolescent development. In addition, school-based sex education programs together with family involvement have been found to delay adolescents' early sexual behaviour (Grossman et al. 2013; Grossman et al. 2014). The following sections will address school-based and parent-based adolescent sexual health promotion respectively.

2.4.2 Sex education in school settings

School is a conventional setting for implementing sex education, given its ability to reach a large number of young people and its advantage of being an educational environment (Fonner et al. 2014; Hayter, Owen & Cooke 2012). However, the approaches to, and effects of, school-based sex education remains controversial across a range of countries, including in the West and in Asia (Kirby 2008; Koo et al. 2011; Lou, CH et al. 2004). The two major approaches to school-based sex education and their effects are discussed below, followed by an overview of school-based sex education in China.

2.4.2.1 Effects of school-based sex education

In the West, especially in the USA, a large amount of literature has analysed and critiqued the two dominant types of sex education programs, which are abstinence-only education and comprehensive sex education, in terms of their effects and appropriateness (Fonner et al. 2014; Kohler, Manhart & Lafferty 2008; Santelli et al. 2006; Thomas & Weng 2008). Abstinence-only education programs promote abstinence until marriage, without the provision of information about contraceptives, and often contain inaccurate medical information about the effectiveness of contraception and the risks of abortion (Kantor et al. 2008). In contrast, comprehensive sex education programs promote such education at an early age, and provide detailed information on sexual development and sexual behaviour, including safe sex using contraceptives or condoms (Fonner et al. 2014). The abstinence-only programs have been found to lack effectiveness in delaying the initiation of sexual intercourse, or in reducing the number of sexual partners among adolescents (Kantor et al. 2008; Kirby 2008; Kohler, Manhart & Lafferty 2008). Comprehensive sex education receives greater support and recognition by both academics and the public, including parents (Bleakley, Hennessy & Fishbein 2006; Eisenberg et al. 2008), as it was found to be more effective in delaying the

timing of the first experience of sexual intercourse, and in reducing sexual risk behaviours for adolescents, than abstinence-only education programs (Fonner et al. 2014; Kirby 2008; Kohler, Manhart & Lafferty 2008; Ott & Santelli 2007).

Tortolero et al. (2010) found that a curriculum-based school program that covered HIV, STIs, and pregnancy prevention, for seventh and eighth graders (aged 12-14) delayed their sexual initiation for an average of 24 months. Markham et al. (2012) found that school-based risk reduction programs (abstinence with the inclusion of condom skills training) in African-American and Hispanic middle schools positively affected both sexually inexperienced and experienced adolescents in terms of delaying sexual initiation and reducing unprotected sex. A review of school education programs in low- and middle-income countries, by Fonner et al. (2014), indicated that school-based sex education was an effective strategy for reducing HIV-related risks in which students receiving the education showed greater knowledge of HIV, self-efficacy in refusing sex, fewer sexual partners, and delayed initiation of their first sexual encounter.

Despite the reported effectiveness of school-based education programs in some studies, others found that these programs had no effect on adolescent sexual behaviour (Koo et al. 2011), or the effects showed gender differences, being more effective for boys (Coyle et al. 2004) or girls (Aarons et al. 2000; Tortolero et al. 2010). Koo et al. (2011) found that a school-based adolescent pregnancy prevention program, including 10 sessions about three sexual-related topics (i.e., puberty changes, abstinence, and negotiating peer pressure) in one school year, increased adolescents' knowledge of puberty, but did not affect the increasing rate of sexual intercourse among a group of early African-American adolescents (aged 10-11). Adolescent sexual health is influenced by a range of ecological factors, such as peers and the media (Friedlander et al. 2007; L'Engle, Brown & Kenneavy 2006), which may interfere with the effects of school-based sex education programs.

2.4.2.2 School-based sex education in China

The above discussion about the effects of sex education programs is based on the Western context. In China, sex education programs are largely implemented in the school setting. Due to the growing incidence of premarital sex, unplanned adolescent pregnancies, and STIs, including HIV/AIDS, among young Chinese people (Gao, Y et al. 2001; Kaufman & Jing 2002; Song & Ji 2010; Wang, B et al. 2007), it is acknowledged that accurate and adequate reproductive and sexual health education for adolescents is increasingly required. However, there is a gap between this requirement and actual practice, manifested by the fact that

Chinese adolescents with a greater awareness of sexuality, and who need sexual health information, receive only limited information about sexual issues (Hoy 2001; Li, JF, Zhang & Zhang 2007; Watts 2004).

In China, there were very few studies or related information on adolescent sexuality available until the late 1970s, when public writing, discussion, and research on sexuality were not officially sanctioned (Gao, Y et al. 2001). During the 1980s, a number of books concerning sexuality, mostly translated from Western languages, were published in China, and sex education in Chinese schools started (Wang, X 2013). The occurrence of related studies on sex education is in accordance with the promulgation of a series of government regulations since 1988 by the Ministry of Health (MOH), the National Family Planning Commission, and the State Council (Wang, X 2013). These national regulations stated that schools should carry out sex education for young people, and prescribed the content of the education as consisting of physical and psychological health and moral sex education (Liu, WL 2008). However, sex education in Chinese schools is still in the initial stage of development, and largely takes an approach of 'puberty education' by confining knowledge within the physiological aspects of puberty and sexuality, with little information about relationships and safe sex practice (Lou, CH et al. 2004). School-based sex education in China is mandated by official discourse that prioritises political ideology about social stability and social harmony in the socialist system (Li, L, King & Winter 2009; Wang, X 2013). However, these education programs place a greater emphasis on addressing sexuality from a perspective of imparting biological knowledge and risk prevention, yet with less attention on the psycho-sexual aspects, such as romantic experience (RE).

In China, RE is labelled as 'early love' and is included as part of sex education programs provided in the school setting, using warning messages to restrict adolescents from romantic engagement (Hong, J et al. 2010). Romantic experience is recognised as a normal and expected developmental task among adolescents in the West (Bouchey & Furman 2006; Madsen & Collins 2011; Royer, Keller & Heidrich 2009). However, adolescent RE in China is framed as a pathway to adolescent sexual activity, which is against social morality, and is seen as a dangerous social problem by wider society (Farrer 2006). Therefore, relationship and sex education has predominantly adopted a morality-based approach by promoting sexual restraint as a national virtue (Wang, X 2013; Wei 2004), which also reflects the dominant approach of abstinence-based sex education in China's schools.

In practice, sex education in Chinese schools encounters a number of structural challenges, such as a lack of skilled staff, conflict with competitive academic tasks, and a socio-cultural dilemma associated with embarrassment when talking about sex (Lian et al. 2006; Thomas & Weng 2008; Zhang, LY, Li & Shah 2007). Through a self-administered questionnaire survey on 436 primary and secondary schools in one province in northern China, Thomas and Weng (2008) identified that the negative attitudes of school administrators, teachers, and students towards sex education were chief obstacles to school sex education programs. Others have also found that the lack of in-service training for staff, and insufficient teaching time allocated to sex education due to the demands of the national curriculum, impeded its implementation (Hong, J et al. 2010; Lian et al. 2006; Zhang, LY, Li & Shah 2007). As a result, time could not be adequately allocated to adolescent sex education in the school setting. From a socio-cultural perspective, studies show that teachers remain uncomfortable in providing sex education to adolescents due to the cultural norms of not publicly discussing sexual matters (Cui, Li & Gao 2001; Lian et al. 2006). Consequently, most teachers in middle-school tend to omit sexual-related content in their instruction, or use it as a self-learning assignment (Hong, J et al. 2010; Hoy 2001). In addition, the methods of conducting sex education are predominantly didactic, using traditional and passive approaches such as the distribution of materials, lectures, and in some cases, boys and girls being separated to receive the education (Wang, X 2013).

The above challenges show that the content and scope of school sex education in China has been very limited, and adolescents are provided with very few opportunities to discuss sexuality and relationships within the school programs. As a consequence, adolescents reported that they obtained insufficient information from their schooling. A self-administered survey showed that Chinese adolescents (aged 15-19) obtained their knowledge of puberty primarily from their teachers and parents, while information on sexuality and STIs, including HIV/AIDS, was primarily acquired through the mass media or from peers (Zhang, LY, Li & Shah 2007). Wu, L (2010) investigated a sample of pregnant adolescent girls (aged 16-19) seeking an induced abortion service in hospital, and found that they reported that their contraceptive knowledge from school was not enough, while their friends, the Internet, and the media were common sources of contraceptive information. Therefore, from a perspective of adolescents' needs, the effect of the current school-based sex education in China on adolescent sexual health is quite limited.

Similar to the global debate about adolescent sex education, it remains controversial in China and is disputed in terms of what kind of sexual health education and services should be provided, and how they should be provided for adolescents (Aresu 2009; Wang, X 2013). One of these debates is on the appropriate age for adolescents to receive sex education, and/or whether sex education encourages adolescent sexual activity at a younger age (Gao, Y et al. 2001; Hoy 2001; Lou, CH et al. 2008; Wu, L 2010). The overall debate poses a challenge for schools to meet the needs of adolescents while allaying the wider social concerns that sex education inadvertently promotes permissive sexual attitudes and behaviours among adolescents. In recent times, scholars have questioned the dominant abstinence-only sex education approach in China (Aresu 2009; Wang, X 2013), given that contemporary adolescents increasingly engage in premarital sexual activity and no longer consider virginity as an absolute value (Li, L, King & Winter 2009; Chang, Hayter & Lin 2014).

One program in China has explored the possibility of implementing comprehensive sex education for unmarried young people (aged 15-24, with 56.7% being out-of-school) in a community setting (Lou, CH et al. 2004; Wang, B et al. 2005). This program showed no effect in delaying sexual initiation, but had positive effects in terms of reducing the incidence of sexual coercion, increasing contraceptive and condom use, and decreasing rates of pregnancy among the intervention group. The evidence from the program in relation to comprehensive sex education delaying sexual initiation may have been weak due to approximately half of the study sample being comprised of young adults (aged 19-24 years) who might have already engaged in sexual behaviour before participating in the program.

Another program which focused on life skills training with a component of comprehensive sex education for vocational school students (average age of 16 years), demonstrated improvement in reproductive cognition related to sexual behaviour and contraceptive/condom use (Lou, CH et al. 2008). Specifically, the perceived risks of getting pregnant and contracting STDs, the perceived benefits of learning to use a condom and self-efficacy for using contraceptives, were enhanced among the students as a result of the program (Lou, CH et al. 2008). However, this program only measured cognitive changes, rather than behaviours, and thus, the effects may not have been completely captured. The effects generated as a result of the program indicated that a comprehensive sex education program may be promising. However, under the Chinese socio-cultural context that politically and socio-culturally

highlights the abstinence-only approach to sex education (Aresu 2009; Wang, X 2013; Watts 2004), expanding this type of program into the secondary school setting to reach a large number of adolescents, would be a significant challenge.

The weight of evidence in the literature appears to support the idea that sex education for adolescents in school time is a necessity (Wang, X 2013; Watts 2004); however, school-based sex education alone is inadequate for changing adolescent sexual behaviour (Yu, J 2010). Studies have also highlighted the importance of recognising and strengthening the parents' potential influence on adolescent sexual health (Kong 2010; Thomas & Weng 2008). One study in China demonstrated that the combination of both school and family-focused education produced better outcomes in relation to sexual knowledge and attitudes than exclusive school sex education for middle-school students (Zuo 2006). However, very few school programs in China were found to involve parents.

2.4.3 Parent-based adolescent sexual health promotion

This section addresses the perceived and practised roles of parents in adolescent sexual health promotion from the international and the Chinese literature respectively.

2.4.3.1 Overview of parents' roles in adolescent sexual health

It is acknowledged that parents are the earliest and most important influences on adolescent sexuality (Kotchick et al. 2001; Miller, KS, Forehand & Kotchick 1999). Miller et al. (1999) stated that parents are the most powerful socialising agents in adolescents' lives, because "parents are in a unique and powerful position to shape adolescents' attitudes and behaviours and to socialise them to become sexually healthy adults" (p. 96). Parent-adolescent discussions about sexuality can transfer objective facts about relationships and sexual behaviours, as well as family norms and attitudes. These messages can help adolescents to clarify their values, attitudes, and intentions about sexual involvement (Ford et al. 2005; Perrino et al. 2000). Parental messages in line with family values were found to provide a buffer to other external influences, such as peers and the media (Fisher, DA et al. 2009; Urrea-Giraldo et al. 2006). Therefore, parents could exert influence on adolescent sexual health outcomes through both direct and indirect ways (Rose et al. 2005; Turnbull, Wersch & Schaik 2008).

Empirical studies support the proposition that parents represent an influential power in adolescent sexual health (Lagus et al. 2011; Turnbull, Werscha & Schaik 2011). A study in Minnesota investigated parents' views on the ideal source of sex information for young

people, and found that over 90% of the parents perceived that they should be the primary communicators of sex-related information for young people (Lagus et al. 2011). Turnbull, Werscha and Schaik (2011) employed a qualitative approach and found that the majority of British parents and their adolescents discussed sexual matters openly within the family. In this study, the parental wish for their adolescents to receive better sex education than they had was an important motive for such discussions about sexual issues.

A quantitative study conducted in the Philippines illustrated that adolescents (aged 13-18) valued the opinions of their parents more than their friends in relation to love and sexuality (de Irala et al. 2009). In a survey about dating relationships in Canada, adolescents (aged 13-16) perceived that parents and sex education teachers were more accurate sources of information about dating relationships than friends or the media. However, these perceptions of accuracy did not directly translate into influence as adolescents reported that friends had the most influence on their dating choices (Wood et al. 2002). In a focus group study, a group of American high school students argued that the absence of discussion with adults (including parents and teachers) pertaining to romantic and sexual relationships resulted in them turning elsewhere for relevant information (Adams & Williams 2011). In contrast, a study in the Netherlands showed that a majority of adolescents (62.9%) have discussed sexuality with their parents, especially in relation to choice of partner and sexual decisions (Schouten et al. 2007). While these studies show variations in the perceptions of adolescents about the parents' role across countries, they shed light on parental impacts on adolescent sexuality development and sexual health.

2.4.3.2 Role of Chinese parents in adolescent sexuality

Studies about the parental role in adolescent sexuality that are available in China predominantly collected their data through surveys to investigate the views of parents or adolescents about the parents' role and parental practice in adolescent sexuality, with a particular focus on whether parents constitute a source of sexual knowledge for their adolescents (Liu, WL et al. 2011; Zhang, LY, Li & Shah 2007). These studies show mixed findings in relation to the perceived role of Chinese parents in providing such information.

A recent study surveyed 694 Chinese parents of middle- and high-school students in three urban cities about their perspectives on sex education for adolescents in the family context (Liu, WL et al. 2011). The findings indicated that a vast majority of parents (79.6%) supported sex education for adolescents, and 73.3% believed that parents should take primary responsibility of providing such education (Liu, WL et al. 2011). However, in practice, only a

minority of parents (16.4%) actually educated their adolescents about sexuality. In addition, most parents (85.8%) supported HIV/AIDS education in schools, but did not support instruction about contraception due to a concern that information about contraception would encourage their adolescents to engage in sexual activity. A majority of parents (56.7%) chose not to discuss sexual intercourse and contraception with their adolescent children until they were ready for marriage (Liu, WL et al. 2011).

Despite parents' limited practice in providing sex education for their adolescents in China, the adolescents identified their parents as an important, or preferable, source of sex education (Wu, J 2007; Zhang, LY, Li & Shah 2007). A survey of 1,319 youths aged 15-24 showed that parents did not play the role of providing sexual information as young people expected (Zhang, LY et al. 2010). Zhang, LY, Li and Shah (2007) collected data in 2001 from unmarried adolescents aged 15-19 about their source of sexual knowledge. They found that whether or not parents were a source of sexual knowledge depended on the age, gender, romantic relationship status, and sexual experience of the adolescents, and the sensitivity of the topics. Specifically, younger (aged 15-17) female adolescents, and those without romantic and sexual experience were more likely to obtain knowledge from their parents. Parents were often the source of knowledge on less taboo and sensitive topics such as puberty; but peers and the mass media were the sources of more taboo and sensitive topics such as sexual behaviour and STIs (Zhang, LY, Li & Shah 2007).

These quantitative studies reflect the limited role of parents in providing sexual knowledge for adolescents in China. The self-reported data from Chinese parents and adolescents cannot provide deep understandings about why parents did not fully play their expected role, and why adolescents did not choose their parents as a major source of sexual information. In situations where parents did provide adolescents with information about sexuality, or influenced adolescent sexuality, communication was a major strategy (Liu, W & Edwards 2007; Liu, WL et al. 2011) and will be further discussed below.

2.5 Parent-adolescent communication about sexuality

In China, only a limited number of studies on parent-adolescent communication about sexuality are available (Wang, B et al. 2007; Zhang, LY et al. 2007; Zhang, LY, Shah & Baldwin 2006). The sections below draw on the Chinese literature and international research to discuss four aspects of parent-adolescent communication about sexuality. These are the

features of parental communication, factors influencing communication, topics involved in the communication, and the outcomes of communication.

2.5.1 Features of parental communication about sexuality

Among the studies on family-based approaches to sexual health promotion, researchers recognised three distinctive features of parent-adolescent communication that are differentiated from other approaches, such as school-based education. Firstly, parents are able to transmit their ideologies and expectations to their adolescents in line with their own values and beliefs about the social context during the communication (Allen 2011; Miller, KS et al. 2009; Romo et al. 2002; Schouten et al. 2007). Secondly, individuals demonstrate developmental heterogeneity during adolescence. Parents have more complete information of their adolescents' characteristics and may offer information appropriately and sequentially by considering adolescents' physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychological maturity level of development (Sabia 2006). The individual differences among adolescents enables the parents to take an individualised approach and tailor relevant messages to strengthen adolescent's receptivity to the information (Jaccard, Dodge & Dittus 2002). Finally, parents can continuously influence adolescents beyond the reach of the schools or the clinics in the family context, and offer time-sensitive guidance by immediately responding to adolescents' sexual-related questions (Miller, KS et al. 2009; Stanton et al. 2000).

These features represent parental strengths that place them in a unique position for influencing adolescents through communication. However, in practice, the communication has been found to vary in relation to its content and extent due to a range of factors, as discussed below.

2.5.2 Factors influencing parent-adolescent communication

Practical communication about sexuality is complex due to variables such as parental/ adolescent gender, the age of the adolescent, the sexual topic, parent-adolescent relationships, communication patterns, parental/adolescent beliefs, and parents' self-efficacy for communication (Beckett et al. 2010; Hutchinson et al. 2003; Romo et al. 2002; Schouten et al. 2007; Siriarunrat et al. 2010; Swain, Ackerman & Ackerman 2006; Wyckoff et al. 2007).

The gender of both the parents and the adolescents is identified as a factor in both quantitative and qualitative studies. It has been found that a mother, as the primary educator in a household, may find it difficult to talk with her son in comparison with her daughter, while fathers were less likely to talk with their daughters, in studies conducted in the UK (Walker, JL 2001), Australia (Kirkman, Rosenthal & Feldman 2005) and the USA (Ballard & Gross

2009; Wilson, EK & Koo 2010). Likewise, girls tended to talk more with their parents, especially with their mothers, than boys in regard to sexual topics, as was found in a cross-sectional study in the Netherlands (Schouten et al. 2007) and a longitudinal study in Scotland (Wight, Williamson & Henderson 2006). Similarly, in a survey involving a convenience sample of 1,304 out-of-school youth aged 15-24 years in China, few adolescents of either gender discussed these issues with their father, while 33%-38% of the female adolescents, and 2%-8% of males, talked with their mothers about sex (Wang, B et al. 2007).

The age of adolescents and their developmental/sexual status is a factor that influences the parental timing of initiating a discussion about sexuality. Parents determine the initiation and appropriateness of talking about sexual topics based on their children's age or maturity (Miller, KS et al. 2009). Askelson, Campo and Smith (2012) found, in the USA, that the age of the daughter was the most powerful predictor for the number of sexual topics mothers covered during their conversation, and the timing of mothers raising the issue of sexuality. Iliyasu et al. (2012) identified that Nigerian parents started to talk about sexual issues when they realised that their children had reached puberty or had been involved in romantic activities. Using a telephone survey, Eisenberg et al. (2006) reported that a majority of American parents initiated conversations about sexuality with their adolescents (aged 13-17) after they believed that they had been involved in romantic relationships. Similarly, Beckett et al. (2010) used longitudinal data from a group of 141 American parents and their adolescents (aged 13-17), and found that their discussion about sexual topics occurred after the adolescents' sexual initiation. However, other studies have shown that parental messages were more powerful to adolescents when sexual topics were discussed before the onset of their sexual activities, coupled with an increase in peer influence (Clawson & Reese-Weber 2003; Wyckoff et al. 2007). Hence, parents might miss the opportunity to influence adolescent behaviours if they delay talking about sexual topics until their adolescents have initiated sexual activity or developed romantic relationships (Eisenberg et al. 2006). In China, younger adolescents were more likely to talk with their parents about sexuality as found in cross-sectional studies (Wu, J 2007; Zhang, LY, Shah & Baldwin 2006; Zuo 2006).

Parent-adolescent relationships and communication patterns are important factors that influence the frequency and quality of communication. In an investigation of American parent-adolescent dyads, Afifi, Joseph and Aldeis (2008) found that closer and more satisfying relationships (characterised by affection, receptivity, and composure) with parents reduced adolescents' anxiety and avoidance during sexual-related conversations, and thus

promoted their communication. Through qualitative interviews (N=38) and focus groups (N=31) with young people (aged 15-21), Elley (2010) showed that an open and trusting relationship between British parents and adolescents enabled a dialogue to take place around sexuality. An investigation of a random sample of 283 mothers with daughters aged 9-15 by Askelson, Campo and Smith (2012) indicated that an authoritative parenting style (with features of being both demanding and responsive to children) was related to more sexual topics being discussed between American mothers and their daughters at an earlier time than an authoritarian parenting style.

A number of qualitative studies have explored subjective understandings of, and perceptions about, communication, and identified the barriers and facilitators that existed across different contexts. Parents have attributed their lack of involvement in communication about sexuality with their adolescents to a number of reasons. Specifically, parents felt incompetent, uninformed, embarrassed, or uncertain, and these were seen as obstructing factors that influenced the communication, as found in the UK (Walker, J 2004; Walker, JL 2001), Australia (Kirkman, Rosenthal & Feldman 2005) and the USA (Wilson, EK et al. 2010). In Nigeria, part of parental uncertainty and incompetence was identified as a result of the absence of role models in talking about sexuality during their adolescent years, and the subsequent lack of skills in communicating about sexuality with their own children (Iliyasu et al. 2012). In addition, researchers in the UK identified parents' lack of awareness of their adolescents' needs, inadequate recognition of the parental role in adolescent sex education, and lack of time and energy, as restraining their involvement in such communication (Walker, J 2004; Walker, JL 2001; Yu, J 2007). Some parents have also ascribed their lack of communication about sexual issues to their adolescent being too young or being resistant to communication, and the risk of conversations triggering adolescents' sexual experimentation, as reported in Australia (Kirkman, Rosenthal & Feldman 2005), Scotland (Ogle, Glasier & Riley 2008), and the USA (Wilson, EK et al. 2010). Other studies have demonstrated additional barriers, such as cultural and language barriers between parents and adolescents who have migrated into a country comprised of multiple ethnicities, such as the USA (Kim & Ward 2007; Wilson, EK et al. 2010) and the UK (Yu, J 2007).

Qualitative studies have also found that adolescents reported that feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed constrained their engagement in parental communication (Ogle, Glasier & Riley 2008; Trinh, J et al. 2009; Yu, J 2007). In addition, parental reactions perceived by adolescents influenced their communication with their parents. A group of 41 American

adolescents (aged 10-16) perceived that their parents were intrusive and made assumptions about their sexual activity, and they viewed their parents' statements about sex as 'short' or threatening, and this inhibited adolescents from talking to their parents (Eastman et al. 2005). The reports from adolescents somewhat differed from parents' reports in other studies who contributed barriers to communication on the part of adolescents. In a qualitative interview study with 43 parents in Ireland, Hyde et al. (2013) identified that parents' silence was resulted from adolescents' use of blocking strategies, including claims to have a full knowledge of sexual issues and display annoyance or irritation by their parents' introducing sexual topics. The discrepant reports between parents and adolescents may reside in the quality of parent-adolescent interaction which needs to be further examined in dyads of parents and adolescents.

In comparison with the reported barriers to communication, parents in three qualitative studies conducted in Australia, the USA, and the UK reported on the facilitators to communication (Walker, J & Milton 2006; Walker, JL 2001; Wilson, EK et al. 2010). These facilitators included developing a good parent-child relationship, creating opportunities to talk, starting sexuality conversations when their children are young, using books, and using religious teachings and the church community as supports. Likewise, findings from an investigation in the Netherlands demonstrated that the holding of positive beliefs about the importance of parental communication about sexuality by adolescents predicted a greater amount of communication (Schouten et al. 2007).

Programs aimed at helping parents to reduce the barriers, and thus, to promote communication have been designed to enhance parents' relevant knowledge and build their confidence to talk to their adolescent (Eastman et al. 2005; Klein et al. 2005; Sarkissian 2010; Schuster et al. 2008; Turnbull, Werscha & Schaik 2011). Findings from the program evaluations indicated that improvements in parental sexuality communication occurred through a range of strategies (e.g. workshop training, multimedia computer programs). The effects of these programs included increased discussion about sex, a higher level of communicative ability, and more openness, as reported by both parents and adolescents, suggesting that more knowledge and confidence facilitated parents to discuss sexuality with their adolescents (Campero et al. 2010; Lagus et al. 2011).

In addition, peer groups and media were also reported to be associated with parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in terms of its frequency and related comfort. For example, a

longitudinal analysis by Wight, Williamson & Henderson (2006) showed that having a higher proportion of out-of-school friends was associated with male Scottish adolescents never having talked with parents about sex, and associated with female adolescents talking with mothers with less comfort. Qualitative studies found that the peer groups including friends of adolescents were talked about during parent-adolescent communication in American families (Afifi, Joseph & Aldeis 2008) and other Asian countries (Trinh, J et al. 2009; Muhwezi et al. 2015) to introduce the topic of sex or compare/justify adolescents' own beliefs and behaviours. In addition, sexual communication with peers were found to be more varied, frequent, explicit and comfortable than communication with parents in several studies (Bleakley et al. 2009; Lefkowitz & Espinosa-Hernandez 2007; Trinh et al. 2014). Therefore, peer groups of adolescents may inhibit or promote parent-adolescent communication about sexuality. Media tends to stimulate parent-adolescent communication about sexuality and provide the context of sexual conversations due to its coverage of adolescent sexual behaviour and the related outcomes such as HIV and unwanted pregnancy (Trinh, J et al. 2009; Kim 2009).

In China, studies showed that parent-adolescent communication about sexuality was infrequent (Liu, WL et al. 2011; Zhang, LY et al. 2007; Zhang, LY, Shah & Baldwin 2006). However, the reason for the limited communication was not explored in these studies. An investigation by Zhang, LY et al. (2007) used survey questionnaires to explore whether adolescents (aged 15-19) had discussed sexual-related issues with their father/mother, and found that 31% of the respondents reported communicating about sexual matters (either 'often' or 'occasionally') with their mother, while only 17% talked with their father. However, this study did not clarify any specific sexual issues which may result in adolescents' having a wide range of interpretations of sexuality, potentially leading to inaccurate measurement of their responses.

The topics of discussion have been identified as factors that influence the frequency of communication depending on the nature and sensitivity of the topics (Ogle, Glasier & Riley 2008). The content of communication represents the messages exchanged between parents and adolescents, and is one of the key components of the communication process, as illustrated below.

2.5.3 Topics of sexuality communication

Among the studies about parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in which the topics of discussion were explored, wide variation existed in relation to the scope and nature of the topics as well as the extent or frequency of the topics being discussed. Most studies emphasised sexuality in the wider sense by using a survey approach in which a list of sexual topics were presented to examine the content and extent of the communication (Beckett et al. 2010; Eisenberg et al. 2008; Martino et al. 2008; Schouten et al. 2007). For example, Schouten et al. (2007) designed a questionnaire for 481 high school students (aged 15-17) to explore self-reported topics covered in family communication in the Netherlands. This study found that 'choice of partner', 'decisions about whether to have sex or not', 'contraceptives', 'unwanted sex', and 'body changes during puberty' were talked about significantly more than 'STIs', 'sex before marriage' and 'family values'. However, in another study conducted in Edinburgh among 575 parents and 317 adolescents (aged 13-15), 'boyfriend/girlfriend' was reported as the most comfortable topic, while 'sexual intercourse' was the least comfortable (Ogle, Glasier & Riley 2008). Similarly, among Nigerian mothers and their adolescent daughters (aged 11-19), marriage, menstruation, courtship, premarital sex, and STIs were more likely to be discussed than contraception and other reproductive issues (Iliyasu et al. 2012). This difference may be due to socio-cultural norms in these countries, in that the Netherlands is considered to be more open about sexuality, and has implemented a comprehensive system of sex education (Dodge et al. 2005).

In addition to the relatively broader sexual topics being examined in the above studies, some studies focused on several specific topics, such as contraception, family planning, and abortion (Akers et al. 2010; Sisco et al. 2014). Others discussed abstinence, puberty, physical development, reproduction, birth (Miller, KS et al. 2009; Wilson, EK & Koo 2010), male/female physical development, sex in relationships, STIs, pregnancy prevention, and healthy decision-making (Beckett et al. 2010). The variation of sexual topics in these studies reflects the broader physical and physiological aspects of sexuality.

In a study of 185 randomly selected parent-youth dyads in Vietnam, Kaljee et al. (2011) found that parents were more likely to talk about relationship issues with their adolescents than pregnancy and birth control topics. In one large-scale survey on relationships, love, and sexuality among a representative sample of Filipino adolescents (aged 13-18, N=3044) , over 80% of the adolescents expressed their desire for more information on feelings or the

emotion-related aspects of sexuality, and for better communication with their parents on these issues (de Irala et al. 2009).

In China, puberty development was reported as the most often discussed topic between parents and adolescents (Zuo 2006), while birth control and STIs were less covered in parent-adolescent communication (Liu, W, Dennis & Edwards 2015). However, Zuo (2006) found that the topic of 'interaction with the opposite sex' (indirectly referring to romantic experience) interested adolescents the most. Chinese middle-school students (aged 12-15) reported that romantic experience was the topic they were most willing to talk about with their parents (Wu, J 2007).

Further research has been called for to understand how communication about sexual-related issues take place in order to enhance the effectiveness of intervention programs (Miller, KS et al. 1998). Considering that RE is the primary context for sexual activities (Auslander, Rosenthal & Blythe 2006), it is significant to understand parents' and adolescents' perceptions about RE.

2.5.4 Outcomes of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent sexual health

Parent-adolescent communication about sexuality has demonstrated mixed outcomes in relation to adolescent sexual health across a number of international studies. Several studies in Western countries have demonstrated a protective relationship between parent-youth communication and adolescent sexual behaviour (Aspy et al. 2007; Hutchinson et al. 2003; Kao & Manczak 2012; Karofsky, Zeng & Kosorok 2001). Based on longitudinal data from 473 adolescent students (aged 12-14) and their parents in Utah, Miller, BC et al. (1998) used structural equation modeling and found that parent-adolescent communication related positively to adolescent sexual abstinence values, which in turn was negatively associated with sexual intentions and behaviours. Subsequently, Karofsky et al. (2001) stated that greater levels of communication with parents predicted less sexual intercourse engagement among adolescents in a 10-year longitudinal study in one American city. Similar protective influences of parental communication were found in a large-scale survey of 1,083 adolescents aged 13-17 (Aspy et al. 2007). This study found that parents have the opportunity and ability to influence their adolescents' sexual decisions through communication. Specifically, more parental communication and instruction increased the likelihood of adolescent sexual abstinence, and safer sexual practice for sexually-active adolescents (e.g., using contraception, having less sexual partners) (Aspy et al. 2007). A review of the literature from 1980 to 2007

by Commendador (2010) came to the conclusion that parental communication had a positive impact on adolescent sexual decision-making.

Some studies, however, found parental communication did not play a protective role. Somers and Paulson (2000) found that greater parental communication was linked to more sexual behaviours among 14-18 year old adolescents in the USA. Deptula, Henry and Schoeny (2010) found that parent reports of communication about the risks of sexual activity were negatively associated with condom use and greater likelihood of sexual initiation through a secondary analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in the United States. Nonetheless, the authors indicated that these data did not include information about the style and specific content of the communication, which was an important part of the communication but could not be examined to capture a more comprehensive understanding about its effect on adolescent sexuality. The above mixed findings about the association between parental sexual communication and adolescent sexual health may be attributed to differences in sampling, study design, and response bias among these quantitative studies. There is some evidence that parent-adolescent communication can mitigate the negative influences of sexually-active peers (Fasula & Miller 2006). Parental communication has also been found to be associated with adolescents' discussions about sexual risks and condom use with their partners (Hicks, McRee & Eisenberg 2013; Hutchinson & Montgomery 2007). Postive parent-adolescent communication about sexuality has been found to facilitate adolescents to talk to health providers about sensitive sexual issues by reducing the associated shame, embarassment, and anxiety (Romo, Cruz & Neilands 2011). From this point of view, parental communication may advance adolescent health service-seeking behaviour.

In China, similar mixed findings were reported regarding the outcome of parent-adolescent communication about sexuality (Wang, Z, Zhao & Lei 2007; Zhang, LY et al. 2007). One study analysed the correlation between parental sexual communication style and adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviours, by using data from 847 high-school students' reports (Wang, Z, Zhao & Lei 2007). By using structural equation modelling, this study showed that greater openness in parental communication predicted less adolescent sexual behaviours and adolescents' disapproval of peer sexual behaviours. However, another study found no association at all between parental communication about sexuality and sexual initiation among unmarried adolescents aged 15-19 in China (Zhang, LY et al. 2007). In this study, the timing of communication before or after adolescent sexual initiation was unknown, and thus may have influenced the result. Wang, Z et al. (2007) found that communication with parents

about sexuality was associated with premarital sex among a group of young people (aged 15-24). However, causation could not be established in this cross-sectional study in that over one-third of the sample had already engaged in sexual activities (e.g., kissing and fondling), and 18% in sexual intercourse, that may have preceded communication with their parents. Given that longitudinal studies are rare, the outcome of parent-adolescent communication regarding adolescent sexual health in China remains indecisive.

2.6 Discussion

Adolescent romantic experience has been recognised as a normal part of adolescent development and as part of adolescent sexuality. The literature has explored the factors influencing adolescent sexual health in which school sex education and parental involvement play a role. School sex education in China has been found to provide only limited sexual knowledge for adolescents. In relation to parent-adolescent communication about sexuality, a variety of topics have been identified, while the effectiveness of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent sexual health was found to be inconclusive. However, a large body of evidence supports the beneficial effects of parental communication about sexuality in which the amount and quality of the communication play an important part. Notably, most of the studies examining the effects of communication are quantitative with predetermined variables that primarily measured the outcomes of adolescent sexual behaviour. The subjective outcomes may however be broader than these predetermined variables, which entails further qualitative exploration.

Through reviewing the literature, the following knowledge gaps have been identified. Firstly, most studies conducted in this area are based on quantitative designs, relying on respondents' self-reporting to obtain information about parent-adolescent communication. Much of the qualitative research has been conducted in the Western context. Most of the available studies in China have discussed parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in the context of larger studies, with only a few closed-ended questions as items of measurement. While these studies often reported infrequent communication about sexuality in Chinese families, they did not investigate how, what, and why communication takes place (or not) between parents and adolescents. Qualitative research will provide greater insight into this research topic in China.

Secondly, adolescent romantic experience (RE) is a critical component of adolescent sexuality that involves a range of sexual feelings and/or activities. It has been highlighted that helping adolescents to build healthy romantic relationships and reduce risky behaviours is important

through obtaining more knowledge about adolescents' opinions of relationships, love, and sexuality. The existing research indicates that adolescents express a strong desire for information and communication with their parents about feelings or the emotion-related aspects of romantic relationships. Romantic experience is prevalent among adolescents and may be a comfortable topic of discussion between parents and adolescents because it is not as straightforward as the issue of sex in China. Therefore, based on adolescents' interest in the topic of RE and its relatively less sensitive nature, adolescent RE may be a good starting point of conversations between parents and adolescents in addressing adolescent sexual health. In the Chinese context, specific research on parent-adolescent communication about sexuality, including romantic experience, is comparatively rare, and is an area worthy of further study.

Thirdly, communication is a two-way process involving the sending and receiving of messages. Most existing studies used either parents or adolescents as informants to illustrate an understanding of this topic. Involving both parents and adolescents will make both voices recognised and then set a basis for identifying the issues embedded between them. Particularly, in Chinese studies, adolescents have not been provided with enough opportunities to express their understandings of RE and sexuality. Acknowledging adolescents' voices through understanding their perspectives or concerns is crucial to ensuring that relevant messages or interventions can be targeted and well-focused. In addition, the research has more frequently targeted college-age rather than younger adolescents to explore their experiences of communicating with their parents. Investigations have indicated that adolescents start to have RE, or even engage in sexual activities, in middle-school, and also that younger adolescents tend to have greater receptivity to parental discussions. Therefore, a study on high-school students who are in the middle- or late-adolescent stage and their parents could explore their current perceptions about, and experiences of, RE and the associated communication.

In short, in the Chinese context, there has been a lack of deep exploration about how parents and adolescents perceive adolescent romantic experience and how they communicate about this. In order to engage parents in the promotion of adolescents' sexual well-being, a more thorough understanding of both their respective perceptions and communication about RE is essential.

2.7 Summary

In this literature review, adolescent romantic experience was firstly illustrated through its development, effects, and links with sexuality. Subsequently, factors influencing adolescent sexuality and sexual health were discussed under the ecological framework, in which the family and parents were identified as being important in the micro-system in terms of influencing adolescent sexual health. Strategies for adolescent health promotion were explored, including a discussion of the parents' role in adolescent sexuality. Parent-adolescent communication about sexuality was identified as one approach to promote adolescent sexual health. Knowledge gaps were identified through a review of the literature around parent-adolescent communication about sexuality, both internationally and in China. Based on these knowledge gaps, an exploration of parent-adolescent communication about sexuality, including adolescent romantic experience in the Chinese context, was proposed as the research problem. The following chapter will present the methodology and methods used to collect and analyse the data to explore this research problem.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

3.1 Introduction

A qualitative paradigm was used to achieve the overarching research purpose of exploring the subjective experience and perspectives of parents and adolescents about adolescent romantic experience (RE), as well as their communication about RE. Relativism and interpretivism were adopted as the ontological and epistemological stances underpinning this qualitative study. Social constructionism and interpretive interactionism were chosen as the methodological foundations based on the concordance between their underlying tenets and the aim of the study. Informed by these philosophical orientations, in-depth interviews were employed as the method of data collection, and were conducted with a group of adolescents (aged 15-18) who were at high school, and their parents in urban North-Eastern China. The data were analysed thematically through the social constructionist and interpretive interactionism lenses. This chapter will describe the process of participant recruitment, the data collection and analysis processes, and the strategies to improve the rigour of the study.

3.2 Relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology

Ontology and epistemology offer the basic lens of how to see the nature and relevance of knowledge (Creswell 2013). Therefore, ontological and epistemological positions underpin the way in which research is undertaken (Liamputtong 2013). Ontology refers to the question of the nature of truth and reality (Creswell 2013). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define 'reality' as the existence of what is real in the natural or social worlds. Realism and relativism are the two categories of ontology (Bilgrami 2002). The adoption of a realist position means belief in a single reality, and quantitative research holds that this single reality is objective and can be measured. By contrast, relativist researchers using qualitative methods believe that there are multiple realities (Creswell 2013). This study aims to explore the multiple realities of parents' and adolescents' understandings of adolescent romantic experience (RE) and their communication related to RE. Both parents and adolescents have their own various understandings and beliefs about adolescent RE and communication, therefore, relativism was adopted as the ontological position for this research.

Epistemology is concerned with how knowledge/reality is owned, obtained, and used (Liamputtong 2013, p, 10). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) summarised five major epistemological paradigms to explain the nature of knowledge and how knowledge can be

understood, or ‘become known’. These are *positivism, post-postivism, critical, constructivism/interpretivism, and participatory* approaches. Constructivism is also referred to as a form of interpretivism (Bryman 2012).

Constructivism embraces a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln 2011). In constructivism, knowledge is subjective, constructed, and multiple in nature, in which different individuals experience a phenomenon in different ways (Grbich 2013). Green and Thorogood (2009) stated that these multiple realities are socially constructed by individuals and can be interpreted by the researcher. The research situated within this constructivist paradigm focuses on “exploration of the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences in the world in which they live, and how the contexts of events and situations or the wider social environments have impacted on constructed meanings” (Grbich 2013, p, 7). This study seeks to obtain multiple perspectives on RE and related communication from Chinse parents and adolescents through the interpretation of the researcher. As discussed in Chapter Two, these perspectives are shaped by the social world in which parents and adolescents are situated. For this reason, constructivism serves as the epistemological foundation for this qualitative study.

In addition, constructivism is considered to be a subjective process due to the active involvement of the researcher in the conduct of the research and interpretation of the meanings (Grbich 2013; Liamputtong 2013). Therefore, the researcher needs to acknowledge their own personal subjectivity, including their beliefs, values, and emotions in the process of researching the realities and experiences of other people (Liamputtong 2013). The researcher has illustrated her own beliefs and values about adolescent romantic experience and communication with the parents in the preface, so as to recognise her own subjective involvement in the data collection and interpretation, such as influencing the way she represented the information provided by the participants.

3.3 Methodological frameworks

The purpose of this study is to understand how parents and adolescents make sense of adolescent RE, as well as their communication about it. Using relativism and constructivism as the ontological and epistemological positions indicates a need for embracing a qualitative approach that enables people to articulate the meanings of their realities. Qualitative research emphasises “the qualities of entities, processes, and meanings that are not experimentally-examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency ” (Denzin &

Lincoln 2011, p8). These meanings and interpretations are based on individuals' subjective feelings and experiences in qualitative inquiry (Liamputtong 2013). A methodological framework in which qualitative research is situated directs the researcher to interpret data sensitively and with insight (Liamputtong 2009). Social constructionism and interpretive interactionism have been chosen as the methodological frameworks for this study, the reasons for which are detailed below.

3.3.1 Social constructionism

The phrase *social construction* typically refers to a tradition of scholarship that traces the origin of knowledge, meaning, or understanding to human relationships (Gergen & Gergen 2007). Burr (2003, pp. 2-5) stated that there are four basic assumptions that underpin social constructionism: (1) A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge; (2) The historical and cultural specificity of knowledge; (3) Knowledge is sustained through social processes; and (4) Knowledge and social action go together.

Social constructionism suggests a critical stance toward assumptions about the world, and being suspicious of realist claims, which is in line with the relativist ontological beliefs of multiple realities. Knowledge is historically and culturally relative, as ways of understanding depend on the particular social arrangement in the culture at a specific time (Burr 2003). For this reason, the sociocultural and historical context in which individuals are located sets the foundations for the understanding of a phenomenon. According to social constructionism, knowledge or meaning is constructed rather than created, through normal interactions between people and their everyday worlds in the course of social life (Crotty 1998). Human relationships, or social interaction, serves as the source of social construction (Gergen & Gergen 2007).

In the present study, an ecological approach is used to make sense of the social constructions of adolescent RE and parent-adolescent communication about it, because both parents and adolescents are situated in, and interact with, the ecological system (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2007). At the microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, the interaction between parents and adolescents would influence how both construct adolescent RE and their communication about it (Deptula, Henry & Schoeny 2010). In addition to family, For adolescents, and the family, school is an important socialisation environment for adolescent students where they interact with peers and teachers (Thomas & Weng 2008). Interaction in the school setting shapes adolescents' construction of RE and

sexuality as well as their communication with their parents (Grossman et al. 2013; Shtarkshall, Santelli & Hirsch 2007). Within the exosystem, the mass media has been a pervasive source of interaction beyond the family and the school for adolescents that influences their romantic and sexual development (Bleakley, Hennessy & Fishbein 2011; L'Engle, Brown & Kenneavy 2006). Further, family and school, as part of the microsystem, are embedded in the broader macrosystem in which culture, history, and political discourse play a significant role in how parents and adolescents make sense of adolescent RE and the parent-adolescent interaction (Gao, E et al. 2012; Hutchinson & Montgomery 2007). Culture exerts a strong influence on people's attitudes towards love and sex (Thigpen & Fortenberry 2009), and thus sexuality is a socially-constructed phenomenon (Huang, Y et al. 2009; Wight et al. 2006). The particular social and economic contexts of time and place also shape parenting ideologies and practices (Way et al. 2013). Therefore, for adolescents and parents, social interaction is complicated and functions at both the micro- and macro-levels, and this needs to be considered during data collection and interpretation.

Furthermore, from a social constructionist perspective, each construction of knowledge brings with it some kind of action from human beings. During the process of construction, language is performative in the construction of knowledge and practices which social interaction is built upon, and thus, can have practical consequences for people resulting in possible change and action (Burr 2003). This viewpoint offers implications for the present study, in that using particular language in parent-adolescent communication could produce practical impacts, such as influencing adolescents' sexuality development and sexual health practice. For this reason, parent-adolescent communication about adolescent RE is a key part of this study, and the outcomes of the communication constitute one part of the perceptions of parents and adolescents in the data collection and analysis process.

In addition, the construction of the world is bound up with power relations that have implications for acceptable behaviours or ways of interacting (Burr 2003). In the present study, the power relations embedded in the parent-adolescent relationship may influence how they understand RE and undertake RE-related communication. In addition, the power relations between the researcher and the participants may also shape the ways in which the participants present their constructions of adolescent RE and the related communication. An understanding of the power relations prompted the researcher to remain reflexive during the research process. Overall, the four tenets embedded in social constructionism offer a useful theoretical perspective to address the intersection of adolescent romantic experience, parent-

adolescent communication, and culture within the contemporary Chinese context. In particular, the historical, social, and cultural contexts will be considered in relation to how they influence current parents and adolescents in constructing adolescent RE and the associated communication. Interpretive interactionism offers another lens for interpreting the social constructions from an interactive perspective.

3.3.2 Interpretive interactionism

Interpretive interactionism is a synthesised and multi-perspective qualitative research approach, which is suited to health care research, and fits with the philosophies of nursing and medicine (Mohr 1997). Denzin (1989, 2001) used symbolic interactionism as the epistemological foundation for the development of interpretive interactionism (Sundin & Fahy 2008). The tenets of symbolic interactionism are first presented below before illustrating those of interpretive interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism is concerned with the "subjective meanings individuals attribute to their activities and environment" (Flick 2006, p66). Blumer (1969) illustrated three basic interactionist premises underpinning symbolic interactionism, including human action toward things based on their meanings; meanings being generated from social interaction among individuals; and meaning being assigned and modified through an interpretive process (p. 2).

Symbolic interactionism is grounded in individuals' understandings of everyday life, and the meanings they assign to their actions (Mohr 1997). Specifically, individuals interpret the world in which they live through the use of symbols (e.g., language) in the process of interaction and then act upon it, rather than responding directly to things (Benzies & Allen 2001; Burbank & Martins 2009). According to Blumer (1969), meanings are learned by human beings in the process of social interaction with one's self and other people. As shown in the ecological model, the interpretive process is ever-changing as individuals and society are dynamic, and social context constrains behaviour (Benzies & Allen 2001). In symbolic interactionism, the process and change that happens in the personal and social worlds are emphasised more than social structure (Benzies & Allen 2001; Sundin & Fahy 2008). Therefore, researchers in this tradition are not only concerned about understanding the individuals' points of view, but they also focus on understanding the processes by which individuals develop interpretations and actions in a particular context (Benzies & Allen 2001). These insights from symbolic interactionism highlight the importance of understanding adolescents' own constructions of the meanings of their romantic experience (RE), which are

shaped by their interactions with people around them, including parents, peers, and others in wider society, as indicated by the ecological system. The constructed meanings of RE by adolescents from a variety of sources in turn shape their actions upon it. Simultaneously, parents and adolescents interpret the meaning of communication about adolescent RE during their interactions, and this interpretation may change over time. The meanings they attribute to the communication influence their communicative actions. As a result, this study explores the meanings of adolescent RE as well the meanings inherent within the related communication from both the parents and the adolescents in the context of interaction.

Based on symbolic interactionism, Denzin (1989, 2001) developed interpretive interactionism by drawing upon works from a number of different disciplines and on the tenets of the traditional symbolic interactionist approach, hermeneutics, feminist social theory, and cultural studies. Due to the integrative feature of interpretive interactionism, Volker (2003) asserted that it is an interactive and hermeneutic approach to capture the voices, emotions, and actions attached to everyday experiences. Interpretive interactionism attempts to study a phenomenon from the point of view of the persons being studied, with an emphasis on placing the whole person in a historical/ sociocultural and biological context (Mohr 1997; Volker 2003). This point stresses the importance of connecting the individual's problems to the larger social and public context.

However, symbolic interactionism has been criticised by post-structuralists in relation to its humanist beliefs about human subjects being at the centre of meaning-making, which entails that the subject is free to make choices (Sundin & Fahy 2008). In contrast, the post-structuralists see the subject as being socially-constructed and limited by the subject positions provided to her/him through the culture (Grosz 2002). This weakness of symbolic interactionism can be complemented by social constructionism which offers the researcher's insights in bringing more awareness of the complexity, context, history, and power relations that are operating in the research problem and the research process.

Benzies and Allen (2001) argued that symbolic interactionists have addressed the connection between individual behaviour and micro- and macro-level social structures, whereas, Burbank and Martins (2009) argued that symbolic interactionism holds a micro-perspective and focuses on the individual level. Furthermore, it lacks the macro and societal foci, as it does not focus adequate attention on the social structure (Burbank & Martins 2009). In addition, the focus of symbolic interactionism on the nature of social interaction limits its ability to

fully understand human behaviour without other psychological and biological factors being considered (Benzies & Allen 2001), such as gender and adolescent developmental stages, which are considered in this study.

Similarly, Sundin and Fahy (2008) argued that Denzin's symbolic interactionism-based interpretive interactionism methodology does not address issues of power, and thus, remains a strictly interpretive paradigm. However, power relations are found in all individual interactions between people (Burbank & Martins 2009), such as the parents and adolescents in this study. For this reason, Burbank and Martins (2009) suggested using a critical perspective to address issues of power within social systems when using symbolic interactionism. Sundin and Fahy (2008) suggested updating Denzin's interpretive interactionism to a critical paradigm in order to demonstrate that social construction is a result of interactions and power relations. According to social constructionism, power relations exist in the process of the social construction of knowledge. In this aspect, social constructionism can supplement interpretive interactionism to improve its application in this study.

Consistent with Blumer's (1969) definition of meaning that is associated with the intentions and actions of a person, Denzin (2001) argued that meaning is interactional and interpretive, and that interpretation is the process of elaborating the meaning of an event or experience. Furthermore, interpretation builds on thick descriptions which give meaning to experiences. Mohr (1997) emphasised that the primary aim of interpretive interactionism is to elicit 'thick description' from the study participants and to develop 'thick interpretation'. Thick description is deemed to have the quality of being dense and richly detailed, and thus enables the contextualisation of participants' experiences by including environmental circumstances (Mohr 1997). Denzin (2001, p53) illustrated that thick description has the following features: (a) provides the context of an action, (b) presents the intentions and meanings underpinning the action, (c) tracks the evolution and development of the action, and (d) describes the action as a text that can be interpreted. Accordingly, in the findings chapters, where the data are presented and interpreted, a detailed description of adolescent RE and parent-adolescent communication will be provided to contextualise the experiences and perceptions of the participants.

Interpretive interactionism illustrates the key tenets of interpretation based on both symbolic interactionism and an interpretive approach. Despite its lack of an explicit critical approach, it can be seen as a method of elucidating and giving meaning to human interactional

experiences. Parent-adolescent communication about adolescent RE is an interactional experience for both parents and adolescents within society. From this viewpoint, interpretive interactionism is considered to be appropriate and useful for addressing the research questions about parent-adolescent communication around adolescent RE.

In addition, another benefit of using interpretive interactionism is that Denzin described the basic steps in the interpretive process (Denzin 2001) which assists in understanding the approach. In the first step of *framing the research question*, Denzin (2001) stated that the research question should be formulated through 'how' questions to reflect the experience of the research participants. The overall research question in the present study has been framed as how parents and adolescents perceive and communicate about adolescent romantic experience (RE). *Deconstruction* is the second phase and can be seen as being analogous to a review of the literature to examine how the phenomenon of interest has been studied in the existing literature (Mohr 1997). This phase has been conducted in this study through reviewing the literature in Chapter Two. The third phase of *capturing the phenomenon* involves the field research methods to elicit multiple instances or experiences from the informants. The phase of *bracketing and constructing the phenomenon* can be viewed as the process of coding and interpreting the data to identify its essential structures and features (Volker 2003). Data collection and analysis, constituting the *capturing, bracketing, and construction* phases, will be described in the latter sections of this chapter. The final phase of *contextualisation* refers to the locating of the phenomenon within the social and historical circumstances or context, as well as comparing and contrasting all the research data within this context and with the literature (Sundin & Fahy 2008). In this phase, a social constructionist lens will be used to contextualise the research findings and to demonstrate how individual experiences are shaped by context in the subsequent findings chapters.

To summarise, social constructionism and interpretive interactionism work together to underpin the methodology of this study. As implied by these two methodological frameworks, the meanings of adolescent romantic experience and related parent-adolescent communication shape the subsequent actions within the Chinese sociocultural context. The elicitation of the meanings calls for the voices of both the parents and the adolescents who interact in their communicative process.

3.4 Data collection process

In relation to interpretive interactionism, Denzin (2001) suggested that the open-ended interview is a strategy used to obtain meaning from participants. He also advised starting from a set of questions or a general list of information, and altering the order or the phrasing of the questions as necessary to fit each individual being interviewed. This suggestion indicates the value of using semi-structured in-depth interviews as the data collection method in this study, to achieve the aim of understanding adolescent romantic experience and the communication about it by both parents and adolescents. This section describes the in-depth interview methods, the research setting and participants, ethical considerations, and the interview process.

3.4.1 In-depth interview methods

Qualitative research enables a focus on the subjective experience of individuals within the setting of the social world, with the essence of exploring 'meaning and interpretation' from individual perspectives (Liamputtong 2009). In line with the research aims, qualitative interviews enable individuals to express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences, and therefore facilitate an understanding of the complexities of that experience (Liamputtong 2009).

In-depth interviews are widely employed in qualitative research, and are characterised by a one-on-one, face-to-face interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Bryman 2012; Liamputtong 2013). Beyond simple conversation, an in-depth interview aims to elicit fruitful information from the research participants' perspectives on a specific topic, which enables the researcher to obtain a greater depth of self-expression by the participant than other interviewing methods such as focus groups (Serry & Liamputtong 2010). Meanwhile, in-depth interviews are used to engage interviewees in the conversation to express their understandings and interpretations, and thus are not limited to fixed questions. In this way, the researcher is able to see the world from the participants' points of view and make sense of the multiple meanings and interpretations of a specific action, occasion, location, or cultural practice (Liamputtong 2009).

As a form of in-depth interviewing, semi-structured interviews were used to enable the researcher to elicit information from an interview guide, whilst simultaneously facilitating the participants to elaborate upon their responses (Liamputtong 2013; Serry & Liamputtong 2010). With an interview guide, the researcher can ask probing questions to encourage the

participants to give their accounts in greater detail and simultaneously stay focused on the research topic (Starks & Trinidad 2007). Therefore, the in-depth, semi-structured interview was employed as the method of data collection given its flexibility and open-ended characteristics.

3.4.1.1 Interview guide

Adopting in-depth interviews as the research method entails developing an interview guide for the interviews. The research questions informed the development of the interview guide for this study. The interview guide consisted of a series of open-ended questions organised around how adolescents and parents perceive adolescent RE, and how they communicate about this topic. As adolescents and parents are the target participants of the interviews and are two distinct groups, different interview guides were prepared for each group, with slight variations in the wording of the questions. For example, the adolescents were asked: *Could you please tell me what romantic experience means for you? To whom would you talk about adolescent romantic experience? Can you tell me if you have talked to your parents or your parents have talked to you about this topic, and what was it like?* For the parents, the questions included: *Could you please tell me about your understanding of adolescent romantic experience? Have you ever considered talking with your child about adolescent romantic experience? (When, what and how, why?).* The specific interview questions are listed in Appendices 1A & 1B.

3.4.1.2 Pilot interview

Pilot interviews assist with the modification of the interview questions and enable the researcher to become familiar with the questions, as well as with the interview process (Braun & Clarke 2013). Prior to entering the field in this study, pilot interviews were conducted with adolescents and parents to better equip the researcher with the knowledge and skills needed to elicit rich information from the participants.

Before conducting the fieldwork in China, the interview guides were pilot-tested on three adolescents (an Australian boy and a girl, and one Chinese girl) and two Chinese mothers (one has a boy and one has a girl) living in Australia. The two interviews with the Australian adolescents were conducted in English, and the other three in Chinese. These pilot interviews were transcribed and the Chinese interview transcripts were translated into English. The supervisors of the researcher reviewed these transcripts and provided comments in relation to techniques for further probing to gain more in-depth information from the participants. For example, the suggestions included avoiding leading/dichotomous questions, asking

participants' about actual experiences/ events, and a greater focus on the related context. The preliminary interview guides were finalised after the pilot interviews by adding extra questions. These strategies enabled the researcher to improve her interviewing skills in order to optimise the participants' engagement during the formal interviews in China.

Zeng et al. (2011) indicated that sexuality is still a sensitive topic in China and public discussion on the topic is somewhat restrained. For adolescents, romantic experience is a personal question that they may not be willing to talk about with strangers. The sensitivity of this research topic concerned the researcher in terms of the engagement of the participants in the interviews. Through the pilot interviews, both the adolescents and parents talked quite openly about RE and sexuality without much embarrassment or discomfort and this reassured the researcher. In other words, when the researcher initiated questions with appropriate wording, the pilot participants spoke about RE and sexuality comfortably. The comfort these pilot participants showed could be associated with their being Australian, or being acculturated to Australian ways of being. Through the pilot interviews, the researcher became familiar with the interview questions and could adjust the sequence of the questions responsively and flexibly.

The data from the pilot interviews were not included in the full analysis, as these participants are a different cultural group from those living in China. The pilot interviews were conducted as practice to examine the feasibility, acceptability, and comprehensibility of the interview guides that would be used for interviewing parents and adolescents in China.

3.4.2 Research setting and participants

Adolescents in this study were aged 15-18 years and were studying in two high schools in the city of Qingdao located in Shandong Province of China. This group of adolescent students were in the middle to late adolescent stage (Auslander, Rosenthal & Blythe 2006). The parents were then recruited through the high schools in which their adolescents were studying.

3.4.2.1 The research site

Qingdao is a city in eastern Shandong province on the east coast of China (see **Figure 1**). Qingdao is a medium-sized city with a population of over 9 million in 2014, with approximately 4.8 million living in the urban and suburban areas (*Qingdao Municipal Overview* 2015). The city is administered at the sub-provincial level due to its rapid socioeconomic development, and its cultural and international importance for China. Qingdao was one of the first coastal cities to open to the outside world since the economic reforms in

the early 1980s, and is an important trading port for the country. Qingdao is one of the economic centres of China and is flourishing with foreign investment and international collaboration and trade (*Qingdao Municipal Overview* 2015).

Figure 1. Map of China with the city of Qingdao circled in red
(Source: http://web2.ph.utexas.edu/~senyang/images/map.bmp)

Qingdao follows the national nine-year compulsory education program in primary and secondary schools (*Law on Nine-Year Compulsory Education* 2006). Given that most adolescents receive education at school, it was considered to be fairly straightforward to recruit adolescents and parents from the school setting. In order to gain perceptions from a wider diversity of people, two schools were considered to increase the variation of the sample. Given that people living in urban and suburban areas are socioeconomically disparate, two high schools, from urban and suburban districts[6] were accessed. Through a full search for information concerning public schools in Qingdao from the local website of the Bureau of Education (http://www.qdedu.gov.cn/qdedu/index.html), a list of possible schools was

[6] Urban districts are located in the centre of the city, while suburban districts surround the urban areas, located outside the centre and/or outskirts of the city.

screened and approached based on the following criteria: (1) being a public high school; (2) located in an urban or suburban district; (3) and which consented to participate in the study.

The researcher contacted potential high schools and discussed the possibility of conducting qualitative research with students and their parents with the school administrators. Initially, the researcher spoke to the school principals on the telephone and explained the research briefly. If the principal was interested in the research, a research proposal with detailed interview questions was sent to them for further review. Four schools were contacted. The authorities of two schools expressed concern about the sensitivity of the topic and the response of adolescent students and parents that could influence the school management, and therefore these schools refused to be involved in this study. Finally, the principals of two schools (School A and School B) approved the research proposal and permitted the researcher to recruit participants from these schools. The two schools were willing to provide support and assistance if required. The general characteristics of these two schools are briefly described below.

School A and B are public schools under the administration of the local bureau of education with medium academic rankings[7]. The two schools are mixed-gender educational settings where cross-gender encounters are common and offer three years of education from Grade 10 to Grade 12. In school A, there are 12 classes in each grade, with 40 students in each class, while in school B, there are eight classes in each grade, with 40 students in each class. Grade 10 and 11 students in both schools are in school from 8:30am till 5:30pm on weekdays. Students in Grade 12 are in school for six days per week except Sunday. At midday, students have a one-hour nap in the classroom after eating their lunch. In this study, both principals suggested limiting recruitment to students in Grades 10 and 11, rather than involving Grade 12 students who were in the last semester of school and were concentrating on preparing for the national college entrance exam. The researcher complied with this request, and thus, only involved Grades 10 and 11 students in the recruitment process.

Geographically, School A is located in the central business district in Qingdao with shopping malls, restaurants, pharmacies, hotels, and entertainment centres nearby. School B is situated in a quiet location surrounded by a few small shops. In addition, both schools work closely with the parents of the students, in the form of seeking advice from parents and providing

[7] The ranking mainly uses levels of achievement, such as college acceptance rates and competition performance as the major indicators.

them with support. This form of connection indicates a greater possibility of recruiting parents from these schools. Moreover, both schools have a consultation room on campus which provides psychological consultation services for students. This service was able to be used in the case of potential discomfort of the participants during the interviews. In addition, sometimes the consulting room was used as an interview venue for the adolescents on the basis of it being a quiet and private space. To be noted, the involvement of two schools was to add variation in the sample of adolescents and parents, rather than to analyse the data by location.

3.4.2.2 Methods of recruiting participants

Convenience sampling was used to recruit the participants in the two schools. After gaining ethics approval to proceed, the recruitment process was conducted concurrently in Schools A and B. Advertisements including a description of the project were used to recruit the participants (see Appendices 2A and 2B). The schools were willing to provide support and assistance to distribute the advertisements to students in Grades 10 and 11 in two randomly selected classes in each grade of each high school. In response to the recruiting advertisement, students and parents were asked to contact the researcher directly via telephone or email to indicate their willingness to participate. This strategy was used to avoid potential coercion that the participants may have felt from the schools, and also, to ensure anonymous participation.

To facilitate recruitment, the researcher went to the selected classes to provide a self-introduction and to explain the study through a presentation with slides, with an emphasis on the participation process and the ethical principles. This strategy assured the adolescents of their voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the non-judgement of their opinions. The presentation also provided the students with an opportunity to ask questions and to become familiar with the researcher. The students were asked to take the parental recruitment advertisement home to their parents.

After the presentation, the students indicated their willingness to participate on site or by sending a message to the researcher. The researcher then distributed the Letter of Introduction (see Appendix 3A), Information Sheet (see Appendix 4A), Consent Form (see Appendix 5) and Parental Consent From (see Appendix 6) for review. In addition, the researcher contacted the potential participants to arrange a date/time and location for the interview. Compared with the adolescents, fewer parents responded to the recruiting advertisement in the initial stages. The researcher asked the adolescent participants about whether their parents would be

interested in participating in the research. Most of the adolescent participants said that their parents were busy and it was difficult to schedule a time for an interview. Although the parents themselves consented to their child's participation, it seemed that time was their major concern. Therefore, the researcher turned to the school principals for advice, and they suggested approaching parents through the parent-school committee who had contact with the parents of the students. This strategy worked well and more parents responded to the recruitment drive. At the same time, a number of school teachers with adolescents aged 15-18 volunteered to participate in the interview. Parents who indicated a willingness to participate received the Letter of Introduction (see Appendix 3B), Information Sheet (see Appendix 4B), and Consent Form (see Appendix 5) for review. It must be noted that the adolescent and parent participants were not necessarily dyadic given that they were recruited through different channels.

3.4.3 Ethical considerations

The research design was approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 7). As there is no specific ethics board in the two high schools involved, the principals of both schools reviewed the research proposal together with the relevant ethics documents (in Chinese, e.g., the letter of introduction, information sheet, and consent form, see Appendices 1-6). After further discussion and clarification about the details of the project, the principals granted permission to collect data in their school settings (see Appendices 8A and 8B).

To conduct the research in an ethically sound way, the principles of merit and integrity, justice, beneficence, and respect were followed throughout the process of research design and data collection (NHMRC 2007). Specifically, precautions and procedures were made to ensure that all participants took part in the research in a voluntary way by explicitly explaining the research process to them. All the potential participants were provided with a Letter of Introduction (see Appendices 3A and 3B) and an Information Sheet (see Appendices 4A and 4B), outlining the study process and explaining that participation was entirely voluntary and that their confidentiality and anonymity would be protected (NHMRC 2007). For example, pseudonyms were used during the interview, the coding process, and the presentation of the findings to ensure that individual participants could not be identified. All the interview tape recordings and transcripts were stored on a hard drive and protected with a password without any participant’s identifiable information. The hardcopies of the relevant documents, such as the participants’ demographic information and the signed consent forms

were kept in a locked filing cabinet in a secure location. In particular, the adolescent participants were assured that what they said during interviews would not be revealed to their parents, and the parent participants were informed about the same principle. These assurances were also repeated verbally by the researcher prior to each interview.

In addition to the above measures, written consent was asked of each participant (see Appendix 5). For adolescents under the age of 18, their parental consent was sought (see Appendix 6). Before each interview commenced, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and assured the confidentiality of the participants, and asked their enquiries. Meanwhile, the researcher indicated that an audio-recorder would be used for accurately recording the information they provided, while asking their permission. The researcher also emphasised that the participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty, and provided each participant with enough time to reconsider their involvement in the study.

The potential risks to the participants were identified and were expected to be psychological in nature, such as emotional distress potentially arising from thinking about their experiences. Arrangements were made to safeguard the interests and well-being of the participants (NHMRC 2007). For example, if some discomfort was identified, or felt, by the participants during the interview, the researcher would immediately ask the participant whether she/he needed a break or if they wished to stop the interview. The school counselling service was also available if required. With these precautions in place, the risks of the research were minimised.

3.4.4 The interview process

The interviews were conducted between February and April in 2013. This period fitted well with the school calendar because it was the beginning of a new semester in Chinese high schools, and thus, was chosen as the students were not as busy as they would be at the end of the semester when they would be preparing for exams. For the adolescents, the interviews were undertaken during their class break or on weekends in a place that they proposed and perceived to be convenient, private, and comfortable, such as the school consulting room, a public library, or a fast food outlet. For the parents, most of the interviews were conducted in their workplace or in a public area close to their workplace when they had a break from work. The participants speak Chinese as their native language, and the researcher is also a Chinese

speaker. Therefore, the interviews were conducted in Mandarin which is the official language of China. The detailed interview process is described below.

Promoting a welcoming, non-threatening, and non-hierarchical interview atmosphere can enhance a sense of rapport, and facilitate the sharing of participants' personal experiences and beliefs (Karnieli-Miller, Strier & Pessach 2009). Before the interview, warm-up activities such as an introduction and an informal chat were conducted to assist the participants to feel comfortable with the researcher and to establish rapport. The researcher introduced herself to the participants as a full-time doctoral student studying abroad who had no position or relationship with the schools. The researcher consulted school staff about how to best approach students based on their experience in the school environment. They suggested that a person who was seen as being a non-authority figure would best facilitate the students in speaking more freely. Therefore, the researcher provided her student identity card and attempted to build an equal relationship with the adolescent participants. Meanwhile, the parents also regarded a student as not being 'an expert', and so were more willing to share their experiences and perceptions. Therefore, the student identity of the researcher served to facilitate the interviews.

During the interviews, the researcher asked the open questions that were listed in the interview guide, yet not strictly following the sequence in the guide, as suggested by Liamputtong (2009). During the course of the interview, the researcher actively listened to the participants and took notes in order to follow the responses with prompts when required (Bryman 2012). Probing and prompting techniques were employed to obtain rich and clear information from the participants, such as encouraging them to give examples, and asking 'what', 'why', and 'how' questions in order to encourage the participants to further elaborate upon, or to clarify their responses (Liamputtong 2009). If the participants did not understand the questions, or if the interview did not seem to be progressing well, the researcher would restate the question(s) later, or to change the way it was worded to elicit more information.

When the participants had responded to all the interview questions, they were asked if they had any information to add that was not covered during the interview, or if they had any more comments. They were also encouraged to talk about their feelings and to provide feedback about the interview, such as any discomfort they may have felt. None of the participants expressed discomfort during the interviews, and a number of them regarded the interview as being beneficial in a number of ways. For example, some of the comments from the

adolescents indicated that: *"This is the first time that I have totally expressed my views about adolescent romantic experience; I have never talked with others like this before, a feeling of being comfortable"* (Lin, female, aged 16); and *"I feel that my parents did well in communicating with me about adolescent romantic experience. I will communicate with my own child in future like my parents did"* (Xiao, female, aged 16). A number of parents indicated that the interviews raised their awareness about increasing their communication about sexuality with their adolescents: *"I will find more opportunity to talk with my daughter about sexuality as soon as possible"* (Hu, aged 45, a mother of a 17-year-old girl). The feedback indicates that the participants' were highly engaged with the interviews, and that the interview itself drew their attention to communication about sexuality in the family context. The interviews typically lasted between 40 and 100 minutes.

After the interviews, the participants were asked to complete a demographic information sheet. For the adolescents, the information included their age, gender, grade, family structure, and their parents' educational level and occupation (see Appendix 9A). For the parents, information about their age, gender, marital status, occupation, and their adolescents' age, gender, and grade were collected (see Appendix 9B). Some of the adolescents did not want to disclose their parents' information and did not fill in the relevant sections of the form.

During the interviews, no adolescents withdrew from the study, while three parents discontinued the interview because other issues emerged that they needed to deal with immediately. When the researcher contacted the three parents later for another appointment, they refused to continue, or had difficulty in making another time. The concept of data saturation, as proposed by Padgett (2008), was used as the criteria for deciding the number of participants during the data collection process. Specifically, the researcher took field notes during the interview and summarised the major viewpoints of the participant after each interview, in order to understand the amount and variability of the information provided by the participants. This practice was to ensure the depth and breadth of information was obtained to achieve sample adequacy which is regarded as a mean of data saturation for qualitative research (Bowen 2008; O'Reilly & Parker 2012). Finally, 38 adolescents and 27 parents in total were interviewed, until there was no new information arising from the last few interviews. The demographic information of the participants is summarised below.

3.4.5 Demographic information of participants

The age of the adolescent participants (N=38) ranged from 15 to 18 years, with a mean of

16.1 years. Most of the students in the sample were female (n=26, 68.4%) compared to males (n=12, 31.6%). More detailed information about the adolescents and their parents is listed in **Table 1.** The group of parents (N=27) were aged from 42 to 50 years, with a mean of 47.1 years, and consisted of 16 mothers and 11 fathers. More information about the parent participants and their adolescents is list in **Table 2**.

Table 1 Demographic information of adolescent participants

Item	Category	Adolescent (N=38) (%)
Gender	Female	26 (68.4%)
	Male	12 (31.6%)
Grade	Year 10	24 (63.2%)
	Year 11	14 (36.8%)
School	School A	28 (73.7%)
	School B	10 (26.3%)
Parents' marital status	Married	33 (86.8%)
	Divorced	5 (13.2%)
Mother's/Father's education	Not completion of high school	2/3 (5.4%/8.1%)
	Completion of high school or equivalent	15/14 (40.5%/37.8%)
	College or equivalent	11/7 (29.7%/18.9%)
	university bachelor degree or above	9/13 (24.3%/35.1%)
Mother's/Father's occupation	Unemployed	2/1 (5.4%/2.9%)
	Non-professional job	15/17 (40.5%/48.6%)
	Professional job	20/17 (54.1%/48.6%)

Table 2 Demographic information of parent participants

Item	Category	Parent (N=27) (%)
Gender	Female	16 (70.4%)
	Male	11 (29.6%)
Grade of their adolescents	Year 10	10 (37.0%)
	Year 11	17 (63.0%)
School of their adolescents	School A	15 (55.6%)
	School B	12 (44.4%)
Marital status	Married	27 (100%)
	Divorced	0
Education	Not completion of high school	0
	Completion of high school or equivalent	1 (3.7%)
	College or equivalent	6 (22.2%)
	university bachelor degree or above	20 (74.1%)
Occupation	Unemployed	0
	Non-professional job	10 (37.0%)
	Professional job	17 (63.0%)

The adolescents were asked about their parents' education level and occupation as an indicator of family socioeconomic status. The majority of their parents finished high school and worked in professional occupations, such as accounting and higher education. Most of the parent participants (74.1%) had a college degree, and five of them worked as teachers or administrators in the two high schools. All the parents were married and had a job, the majority of whom worked as professionals. Therefore, most of the adolescents and parents interviewed were from middle-class families.

It needs to be noted that the majority of the parents in this study were born in the 1970s, prior to the Chinese economic reforms that were initiated from the early 1980s, when the country was transformed from a planned economy to a socialist market economy and experienced rapid economic growth afterwards (Tisdell 2009). Therefore, the adolescent years of these parents were situated in the early stage of the socioeconomic transformation in China, which contrasts with the current context that their adolescents are experiencing. Adolescents from these middle-class families are privileged with resources for education, entertainment, and interactions with wider society, with more access to a diverse range of messages from various media as a result of the economic reforms and subsequent development (Chen, X & Chiu 2010; Li, L, King & Winter 2009).

Another important characteristic of the participants is that all the adolescents in the sample were born after the introduction of China's one-child policy in 1979 (Hesketh, Lu & Xing 2005). All the parent participants had one child. Among the 16 mothers, 13 had one adolescent boy, while three had one girl. Among the 11 fathers, six had one boy and five had one girl. Almost all the adolescent participants in this study were the only child in their family, except for two adolescent girls who had one sibling and were not subject to the one-child policy. One girl's family migrated to Qingdao City from a rural area, and thus, she had a younger sister[8], while the other girl had siblings living in the USA.

3.5 Method of data analysis

All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and then analysed with the assistance of the QSR NVivo (version 10) qualitative software package (QSR International 2012). The data were thematically analysed and interpreted through a social constructionist perspective. The NVivo program was used as a tool to assist the data management and analysis, particularly in terms of storing the transcripts and the sorting of codes. All the interview transcripts were imported in text format into NVivo and then coded electronically. In this study, the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, while the research findings were presented in English. As a result of this situation, language is an important issue to be considered in terms of transcription and translation, and is considered further below.

3.5.1 Language issues in data analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded in Mandarin, and were transcribed verbatim in Chinese by the researcher to represent the participants' words as close to the original as possible. The question of whether analysing the original Chinese transcripts, or translating these into English for subsequent analysis, requires further consideration in terms of accuracy of translation and the quality of data analysis.

An exploratory study by Twinn (1997) examined the influence of translation on the validity and reliability of qualitative data analysis. Using data from in-depth interviews with six Cantonese-speaking women, Twinn (1997) compared the analysis by two researchers of the translated English version of the data and the original Chinese data. She found that the major categories developed from the Chinese and the English data were essentially the same, despite differences existing in the texts and a few minor themes emerging in only one of the two

[8] In rural areas, a second child is allowed if the first child is a girl under the one-child policy (*The People's Republic of population and family planning law* 2001)

languages. Twinn (1997) believed that any differences that did emerge may have stemmed from the difference between the researchers (e.g., from different cultural backgrounds), rather than differences in the data. In addition, linguistic, socio-cultural, and methodological issues are involved in translating qualitative data into a target language, such as from Chinese to English (Xian 2008). The complexity of the translation of the Chinese data may compromise the quality of the original data, through the potential loss of meaning (Smith, Chen & Liu 2008). Twinn (1998) recommended undertaking data analysis in the language of the interviews, instead of that of the translated data. These studies provide implications for the current research in that analysing the data in Chinese was considered feasible.

In this study, the involvement of the researcher's supervisors was crucial in light of reviewing the approach to the coding, and in examining the validity of the data interpretations. In order to keep the supervisors informed of the quality of the raw data, four of the transcripts were translated into English and analysed, as it was not feasible to translate all the Chinese transcripts into English. Based on the fieldwork and the field notes, the researcher selected four information-rich transcripts (on average, 21 single-spaced pages after translation) that represented positive and negative communication cases from two parent and two adolescent participants. The selection was intended to provide a sample of the wide range of variation in the understandings and experiences among the participants. This strategy enabled the supervisors to contribute their critiques to the interpretive process, which assisted with the rigour of the study.

3.5.2 Transcribing and translation

The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim into Chinese characters after the field work had been completed. Transcribing is the initial stage of the data analysis process in which the researcher re-familiarises herself with the content of the interviews, while making sense of the data (Liamputtong 2013). During the transcription process, all the words and emotional expressions from the participants, including pauses, laughter, sighs, and stutters were kept, because they indicated how the participant felt about what they were saying at the time (Liamputtong 2009). However, all identifying information was changed to protect the anonymity of the participants. Where the names of participants do appear, they are in coded form through the use of pseudonyms. Occasionally, annotations were used to explain some of the terms or wording for clarity, such as words in square brackets [] and parenthesis ( ). In addition, parents and adolescents often used 'children' to refer to 'adolescents' or used both terms interchangeably during the interviews, indicating that 'adolescent' is a relatively new

term in China (Hu, Y et al. 2011). To reflect this cultural phenomenon, 'children' was kept in the quotation. However, 'adolescent' was used in the body of the thesis to represent the subject of this study.

The translation of the four selected transcripts was undertaken using a meaning-based literal translation strategy for achieving semantic and content equivalence, as suggested by Esposito (2001) and Twinn (1997). In addition to the researcher translating the transcripts, another independent translator was employed to translate the same transcripts to evaluate the accuracy of the translation made by the researcher. Comparing the two versions of the translated transcript from two translators is a strategy used to validate the translation in order to establish the trustworthiness of the study (Esposito 2001). Wong and Poon (2010) stated that the translators' experience, social position, and worldview affect the translation in a qualitative study. The translator's qualifications and characteristics were important in ensuring the credibility of the translation process.

In this study, the translator is a female who has lived in China for approximately 30 years with a Bachelor of Arts (History) degree. She is currently registered as a secondary school teacher in South Australia who specialises in the teaching of Mandarin Chinese with a Bachelor of Education degree obtained in Australia. She has been in Australia for seven years and teaches Mandarin to local students in the primary and secondary school systems. She is not a professional translator accredited by the translators' association; however, her familiarity with Chinese culture and her English proficiency enabled her to integrate the nuances of meaning in the language embedded in the Chinese context. In addition, her work involved adolescents at the high school stage, which enabled her to understand the group of adolescents. Therefore, she was considered to be eligible to produce valid translated data.

The researcher and the translator worked independently on the two transcripts. The three supervisors then reviewed the two versions of the two translated transcripts individually to compare and identify any discrepancies between the two versions. All the supervisors considered that the meanings in the two versions were very similar, with only minor differences in relation to vocabulary (e.g., synonyms) and grammar that did not influence meaning. Therefore, the supervisors believed that the researcher's translation was valid, and the researcher continued to translate the other two transcripts. A flow chart was developed to illustrate the process of transcribing, translating, and analysing the data (see **Figure 2** below).

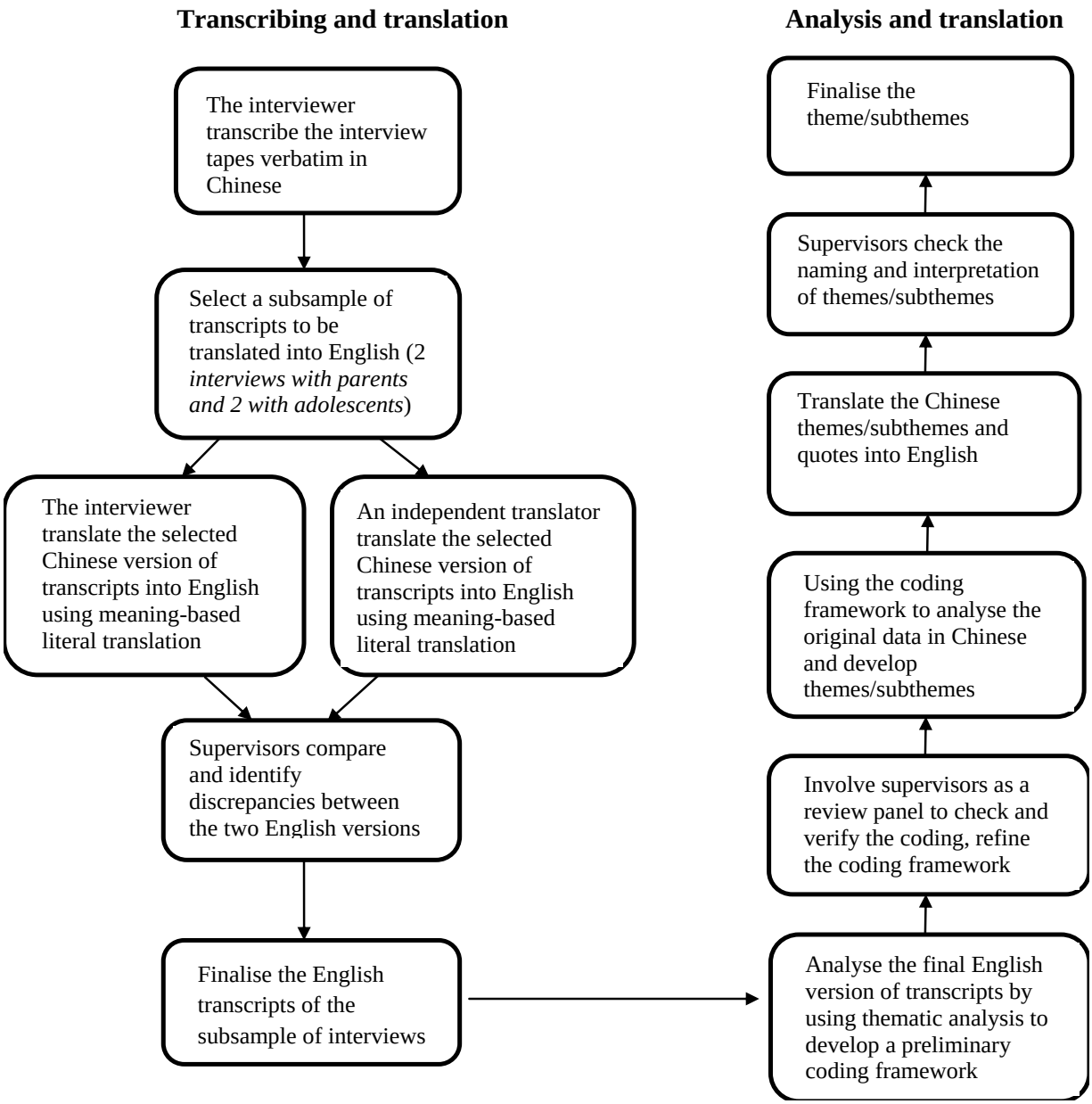

Figure 2. Process of transcribing, translating and analysing the interview data

3.5.3 Thematic analysis

As indicated by the methodology, thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data from the in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis is a method for "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p, 79). This type of analysis is an iterative process and includes the stages of transcribing and sorting the data, coding and categorising, and the building of themes (Braun & Clarke 2006; Holloway & Wheeler 2010). This process echoes the fourth and fifth steps in the interpretive process of interpretive

interactionism stated by Denzin (2001). The thematic analysis was conducted within the social constructionism and interpretive interactionism frameworks.

The process of data analysis was informed by the six-phase thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) through both a deductive and an inductive approach. Initially, the researcher remained open to coding meaningful segments, which was a data-driven inductive approach. After completing the initial coding, the researcher grouped the emerging nodes with reference to the research questions, which returned to a deductive approach. Therefore, the data analysis followed a pattern of an initial inductive approach and a subsequent deductive approach. During the process, memos were written to document the interpretation of, and thoughts about, each node as well as the reflections of the researcher, which were stored in the NVivo program. Firstly, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts to familiarise herself with the depth and breadth of the data, and to immerse herself in the data. Transcription of the interviews in person added to the researcher's familiarity with, and immersion in, the data. During this phase, a number of initial interests and thoughts were developed. In the second phase, the four English transcripts were firstly coded prior to the supervisors' validation of the coding process. In each transcript, the researcher highlighted every meaningful word, sentence, and segment, and from this, generated the initial codes which constituted a preliminary coding framework. The supervisory panel was involved at this stage in order to check, verify, and refine the coding framework (as shown in **Figure 2**). These initial codes were collated together based on synonyms and overlaps, with all the relevant data extracts being placed under one code. A list of different codes was identified from the four transcripts. There were 137 codes in the two adolescent transcripts and 92 codes in the two parent transcripts. This process can also be regarded as a form of peer review, as the supervisors independently coded the data and thus improved the rigour of the study. With the refined coding framework, the remaining transcripts were analysed in Chinese, and then the codes were named in English. After collation, there were in 393 different codes in the adolescent group and 330 codes in the parent group.

Phase three was about searching for themes from these initial codes. The different codes were reviewed and sorted into potential themes through the use of mind-maps. In the NVivo program, these codes were organised as 'parent' codes and 'children' codes. In phase four, these preliminary themes were then reviewed in relation to the coded extracts and the research questions about understanding adolescent romantic experience (RE) and parent-adolescent communication about RE. During this process, the transcripts were re-reviewed as a whole to

understand the relationships between the preliminary themes. Similar themes were assembled into a single theme to reduce overlaps and to achieve greater abstraction. In phase five, the themes were defined to represent the content and to delimit the scope of each theme. Some of the themes were divided into several sub-themes to structure and demonstrate their relationships. The meanings of each theme and sub-theme were analysed, with the extracted data within them being interpreted. Finally, the themes were organised and presented in the three subsequent findings chapters, based on their associations with the research questions. The data extracts (quotes) were selected to illustrate the meanings and story of the themes. In this process, the researcher selected the most illustrative quotes from the participants, while disconfirming cases such as exceptions, were also presented to reflect the complexity and richness of the understandings among the participants. In such a situation, some of the participants were represented more in one chapter and less in others.

During the process of conducting the thematic analysis, the write-up of the themes was concurrently undertaken to assist with organising and defining the themes. This write-up entailed the iterative process of thematic analysis, in which the themes were continually revised and organised based on deep and critical analysis. The researcher's supervisors critiqued and commented on the themes in relation to their definition and interpretation, which contributed to the rigour of the study. The next section focuses on the strategies used to improve the rigour.

3.6 Strategies to improve rigour

The merits of qualitative research are judged through the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability to evaluate methodological soundness and adequacy (Holloway & Wheeler 2010; Liamputtong 2009). Guba and Lincoln (1989) developed these four criteria as a translation of reliability and validity associated with quantitative research. The strategies used to improve the rigour of the study will be discussed below in light of the four criteria.

3.6.1 Credibility

Credibility is comparable to internal validity (Liamputtong 2009), which means the compatibility between the researcher's findings and the perceptions of the participants (Holloway & Wheeler 2010). Carpenter and Suto (2008, p, 149) argued that "credibility is based on the constructionist assumption that there is no single reality, but rather multiple realities that are constructed by people in their own context". Therefore, credibility is

achieved when the multiple realities held by the participants are represented as accurately and adequately as possible in the findings of the research (Liamputtong 2009). In this study, the interviews were audio-recorded in order to reflect what the participants actually said. Field notes were kept throughout the research process to document the interview setting and process, and the researcher's reflections. Quotes from the participants were used to illustrate the findings. These strategies are conducive to ensuring credibility (Tuckett 2005).

Furthermore, one of the most powerful strategies for establishing credibility in qualitative research is triangulation (Liamputtong 2009). "Triangulation is the process by which the topic under study is examined from different perspectives, and findings from one type of method (or data, researcher, theory) can be checked out by reference to another" (Holloway & Wheeler 2010, p, 308). In this study, through involving both parents and adolescents from two different high schools at different locations, different perspectives from different groups of people were explored, which was a form of data triangulation (Carpenter & Suto 2008). Through data triangulation, consistency and discordance within, and across, the groups of participants (i.e., parents and adolescents in this study) were identified. Some disconfirming cases were found that drove a consideration about whether the interpretation of the data accounted for the alternative cases. Overall, the process of triangulation enables a more thorough examination of the interpretation, and enhances the credibility of the research findings.

3.6.2 Dependability

Dependability can be compared to reliability (Liamputtong 2009), and requires that the findings are consistent with the data from the participants (Carpenter & Suto 2008). Dependability is achieved through an audit or decision trail (Holloway & Wheeler 2010; Liamputtong 2009), which demonstrates how the researchers make decisions, so that the readers can follow and examine the adequacy of the research process (Carpenter & Suto 2008). The rationale for selecting the methodologies and methods, as well as the research process, has been clearly documented in previous sections, which can be considered as the audit trail for this study.

In addition, peer review or debriefing is a strategy to facilitate the validation of the research findings (Liamputtong 2009). In this study, as described previously, the supervisors acted as reviewers in relation to the auditing of the transcripts and the validation and questioning of the

emerging codes, themes, and sub-themes. This process strengthened the dependability of the study.

Another crucial strategy to establish dependability is reflexivity, in which the researcher reflects on their own preconceptions, positions, and perspectives that influence the data collection and analysis process (Liamputtong 2009; Tuckett 2005). One reflexive practice adopted by the researcher in this study was writing field notes and memos throughout the collection and analysis of the data. A reflexive account will be provided at the end of this chapter.

3.6.3 Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability refers to the degree to which the findings in one context can be applied to other similar situations and individuals or groups (Carpenter & Suto 2008; Holloway & Wheeler 2010). Transferability highlights the theoretical or analytical generalisability of the research findings (Liamputtong 2009). A useful strategy for strengthening transferability is through thick and detailed descriptions about the research settings, participants, methods, processes for undertaking the research, and the findings (Liamputtong 2009). In this study, the context of the research sites, the recruitment of the participants, and the data analysis procedure have been described in detail in previous sections. In the following findings chapters, the interpretation of the data will be presented within the associated sociocultural context, underpinned by social constructionism and interpretive interactionism. These steps shed light on the transferability of the research findings to similar groups in similar geographical areas in China.

3.6.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is comparable to the term of objectivity or neutrality (Liamputtong 2009). It is judged from the perspective that the research findings and conclusions are not derived from the researchers' assumptions and preconceptions, but instead, are linked to the data (Holloway & Wheeler 2010; Liamputtong 2009). The strategies of keeping field notes through a reflexive process, and presenting an audit trail, promoted the confirmability of the study.

3.7 Reflexivity

As indicated by the constructivist epistemology, the qualitative researcher affects all stages of the research process (Holloway & Wheeler 2010; Liamputtong 2009). Accordingly, the researcher needs to make her personal beliefs, presuppositions, and positions about the study

topic explicit during the data collection and analysis process (Jootun & McGhee 2009). In addition, the social characteristics of the researcher, such as identity, age, and gender, shape the social dynamics of the interviews (Broom, Hand & Tovey 2009; Gailey & Prohaska 2011; Manderson, Bennett & Andajani-Sutjahjo 2006). Reflexivity is a practice that researchers use to reflect on the research process in order to make it open and transparent (Finlay 2002; Jootun & McGhee 2009). Therefore, reflexivity is a strategy for improving rigour, and is thus, an integral part of qualitative research. In this study, the researcher reflected on her own values and perspectives in relation to adolescent RE and parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in China, as described in the preface. To manage the researcher's assumptions during the collection of the data, she ensured that the interview questions were open-ended, thereby encouraging the participants to talk about their own beliefs. From the narratives of the participants, the researcher checked her own assumptions which were challenged or confirmed by the participants. Throughout the data analysis and interpretation phase, the supervisors constantly asked the researcher to reflect on, and critique, her assumptions. The researcher used memos in the NVivo program to document her presuppositions. In addition, the researcher reflected on her own potential influence on the interviews, as summarised below.

Adolescent RE and the associated issue of the sexuality of a person is not a topic that is publicly discussed in China (Gao, YY & Zhang 2008). The researcher was concerned about how much adolescents and parents would be willing to engage in the discussion, or they might hesitate to share their opinions. Informed by social constructionism, the researcher recognised the power relations between herself and the participants, especially the adolescents. In addition to the efforts to build rapport with the participants, the researcher tried to be sensitive and reflexive throughout the interviews. Before undertaking the interviews, the researcher referred to the literature about successful interview techniques. For example, Smith, Chen and Liu (2008) suggested that de-personalising the sensitive questions was a strategy that could increase the Chinese participants' responses. Accordingly, the researcher created alternative wordings of questions that would be more understandable and acceptable by the participants based on her understanding of the culture.

After each interview, the researcher reflected upon the interview process by writing notes about what did and did not work, and the influence of the researcher. These reflections meant that the preceding interviews assisted in improving the subsequent interviews. For example, one female adolescent answered a question in English when she referred to sexual intercourse.

Later, the researcher asked her why she used English and she indicated that she felt embarrassed to mention sexuality in Chinese. This instance inspired the researcher to be more aware of the participants' hesitation due to the sensitivity of the topic of sexuality, and to remind the participants to use English to express their opinions in situations when they were uncomfortable about discussing an issue in Chinese. With accumulated experience and skills, the researcher could engage different participants in different and flexible ways. Some of the adolescents and parents were more willing to talk about RE and sexuality than expected.

The participants demonstrated individual diversity in their levels of openness and comfort during the interviews, particularly in relation to sexuality. For example, some of the adolescents/parents could discuss sexual behaviours spontaneously, and some could speak without embarrassment with some prompting. On occasion, some of the adolescents would laugh for a while without mentioning any exact words, particularly those concerning sexuality. In this case, the researcher would leave a little time for the participant to consider their response, or suggest using English to express their views. If they still felt that they were unable to speak, the researcher would change the wording so that they could respond in a different way. The diversity of responses reminded the researcher to always be aware of the participants' potential discomfort and to respond in a safe way.

Furthermore, the personal characteristics of the researcher influenced the interview process, particularly her student identity, age, gender, and marital status. Specifically, the position of the researcher as a student and a non-authority figure helped to build good rapport with both the adolescents and the parents. At times, usually before or after the interview, some of the adolescents showed an interest in the experiences of the researcher, or asked questions about their own studies. Some of the students also tried to seek advice from the researcher about their romantic experience. In these cases, the researcher suggested that she would be happy to discuss these issues after the interview. These interactions between the researcher and the adolescents were signs of building good rapport.

For the parents, the position of the researcher being a full-time student studying in a Western country outside of China had an impact on the interviews. Some of the parents talked about the difference between China and the West, and mentioned that the researcher had not been in China for a long time. This seemed to encourage them to talk more about the changes in China. For this reason, the researcher tried to maintain her appearance as a 'Chinese student', such as wearing long-sleeved clothes and trousers in winter and carrying a backpack. Overall,

the position of being a student created a balancing of the power relations between the researcher and the participants, and encouraged disclosure and authenticity between them.

The age of the researcher was approximately 10 years older than the adolescent students and 15-20 years younger than the parents. This relatively small age gap may be considered as an advantage, as mentioned by some adolescents and parents, enabling the researcher to engage both the parents and the adolescents during the interviews. One of the mothers commented: *"Too much difference within 20 years … you are the generation between us (my and my daughter's generation). So you can talk with me and talk with her as well".*

In addition, the gender of the researcher as a female might also have influenced the conversation with the participants. Specifically, the interviews with the female students lasted longer than those with the male students. The female students tended to be more comfortable discussing sexuality with the researcher than the male students. A similar gender response was demonstrated in the interviews with the mothers and fathers. Therefore, being a female researcher might be a resource for engaging female participants, while it could be a limitation for engaging male participants in discussing sex-related issues. In other words, it is possible that the male participants would respond differently to a male researcher, especially when talking about romance and sexuality. Previous research has discussed gender differences and power relations in interviewing, especially when women interview men (Gailey & Prohaska 2011; Pini 2005). These studies suggest that enabling participants to have some control over the interview, introducing them to the interview guide before starting the interview, and encouraging them to ask questions at the end were attempts to lessen the gendered effects on the quality of the data. This study drew on these strategies to improve the engagement of the male participants in these interviews. In addition, the marital status of the researcher may have offset this gender influence, especially for the parent participants. For example, when one participant (a father) understood that the researcher was married, he became less hesitant and more relaxed about discussing sexual behaviour. The parent participants may have presumed that talking about sexuality would embarrass a stranger who was single or had no sexual experience.

3.8 Summary

This chapter has described the methodology and methods for this study of adolescent romantic experience and the associated parent-adolescent communication. Interviews were conducted with a group of adolescents attending high school, and parents in urban North-

Eastern China. The data were analysed thematically through the social constructionist and interpretive interactionist lenses. Strategies to establish the rigour of the study were described, including ways of dealing with the Chinese-English language issues involved in the study. The next three chapters present and discuss the themes and sub-themes found in the data, structured according to the research questions.

CHAPTER 4 OPPORTUNITIES FROM AND RISKS OF ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE: PERCEPTIONS AND MESSAGES COMMUNICATED BETWEEN PARENTS AND ADOLESCENTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter illustrates the perceptions of parents and adolescents in relation to adolescent romantic experience (RE), and the messages they communicate to each other. These perceptions shape what is discussed between parents and adolescents on these issues. Four major themes representing adolescents' views of RE and the content of communication[9] around RE will be explored, including *opportunities from, and risks of, adolescent RE; sexual intimacy; generational differences; and girls' vulnerability and 'self-respect'*.

4.2 Opportunities from, and risks of, adolescent romantic experience

From a developmental perspective, and in relation to the sociocultural outcomes of RE, parents and adolescents presented a range of views about RE in relation to adolescent development, education, and mental health. Four sub-themes were developed as a result, including *developmental normality; not real love; incompatibility between RE and education;* and *RE shapes mental health*, reflecting the opportunities and risks embedded in adolescent RE.

4.2.1 Adolescent romantic experience is developmentally normal

Parents and adolescents acknowledged the normality of RE, taking into consideration its developmental significance and symbolic meanings regarding the development of self-identity for adolescents. Both parents and adolescents perceived that RE was a typical and normative experience among high school students in the form of developing romantic interest and/or dyadic relationships.

Adolescents reported that they had experienced RE on their own, or witnessed the romantic involvement of their peers in school. For example, Mai (female, aged 17) stated that RE was "*an integral physical and psychological experience during one's growth process*" and acknowledged her affection for certain boys: *"I have some fondness for some boys, a vague*

[9]The term communication explicitly refers to communication about adolescent romantic experience and sexuality, unless otherwise stated.

feeling but have not built a stable relationship yet". Rui (male, aged 17) described the common occurrence of RE among high school students: *"when you stand on the corridor [of the school building], you can see many couples*". These descriptions of RE as being normal for adolescents echoes investigations conducted in China which show that approximately one-third of high school students (aged 15 to 18 years) engage in RE (Chen, Z et al. 2009; Li, ZH et al. 2010). Accounts from adolescents in this study indicate that RE is a significant part of some adolescents' social world and that the school setting is a common environment for RE occurrence.

Parents recognised the developmental normality of RE and commented on its symbolic meaning of maturity for their adolescents. Parents recognised that their adolescents were facing and/or experiencing RE as a manifestation of adolescence and also as a sign of maturity. Cui (M)[10], aged 46, with a daughter aged 17, stated that RE was *"a sign of maturity, proving that she has developed to this stage".* Some parents reflected upon their own adolescent years and understood the normality of adolescent romance, as Yuan (M) commented:

> *At junior middle school, I had crush on a boy secretly, I didn't confess to him … when thinking of my own experience, I feel it is quite normal. For adolescents aged 16 or 17 years, if they do not have any sense of this, it is not good; after all, they are at the age. At least, [having RE] means that he is a normal person, a normal boy. If he is so innocent and doesn't know sexual matters between males and females, then he is abnormal* (Yuan (M), aged 47, with a 16-year-old son).

In stating that romance was part of the development of adolescent sexuality, and an important sign of being a normal person, Yuan argued that adolescents of high school age should have already developed some sense of sexual awareness.

Symbolically, adolescents viewed RE as an indicator of being grown-up and of adulthood, and thus justified the rationality of RE as being appropriate for their age. Luo (male, aged 16) claimed that *"after all, we reach this age, to be an adult soon, so we have such experience".* Sha (female, aged 16) reiterated the link between adulthood and RE: "*At senior high school, we are close to adulthood. Engaging in romantic relationships is very normal. We grow up and we want to be in love".* Romantic relationships before college in China are usually termed as 'early love' or 'premature love' due to their often trivial and immature nature compared to love in adulthood (Dong et al. 2005). Parents and teachers usually construct adolescents in

[10](M) indicates that the quote is from the mother of an adolescent child to distinguish her from the adolescent participants.

high school as being immature, and thus discourage or prohibit them from dating (Nelson & Chen 2007). However, the adolescents in this study related their current developmental stage to adulthood for the sake of asserting the legitimacy of RE.

Besides linking RE with adulthood, adolescents constructed RE as a sign of attractiveness that influenced their sense of self, as Tian (female, aged 16) indicated below:

> *Somebody liking me is a proud thing because that means I have some attractive aspects and strengths that they have noticed.*

Furman and Shaffer (2003) stated that adolescent RE plays a role in the development of adolescent identity by affecting one's self-conception and self-esteem. Tian's example above illustrated her positive perceptions of RE and their influence over her identity. Parents expressed similar views through both their verbal and non-verbal responses to their adolescents' RE. For instance, Wei (M), aged 45, with an 18-year-old daughter, stated that RE carried a meaning of recognition by peers, and thus is an important part of adolescent self-identity:

> *Regardless of being a girl or a boy, being selected (as a romantic partner) at least means that he/she was recognised.*

Likewise, Jing perceived that her mother had a pleasant reaction to a boy expressing romantic interest in her:

> *Sometimes at home, a boy calls me and I can read my mum actually is very glad … happy expression on her face. Because she thinks that a call from a boy means that he is expressing love to me* (Jing, female, aged 15).

Jing captured hints of parental acceptance of RE through observing non-verbal forms of communication, which strengthened her positive self-identity in relation to romantic issues. However, Jing's parents also verbalised disapproval of her engagement in RE during high school: *"Do not have a boyfriend now, even close opposite-sex friends"*. Therefore, some parents conveyed confusing messages about RE to their adolescents, encouraging romantic interest but blocking romantic relationship-building.

By contrast, a lack of romantic involvement for some adolescents appeared to lead to low levels of confidence, especially when other peers were involved in RE. Sha (female, aged 16) stated:

> *I just envy them [those engaging in a romantic relationship] a little bit. I have a crush on a certain boy, but seeing him working hard and feel he must not like me. I feel inferior … I am not beautiful and not as good as others in many aspects...*

Sha felt envious of, and inferior to, others who had been involved in RE. Therefore, the influence of romantic experience on adolescent identity depends on its practice by others, and its specific qualities (Furman & Shaffer 2003). Positive RE strengthens adolescents' identity as attractive partners; while the absence of RE, or having a negative experience, might decrease adolescents' confidence in their ability to form successful relationships.

The ways in which adolescents and parents understand adolescent RE reflects a developmental perspective, in which they construct RE through symbolic meanings of maturity, identity, and recognition. This perception aligns with the theory that the emergence of romantic interest is a major indicator of adolescent sexual, emotional, and social development (Rosenblum & Lewis 2008; Seiffge-Krenke & Shulman 2011). Establishing romantic relationships outside of the family is one task facing adolescents (Auslander, Rosenthal & Blythe 2006), and such relationships influence the development of sexuality and identity (Furman & Collins 2010). In this sense, engaging in RE is normal and valuable for those adolescents in this study who expressed a desire for it.

4.2.2 Not real love but shapes future relationships

Despite recognising RE as being developmentally normal, parents and adolescents characterised adolescent RE as being short-lived, immature, 'not real love', and not marriage-oriented. However, the adolescents emphasised that RE remained meaningful in terms of shaping future relationships. These perceived features influenced adolescent decisions to engage in RE as well as parental attitudes toward RE, and what was discussed between parents and adolescents in relation to this topic.

4.2.2.1 Adolescent romantic experience is not real love

Adolescents perceived that RE could be non-serious, fun, unstable, ephemeral, and distinct from adult romantic relationships. Jia described the short-lived romantic relationships and frequent break-ups among her peers:

> *I know in middle school, after dating for one week or a couple of day*s, most of them *break up. Only a few lasted for several months* (Jia, female, aged 15).

This non-seriousness of RE accords with the developmental-contextual theory of romantic stages during adolescence discussed by Connolly and McIsaac (2011). In early and middle adolescence, romantic relationships are exploratory, and casual dating is one form of romantic involvement. Committed relationships start to appear in late adolescence (Madsen & Collins 2011). The adolescents in this study were aged from 15 to 18 years and in the middle/late

adolescent period of their lives (Auslander, Rosenthal & Blythe 2006). They witnessed RE as being casual and lacking in seriousness among their peers, and thus constructed the idea that current RE was not love, due to its transitory nature and lack of commitment.

Jing cited her parents' romantic story as a comparison with adolescent RE:

> *It (RE) is naïve and immature. Just because seeing him playing basketball and handsome, you get together with him. It is not true love. Only experiencing together, setbacks or difficult times can one know what true love is. When my parents were in love, they were separated for a few years and kept contact by writing letters. My mum was courted by someone else and my dad asked his friend to help … they trusted each other and finally got through* (Jing, female, aged 15).

Jing perceived that current adolescent RE was immature because it was built on physical attraction without the essential characteristic of 'love'. Influenced by her parents' romantic experience, Jing defined love as a mutual commitment. Jing's account shows that parents can serve as a source of adolescent construction of RE and love through the sharing of their own stories. From Jing's perspective, adolescent RE predominantly consists of passion and was lacking in commitment, and thus, could not be equivalent to love. This perception can be explained by using Sternberg's triangular theory of love (Sternberg 1986). According to Sternberg (1986), love encompasses three components, i.e., intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment components. Intimacy refers to feelings of closeness and connectedness, representing the emotional component involved in love relationships. Passion is a motivational component, pertaining to feelings of romance, attraction, and sexuality. Commitment includes the decision to stay involved in, and to maintain, a potential long-term relationship. These three components vary over the course of a relationship, and can be combined to generate different types of love (Sternberg 1986). Adolescent romantic relationships is one of these types of love and typically manifests relatively high intimacy and passion with low levels of commitment (Sternberg 1986; Williams & Hickle 2010). Gao, G (2001) stated that Sternberg's triangular theory of love delineated the development of love and was applicable across cultures. Adolescents and parents in this study stressed the commitment part of adolescent RE, and accordingly, conceptualised adolescent RE as not being a case of 'real love'.

Furthermore, some adolescents interpreted adolescent RE as not being love by referring to its lack of marriage-orientation. Xi distinguished the difference between the two concepts:

> *It [RE] is not equivalent to love. We are still young and cannot understand it completely. At most, it is mutual affection and good feelings. It cannot be classified as love … Real love is to*

> *go hand-in-hand and grow old together … Love is aimed at marriage and building a family* (Xi, female, aged 15).

Other adolescents frequently commented on the unsuccessful outcomes of adolescent RE developing into a more sustained and committed relationship, such as marriage. Qian illustrated her belief about the low likelihood of success of adolescent RE. Therefore, she made a decision to be future-oriented and restrain from romantic engagement during adolescence.

> *I watch some romance dramas and read some romantic fictions, some of them are about high school students and only a few can be sustained to the end. I also see some of our classmates break-up after being together for a while … To be honest, I think the future is more important. It is not worthwhile to have one that is bound to terminate, so I just forget it* (Qian, female, aged 17).

Consistent with adolescents, parents claimed that adolescent RE, without aiming for marriage, was more idealised and could not be defined as 'real love'. Parents frequently emphasised that adolescent RE was predominantly based on emotional attraction without consideration of marriage, and thus transient and immature. Qing (M), aged 45, cited her 18-year-old daughter's short-term RE that contributed to her treating her daughter's RE calmly without any interference:

> *It is absolutely not long lasting. My daughter is an example. In middle school, a boy treated her well. They went to the library and played ball together. I think it was normal and I did not intervene. Now, she doesn't like him and they broke up.*

The lack of a marriage orientation in adolescent RE resulted in objections to adolescent RE by some parents, while in other cases, this assisted parents in facing their adolescent's RE issues more comfortably. Cui (M) and Yan (M) represent contrasting examples of disapproval and acceptance of adolescent RE.

> *I think for teenagers, it is not real love, just a crush in puberty. They have a relationship and interact closely, but don't have a specific purpose. I think real love has its purpose, that is, the two people desire for being together forever and get married. But adolescents do not think of this. So I object to this thing (RE)* (Cui (M), aged 46, with a daughter aged 17).

> *As a parent, the first feeling of knowing my daughter has a boyfriend is to think whether her future husband would like this (boy), and you will judge him from a perspective of the elder viewing the younger generation, or find faults with him … this is complicated. But the only resolution is to believe it is her first love rather than her marriage* (Yan (M), with a daughter aged 18).

Cui illustrated that love meant commitment to marriage, while adolescent RE was exploratory, and thus, not 'real love'. Hence, she strongly disapproved of adolescent RE. In Yan's case,

she used the notion of adolescent RE leading to a low possibility of marriage to reduce her responsiveness to her daughter's romantic relationship, and thus was not worried about it.

Both adolescents and parents dissociated adolescent RE from love, and defined love by linking it to marriage, which reflects a social construction of both love and RE. Culture has a major effect on the three components of love in Sternberg's theory (Gao, G 2001; Williams & Hickle 2010). In Chinese culture, love is a concept which is linked to an individual's search for a mate for life, with other elements, such as obligations to one's parents and family, also being taken into account. The term 'romantic relationship' or 'dating relationship' often carries with it a meaning associated with necessary seriousness and long-term commitment, because it is generally perceived as a major step before marriage (Gao, G 2001), hence the term is often associated with adults. Specifically, when adults choose a marital partner in China, practical factors such as financial stability and family background are often considered (Higgins et al. 2002; Xu, Y & Ocker 2013) for personal economic welfare and for bearing the filial obligation to care for one's elderly parents (Deutsch 2006; Xia et al. 2004). The sociocultural notions of love and marriage, and the traits of practicality and commitment, are attributed to adults, which echoes the practice of labelling adolescent RE as 'premature love' by wider Chinese society (Dong et al. 2005). The construction of love from a marriage perspective explains the notion of constructing adolescent RE as 'not real love' in China.

However, the transient nature, and lack of marriage-orientation, of adolescent RE contributed to some adolescents' understandings of adolescent RE as being innocent and therefore more appealing, compared to adult romantic relationships, as Ya commented:

> *In an adult romantic relationship, one must consider family, character, and the occupation of the other … Adolescents perhaps have not formed the notion of prudence, or they are impulsive and don't think over the consequences. They don't care about these things and are just together* (Ya, male, aged 16).

Ya stated that adolescent RE was simpler and more idealised than adult romantic relationships. This feature drove some adolescents to engage in RE without concerns about familial and socioeconomic factors that were often involved in marriage, showing that adolescents interpret and act differently towards RE in terms of its association with love and marriage.

4.2.2.2 Adolescent romantic experience shapes future relationships

Despite the transient and non-serious nature of adolescent RE, some adolescents stated that RE was a context for learning how to love, and thus was meaningful and contributed to future relationships in terms of accumulating experience and knowledge. Mai expressed how RE

shapes her standards of future partner selection, interpersonal management, and development of a sense of sexual intimacy:

> *It (RE) will influence future partner selection standards and make one more mature, like in interpersonal management … Because you find you like some and dislike other aspects of him (partner). Also you have to connect with his friends and get along with them. Physically, intimate behaviours like holding hands and kissing will bring a special feeling. When I grow up, these won't be strange for me* (Mai, female, aged 17).

Mai claimed that RE consisted of sexual components, and thus played a role in the development of sexuality. The literature consistently addresses RE as the main context in which adolescents develop their understandings of sexuality and/or engage in sexual activities (Auslander, Rosenthal & Blythe 2006; Furman & Shaffer 2003). The sexual intimacy that Mai mentioned reflects the passion component in Sternberg's triangular theory of love (Sternberg 1986), and was understood as a benefit of RE pertaining to adolescent sexual development.

Similarly, Luo and Shan claimed that past romantic experience provided a reference for handling subsequent emotional issues in future intimate relationships, and thus were integral for future marriage preparedness.

> *The first time [engaging in a relationship] was filled with shyness and uncertainties. If I have another experience, I can know the feeling and how to deal with it. For future [relationship], we need to accumulate such experience now* (Luo, male, aged 16).

> *People can try this (RE) in advance. Because in the future when one is 20 or 30 years old and really needs to be in a relationship, with such an experience, one can avoid some mistakes and handle things more appropriately … with a foundation, it can be done better* (Shan, male, aged 17).

In this sense, adolescents constructed RE as a foundational part of their life and as a precursor to future relationships, with the belief that RE helps to accumulate experiences and to develop more appropriate behaviours for later relationships, including marriage. The literature supports the notion that adolescent RE provides a training ground for developing interpersonal skills, including empathy, negotiation skills, and intimate relationship maintenance (Sorensen 2007). These positive constructions of RE in shaping future relationships was the basis upon which some adolescents rationalised their desire for romantic engagement.

Some parents recognised the value of RE for adolescent development and the impact on their future relationship building. Qing (M) and Song (F)[11] interpreted RE positively from a future perspective and held supportive attitudes toward adolescent RE:

> *It (RE) provides a reference to her future choice in love affairs … If she doesn't like some aspects [of the current boyfriend], she must avoid these in another future relationship … I think it is good for her growth, so I support it* (Qing (M), aged 45, with an 18-year-old daughter).

> *I think it [RE] is a kind of training for children. As we know, some people in puberty, or even in university and after employment, feel uncomfortable and uneasy when facing the opposite sex. So in high school, keeping proper interaction with the opposite sex or having intimate romantic experience is good* (Song (F), aged 44, with a 17-year-old son).

Song mentioned that some young people felt uneasy in facing the opposite sex after high school. This phenomenon mainly stems from the fact that close hetero-social interactions are usually discouraged and romantic relationships are restricted in schools in China (Farrer 2006; Li, ZH et al. 2010). In response, some adolescents withdraw from socialising with the opposite sex during adolescence (Farrer 2006). Qing and Song supported adolescent RE by arguing that it provides avenues for socialising with potential romantic partners and provides a basis for marital relationship development in the future. In addition, Song's accounts indicated that schools provided a legitimate 'training' space for girls and boys to interact with each other and explore RE, and that these opportunities tend to be lessened after finishing school. Perceptions of adolescent RE pertaining to love and future relationships also shape the messages communicated between parents and adolescents, which will be explored below.

4.2.2.3 Talking about marriage and family building

In alignment with the perception of adolescent RE as not being connected with marriage, parents and adolescents covered the topic of marriage and family during their conversations about RE. Parents attempted to help adolescents to recognise the idealised and 'not-real love' features of RE, and thus encouraged adolescents to resist romantic engagement during their high school years. For example, Zhang (M), aged 43, conversed with her 16-year-old daughter about the distinction between romantic love and real life to improve her awareness of this distinction:

> *I tell her the times when in love affairs are nice, but real life is not the same as what she imagines … I hope she could be more realistic, rather than impulsive and irrational.*

[11] (F) indicates the quote is from the father of an adolescent child to distinguish him from adolescent participants.

Some parents, such as Zhang, perceived that their adolescents conceptualised romantic love unrealistically, and thus, they needed to pinpoint the realistic aspects of marriage from an adult perspective to influence their adolescents' future ideas about marriage.

Tian's parents conveyed the idea that being realistic about one's future partner guarantees success in marriage:

> *My parents said, 'when you grow up, you will be more realistic and won't pay attention to such details. As long as the major aspects of the person are good, don't be so demanding. Otherwise you will become a left-over woman in future'* (Tian, female, aged 16).

Tian's parents tried to influence some of her opinions about partner selection in order to prevent her from becoming a 'left-over' woman in future. This account reflects the importance of marriage and building a family in Chinese culture, where family is the basic unit of society in Confucianism (Yan, J & Sorenson 2004). The highly-valued Confucianist and collectivist culture in China means that marriage remains a universally important event for most Chinese people (Fong 2007). Traditional beliefs view marriage as functioning in relation to personal self-worth and achievement, as manifested in the Chinese idiom 'get married and start one's career' (Higgins et al. 2002). Nonetheless, the recent rapid economic growth in China has given rise to an increasing focus on career advancement and wealth, with a lower priority being given to marital and family relationships among young people (Huang, WJ 2005). The unmarried status of adults contradicts traditional social views on marriage and the family, and is a source of concern to Tian's, and many other parents.

Ping (M) shared this same concern, and she therefore emphasised the importance of marriage and family to her daughter:

> *One of my friends is busy with her career and she is successful, but she is still single now. Actually she is painful in her heart. I don't hope my daughter is only busy with a career in future. I say 'it is true that career is important, but family is more important for a woman ... You must look for a partner when it is time to get married ... The life of a woman can only be complete if she experiences what she should experience all her life, [i.e.,] being in love, getting married, and having a child ... these cannot be acquired through a career* (Ping (M), aged 42, with an 18-year-old daughter).

Ping's account reflects the traditional gender expectations of the Chinese woman being a 'virtuous wife and good mother' in Confucian ideology (Evans 2010; Sheng 2012). Therefore, marriage is the legitimate way to fulfil a woman's role in society. Additionally, women are often judged by others by their ability to meet their socially required role, particularly within the family domain, which explains Ping's expectation of her daughter to conform to this standard.

Furthermore, many of the parents believe that adolescence was a crucial time for developing beliefs and values about marriage and family. Consequently, these parents inculcated their adolescents with their own beliefs about marriage and the standard of partner selection. Ning (M), aged 45, with a 15-year-old daughter, mentioned:

> *I tell her [take] family and marriage seriously. I said a good marriage was based on two families of equal social and economic status. Financial conditions are important, but not the most important in marriage. One's character, morality, and the match are the most crucial.*

Ning's account reflects a traditional social perspective about marriage, which emphasises a match in the social hierarchy and personality of the couple as the basis of a successful marriage. Despite the parents' attempts to impose traditional norms on their adolescents, in some cases, the adolescents rejected their parents' views. Lin is an example of this:

> *With parents, I talk about what kind of person I will look for as a partner in the future. My mum talks about her opinions on this. She is asking me to look for the type that she likes … We have sort of consistency. But she hopes me to find one from a well-off family, having a house and a car. I don't think so ... Maybe I am still young now and don't have such values. I feel I will find a person I like, regardless of house and car* (Lin, female, aged 16).

Lin disagreed with her mother's point of view about the importance of family background and the resources of the future partner. Instead of adopting her parents' criteria of partner selection, Lin stated that she valued emotional affection over material conditions. Focusing on intimacy fits Lin's developmental stage, whereas her parents held more traditional beliefs about marriage and thus wanted to influence her through their communication.

The parental accounts of expectations for timely marriage and marital partner standards in the future for their adolescents reflects the cultural belief in filial piety where children bear the responsibility of caring for their parents when they age (Xia et al. 2004). Marriage is often described as the union of two families beyond two individuals within the collectivistic value system of China (Huang, WJ 2005). For this reason, parents usually take a prudent attitude toward their future daughter or son-in-law, and get involved in their children's marital decision-making in order to secure their own future welfare. Additionally, the traditional norms about a match in social hierarchy between couples were deeply ingrained among the parents in this study. Through talking about the standard of the future spouse, parents wished to set a framework for their adolescent's marriage. This framework reflects the phenomenon of shared decision-making in marriage in a Chinese family. Parents are involved and remain a strong influence on their child's marriage, with parental approval as an important factor in the choice of a partner (Huang, WJ 2005). Therefore, parents encouraged their adolescents to

consider resources and financial well-being when choosing a partner. Communication about marriage and family reflects the parents' attempts to make adolescents conform to traditional values about marriage and filial piety, and to ensure that their future needs will be catered for.

4.2.3 Incompatibility between romantic experience and academic attainment

In addition to the developmental aspects of RE, both parents and adolescents illustrated their understandings of RE from an educational perspective. They highlighted the priority of study in the context of the education system and the culture of filial piety in China. Most parents and adolescents perceived romantic engagement to conflict with academic performance and that this then influenced adolescents' future prospects and their fulfilment of filial piety. Nonetheless, some adolescents conveyed an ambivalent attitude toward RE by considering its positive sides in bringing rest and relief from academic pressure. Based on these perceptions, parents talked about the educational implications of RE with their adolescents during their communication. The following sections illustrate these perceptions and the communication associated with them.

4.2.3.1 Romantic experience is a distraction from academic engagement

Most adolescents recognised the influence of RE on their study, primarily viewing RE as a distraction from academic goals. Xi and Ya commented:

> *Being in love requires energy to manage it, like texting messages a lot, chatting online, and paying a lot attention to the partner … These must be distractions from study* (Xi, female, aged 15).

> *The major influence [of RE] is study. We need to do homework at night and the time is tight … But dealing with these (RE) things influences the efficiency of doing homework and its quality* (Ya, male, aged 16).

While Xi and Ya described the detrimental impacts of RE on their studies, given the tight schedule in senior high school, they articulated that other students managed their relationships well and demonstrated positive outcomes in their studies while being romantically involved. Ya gave some examples:

> *Some relationships motivate each other to work harder … Two of my classmates are in love but they are not obsessing in intimate behaviours. They promote each other and both do well in study.*

Ya witnessed individual differences in relation to the influence of RE on academic performance, which aligns with previous reports that the effect of RE is dependent on the nature of the relationship and the individual's academic ambitions (Frisco 2008; Furman & Shaffer 2003).

Although Xi recognised that RE could be a distraction from her studies, she observed a positive effect of RE on academic performance. She exhibited some confusion about the consequences of RE and questioned the prohibition of adolescent RE by wider society.

> *I know some friends in Grade 11 who are in love, but one of them got the top in last semester exams. So I don't really get a clear understanding. What does being in love cause on earth? I don't definitely know its disadvantages. Why people emphasise to avoid love now? Actually mostly I am drawing on the views of my parents or teachers in school, or some books I have read* (Xi, female, aged 15).

Xi challenged the negative stereotypical view of adolescent RE that prevails in wider society (including by parents and schools, and in books). However, the negative construction of adolescent RE did not influence some of the adolescents in this study to avoid RE. Tao is one example:

> *My parents object to it (RE) saying that it influences study. But I think everything has two sides. There must have some benefits, like someone gets progress in study. Obviously, I belong to another category because my study grade has declined since being in love. So it depends on the individual. But I think as long as meeting the right person and the two like each other, it is better not to miss it, because we are old enough to be mature in every aspect* (Tao, male, aged 17).

Tao was aware of his parents' disapproval of his RE engagement due to the stated negative impacts on his study, yet he did not conform to the constraints of his parents. Study was not a factor that influenced his decisions about RE engagement because he believed that he was mature enough, and dating 'the right person' was more important.

Despite the potential conflict between RE and education, some adolescents asserted that RE acted as a source of refreshment and relaxation from academic pressures. For example, Hong (female, aged 17) described how RE spiced up her school life:

> *It (RE) makes our boring study more interesting. It likes a flavouring agent for us senior school students. The reason why we engage in love affairs is for a spice of schooling life.*

Similarly, Sha (female, aged 16) was interested in *"a love affair to relax because now study is so tense".* Therefore, school influences adolescents' constructions of RE as an outlet for academic stress and as an important component of their lives. As Hong and Sha illustrated, this construction reinforced their passion and desire for RE.

Although some adolescents believed that RE contributed to their school life, their parents believed that RE was incompatible with academic attainment, and stressed that RE jeopardised the education and future career opportunities of their adolescents. For instance, Ping (M), aged 42, advised her 18-year-old daughter to refrain from RE by stressing that

study was the primary responsibility of adolescents at the secondary schooling stage, while romantic engagement interfered with academic success.

> *When she (my daughter) tells me that someone is having a relationship in her class, I talk with her explicitly, 'Now the most important thing for you is study. Being in a relationship only influences you, distracts your attention from study. This does nothing good for your future.'*

Chinese parents focus heavily on the academic aspirations of their adolescents (Fong 2007), and have great expectations of their only child's academic success (Fong 2007; Settles et al. 2013). The value of education is rooted in the Chinese Confucian ideology, which claims that education is associated with one's social class through influencing employment, marriage, and relationships (Huang, GH-C & Gove 2012). Therefore, education is central to most Chinese families. However, schools which cater to adolescents provide an avenue for boy-girl interactions and create opportunities for adolescents to develop romantic experience. Therefore, the cultural emphasis on education and the parental perspective of the incompatibility between romance and education places adolescents in a challenging situation in which they need to handle both RE and study in the schooling context.

4.2.3.2 Romantic experience contributes to failure of fulfilling filial piety

Some adolescents placed high value on their current studies due to the close connection with their future careers and lives. In China, senior high school students face the national college entrance exam (NCEE) that takes place at the end of Grade 12. The score one obtains in the NCEE is used as a benchmark for the selection of candidates to attend university (Li, W & Li 2010; Nelson & Chen 2007). In the Chinese education system, the NCEE is intensively competitive and only students with the highest marks and best performance can enrol in the key institutions which have superior resources and a better quality of education (Lou, CH et al. 2006). Successful access to these institutions largely determines one's career path through adult life (Nelson & Chen 2007), and one's subsequent economic contribution to their parents (Grant & Hutton 2011), thus resulting in great effort being invested in preparation for the NCEE. Rui described the importance of performance in the NCEE for gaining admission to a good university to study the major that he is interested in.

> *I am interested in science and I want to study physics or aeronautics at university. Only by enrolling in a good university, can this goal be achieved. The national university entrance system requires a good performance to be selected for a good university* (Rui, male, aged 17).

In the context of the market-oriented economy of China, education credentials play an important part in occupational mobility and earnings, and thus relate to one's position in the social structure (Hong, X 2013). Therefore, a university degree is important for adolescents

who wish to pursue professional employment and a higher economic status in the future. Qian and Sha illustrated that higher education was the only route to pursuing a better life in the future, especially given that they were not from wealthy backgrounds:

> *The examination system in China determines that study and future are closely associated. There is a great gap between the rich and the poor. There are some rich second generations but I am not one of them. Only by this (studying well), I can make the future life as I expect* (Qian, female, aged 17).

> *There are two students [in a relationship] in our class. They stay together during class break and are very happy … but their families are very rich … not like us poor people needing to study hard for university. So I don't dare to attempt, in case I will fall behind in study* (Sha, female, aged 16).

The gap between rich and poor in urban China has grown increasingly wider with the process of economic reform (Deng & Li 2009). Education for most people is a major path to changing their future socioeconomic status (Li, W & Li 2010). Qian and Sha argued that adolescents from wealthy families were able to engage in RE more freely without concern about the association between RE and academic performance. Both Qian and Sha were from middle-class families, and were concerned about their future and the potential negative influence of RE on their higher education opportunities. Consequently, they restrained themselves from engaging in RE, indicating that social class is a part of the construction of RE and that it influences adolescents' decision-making about romantic engagement.

In recent years, studying for university has been regarded as a top priority for many families in China, particularly with only one child in most families (Li, W & Li 2010). Although universities in China have expanded their admission numbers with the aim of promoting access to higher education for young people, good universities with high rankings are still limited and thus entry is highly competitive (Li, F, Morgan & Ding 2008; Yang, D 2010).

Chinese culture is deemed to be collectivistic with a high value being placed on filial piety, which includes obedience and loyalty toward family and supporting parents when they age (Deutsch 2006; Fong 2007). Additionally, children's educational success is often associated with filial piety and their ability to look after one's family (Salili, Zhou & Hoosain 2003). Educational achievement is defined by one's test performance, the school attended, and the degree received (Huang, GH-C & Gove 2012). The type of university that children enter is seen as one of the most important social indicators of a family's success (Li, W & Li 2010). For this reason, adolescents work hard partially for the sake of satisfying familial goals. For example, Xi expressed that study was a means to fulfil her filial duty to her parents, while

romantic engagement might be counterproductive to this aim:

> *My parents bear and rear me. I don't seek to bring great honour to the family like getting first place in the exams. I just hope that I try my best to make them spend a wonderful time in their old age. But this (RE) causes distractions and my study might be affected, then I cannot find a good job in the future* (Xi, female, aged 15).

In this sense, the culture of filial piety is a motivator of academic pursuit among Chinese adolescents, and is a source of RE construction regarding its influence on personal prospects and family. The potential conflict between RE and study, and the resulting failure to better reward parents in the future drives some adolescents to avoid romantic engagement.

Parents constantly highlighted that education took precedence over other matters for high school adolescents. The reasons are similar to those stated by the adolescents above. When discussing adolescent RE during the interviews, the parents constantly related it to study. They asserted that RE affected study negatively and led to poor academic performance. Some parents stated that cases of RE promoting study were rare, so they would not let their children take the risk of engaging in RE. Cui (M) remarked that entering a good university was a priority over RE and that this had been her primary expectation for her daughter:

> *It seldom happens that the two students in love promote each other in their studies. In most cases, it (RE) causes decline. There is the high pressure of the college entrance exam. They need more energy [to prepare for the exam] but will get distracted by love affairs … Because in China, it is a fact that university entrance is very important for them. As a parent, firstly, I hope she can go to a good university and find a good job in the future. This is the reality, no other choice* (Cui (M), aged 46, with a 17-year-old daughter).

Cui stated that access to higher education was essential for adolescents' secure employment in the future. The parents in this study who were born in the 1970s experienced a stronger influence of higher education on job security, as the modern higher education reforms started in the late 1990s after the economic reforms (Hu, J & Zhang 2013). In the new higher education system, college students have to compete for employment, as they are no longer assigned to jobs or employers as in the planned economy (Hu, J & Zhang 2013). Studies have shown that the reputation of the higher education institution has a significant impact on employment in which graduates from key universities have greater employment possibilities than those from ordinary universities (Li, F, Morgan & Ding 2008; Zhao 2009). The hierarchical education system in the Chinese socioeconomic context contributed to Cui's construction of the reality of the priority of education for individual adolescents.

Furthermore, parents pinpointed the far-reaching influence of high school education from a filial piety perspective. Wei (M), a high school teacher, described how she discussed the

importance of academic achievement with her students:

> *I often talk to students like this: Obtaining good academic performance is for repaying your parents, for supporting your future partner well, and for being able to provide funding for your own child's education in the future. High school is a phase for studying. So, they must face up to themselves, and make a choice between study and enjoying romance in love affairs* (Wei (M), aged 45, with a 17-year-old daughter).

Wei implied an incompatibility between academic learning and romance. School teachers such as Wei often instilled these ideas in their adolescent students, thus reflecting the persistent cultural values of filial piety and family bonds in China (Fong 2007).

Alternatively, most parents set a timeline for their adolescents that includes university as an appropriate time for engaging in a romantic relationship, because the academic pressure decreases. Hu (M), aged 45, discussed the inadvisability of RE prior to university with her 17-year-old daughter:

> *I feel she had some hazy fondness of a boy in middle school. We just gave her some guidance, like 'you are still young. When you grow up and go to university, you will meet better boys'.*

In another example, Tian illustrated how her parents addressed the crucial role of a good university education:

> *My parents said 'now you are a student and should focus on study. One's energy is limited if you let other things occupy your study then you can't complete your task … now it is still only by passing the national college entrance exam, one can be admitted into university. In most cases, you can find a good job with a diploma from a good university.' … A good university and a good job are used to evaluate a person's knowledge. They hope I can enter into university smoothly, find a good job, and then find a good partner* (Tian, female, aged 16).

Tian's parents described the educational impact of RE as a lifelong influence due to the close link between university admission, future employment, and partner selection. Through such consequence-oriented communication, parents attempted to keep their adolescents concentrating on academia rather than RE, despite acknowledging the normality of adolescents developing romantic interests and relationships. From the parents' perspective, the importance of education transcended the normality of RE for school age adolescents. In an American study, Kao and Salerno (2014) found that parents used academic achievement to discourage their adolescents from becoming interested in RE. In this study, parents attempted to restrict adolescents from RE by emphasising its incompatibility with education, and ensuring that their schooling remained the main priority. Adolescents who held similar beliefs about the negative association between RE and academic performance also prioritised study over RE. However, for adolescents without academic ambitions, the parents in this study who

highlighted the educational risks of RE may be ineffective in preventing them from engaging in RE.

4.2.4 Romantic experience is interwoven with adolescents' mental health

As well as associating RE with adolescents' education and future, parents and adolescents perceived RE as being interwoven with adolescents' mental health. In particular, it was believed that emotional pleasure and fluctuations accompanied romantic engagement. For example, Lin (female, aged 16) described that "*being with the person (romantic partner) brings happiness and relaxation.*" In addition, through observation of the romantic activities of her peers, Sha illustrated that RE was a sharing and mutually supportive relationship in which adolescents gained care and support from their partner.

> *I feel the couple in my class live very happily every day. Sometimes, they hug and talk to each other and send messages. They are good listeners to each other, including talking about unpleasant issues* (Sha, female, aged 16).

During adolescence, romantic relationships are increasingly developed as a source of emotional support when young people become more autonomous from their parents (Madsen & Collins 2011; Sorensen 2007). The parents also discussed the positive aspects of RE on mental health. Zhang (M), aged 43, with a daughter aged 16, acknowledged that RE was mentally pleasurable: *"It (RE) makes them feel good, brings pleasure in mental aspects".* Mao (F), aged 45, with an 18-year-old son, provided a similar point of view on RE:

> *Children have curiosity and good feelings toward the opposite sex. Letting them speak up and act out appropriately is beneficial. Otherwise, repression in the heart is not good ... I don't support their engagement now, but I think it can enhance their emotional intelligence.*

Mao recognised that RE was a reflection of adolescents' emotional needs. He encouraged romantic expression as an avenue for emotional release, but did not support real engagement. For this reason, mental health was acknowledged by parents as a part of adolescent RE, but not as a rationale for gaining parental support.

The positive aspects of adolescent RE, such as closeness and connectedness, were perceived as bringing mental pleasure to adolescents. However, adolescent RE is also filled with emotional fluctuations, especially in the face of break-ups due to its typically short duration, which can put adolescents at risk of mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety (Chen, Z et al. 2009; Davila et al. 2004). Tao mentioned his own emotional distress due to RE failure.

> *… Now I am very sad. Maybe I have not regulated myself well at the moment … In fact, breaking-up is easy, but it is very distressing after that* (Tao, male, aged 16).

The idea of mental health problems was used by some parents to reinforce adolescents' abstinence from RE. These parents often mentioned negative cases to show adolescents that RE was a hazardous activity with accompanying mental health dangers. Wang (M), aged 44, told her 17-year-old daughter about the risks of RE by describing a case which occurred to her university classmate two decades ago:

> *I told her an example happened in my university time. One of my female classmates had an infatuation with a male student who already had a girlfriend. She wanted to date the boy but he refused. She was just in unrequited love day after day and finally became schizophrenic …*

Like Wang, Sha's parents used extreme mental health problems (e.g., schizophrenia) to expound the harm of RE in order to intimidate her into avoiding RE:

> *My parents educated me not to get involved in love affairs. The consequences sound very serious … My mum said one of her classmates suffered from schizophrenia. It is horrible* (Sha, female, aged 16).

In family discussions about adolescent RE, some parents exclusively focused on the risks of RE and how it may affect mental health as a strategy to induce fear and to prohibit adolescents from engaging in RE. Parents tended to have limited knowledge of adolescents' subjective understandings of RE. Therefore, for adolescents who had been in a romantic relationship and/or were encountering relationship conflicts/dissolutions, these parental risk-based messages may be futile. For instance, Tao (male, aged 16) experienced a break-up and was frustrated because he could not turn to his parents for support:

> *Sometimes I am very upset and can't sleep. I can only talk with friends [about break-up] or think alone. I cannot talk to my mum because she disapproves [of RE] and I won't let her know this.*

Tao needed support in coping with the frustration of his relationship break-up. However, due to his mother's disapproval and his corresponding concealment of his romantic issues and feelings from his mother, he could not talk with her and thus turned to his friends for support. Peers are often a good source of support for adolescents when they meet challenges in RE management (Henrich et al. 2006; Sullivan et al. 2012), especially if they face a lack of parental support. Therefore, parents addressing the mental health risks of RE during family communication might create a barrier between themselves and the adolescent, and thus reduce the likelihood of acting as a resource for their adolescents in the face of romantic issues.

4.3 Acceptable versus unacceptable sexual intimacy

Adolescents and parents recognised that RE provided the context for exploring sexual behaviours. They identified that sexual behaviours, including holding hands, cuddling, kissing, and sexual intercourse occur among adolescents. Based on the health and social risks, adolescents classified these behaviours into two categories, i.e., acceptable and unacceptable. Light non-penetrative sexual behaviours (e.g., holding hands and kissing) were framed as acceptable, while sexual intercourse was regarded as 'crossing the line', intolerable, or even shameful by some adolescents.

4.3.1 Adolescent sexual intercourse 'crosses the line'

Adolescents often mentioned that their peers had engaged in a range of sexual behaviours. They pointed out that light sexual behaviours were more common than sexual intercourse among adolescents in their networks. Based on personal experience, Jia (aged 15) stated that kissing and hugging were not harmful, whereas fondling and sexual intercourse were examples of extreme conduct and thus were unacceptable.

> *I think behaviour that is not extreme, like kissing, is ok because I had such an experience before and I did not feel much influence on me … but beyond that, like touching the breasts and beyond is not ok … having sex is too extreme.*

Shan and Rui mentioned that sexual intercourse existed but the rate was low among their same-age peers:

> *… Kissing and hugging are common. Some go to a hotel directly at night … but not much [sex] among people of my age, more among the older like university students* (Shan, male, aged 17).

> *One of my roommates told us that he had sex with his girlfriend. I only know he had this (sex) and I think there are just a few students like him … It is bad because everything is uncertain now, doing this is irresponsible. There should be a bottom line that cannot be moved across* (Rui, male, age 17).

From a responsibility perspective, the two boys Shan and Rui stated that adolescent sexual intercourse was irresponsible, 'crossed the line', and should be delayed until an older age.

Adolescents developed sexual beliefs during the process of being nurtured in the social and cultural environment (Gao, E et al. 2012; Kotchick et al. 2001). Chinese sexual culture and family communication shaped adolescents' understandings of sexuality. For example, Ya stated that adolescent sexual behaviour resulted in severe consequences within Chinese culture:

> *The most extreme is having sex … Maybe it (sexual desire) is very strong and one cannot control himself and the girl is very open, then they do that thing (having sex). I feel it has serious consequences. I don't know exactly what the consequences are, but I am educated from childhood that it should not happen. Parents, elders, and teachers educate and imbued me with such a notion. I think we Chinese are not so open and our culture is more conservative, not so liberal like the USA* (Ya, male, aged 16).

Through social interaction with family members and teachers, Ya developed the notion that adolescent sexual intercourse was consequence-driven and socially-constrained, yet he was unclear about the specific 'serious' consequences. In practice, Ya's family and teachers used caution and fear to develop his awareness of the dangerous nature of sexual intercourse.

Some adolescent girls framed sexual intercourse as being unacceptable considering its association with marriage. Meng and Yu, both aged 16, stated that premarital sexual intercourse would adversely influence future marital relationships:

> *The most wrong behaviour is that (having sex). It should wait until marriage. Because your future husband would have a bad opinion of you and think you are too liberal* (Meng).

> *Now many men have a virgin complex. I am traditional and influenced by my mum. She started to educate me from Grade Five. One word she says is 'If you are not a virgin one day, how will your future husband love you?' I want to be clean to step into marriage* (Yu).

Meng believed that sexual conservatism with premarital abstinence was more favourable for a girl's future marriage. Yu agreed with this belief by stating that the social expectation of a girl being a premarital virgin and her mother's warnings forged her belief in premarital abstinence. The beliefs that Meng and Yu articulated reflect a gendered sexual norm characterised by the premarital chastity of girls in Chinese society (Cui et al. 2012). In Chinese culture, the double standard of chastity for men and women prevails, in which premarital chastity and marital fidelity are viewed as the two most important features that characterise respectable women (Tang, Wong & Cheung 2002). This socially-constructed gender difference and the prescribed 'good women' in relation to sexuality encouraged some adolescent girls to consider the unacceptability of adolescent sexual intercourse.

Parents consistently recognised sexual involvement in adolescent RE. Yuan (M), aged 47, with a 16-year-old son, indicated the normality of adolescent sexual behaviour:

> *I think it is natural that something happens (sex) between them (adolescent romantic partners) ... their bodies have developed maturely.*

However, parents generally claimed that adolescent sexual behaviour crossed the line of familial and social expectation from a moral perspective. Cheng (F) commented that adolescent sexual behaviour was a violation of social morals.

> *Our society has not been open to a degree that views male-female relationships as very casual and under-valued. When one is at a specific age and becomes mature, it is time to consider love, marriage, and having children. So, these out-of-line behaviours (sex and pregnancy) occur among middle school students counter to the social mainstream moral principles* (Cheng (F), aged 42, with a 16-year-old daughter).

Cheng's account reflects the traditional Chinese sexual values that love affairs and sex were connected with marriage and procreation (Zheng, W et al. 2011). From a sociocultural and moral perspective, parents underlined the inappropriateness of adolescent sexual behaviour through a belief about adolescents' immaturity for sexual engagement. Parents believed that premarital sexual abstinence is the mainstream sociocultural expectation for young people in China. Holding this traditional value, some parents limited their approval of adolescent RE within sexual relationships, or explicit romantic relationships, while embracing non-sexual romantic relationships and one-sided romantic interest. Yan and Hu expressed their approval of psychological involvement (e.g., secret adoration), but a disapproval of physical involvement (e.g., sexual activity) in RE:

> *Adoration in spirit, or even falling in love, as long as not crossing something at this age, it should be healthy and positive. But if the two quickly step into a sexual relationship, it is not normal* (Yan (M), aged 47, with an 18-year-old daughter).

> *It is ok for children to have a romantic experience, hiding it in the heart and secretly loving one person, but don't do something to cross the line and influence their study* (Hu (M), aged 45, with a 17-year-old daughter).

Yan and Hu defined a healthy adolescent romantic relationship as non-sexual involvement without distraction from study. Accordingly, they suggested that their daughters took a form of implicit romantic interest and avoided any sexual behaviour that would 'cross the line'.

4.3.2 Consequences of sexual engagement to marriage, health, and social response

As well as constructing adolescent sexual intercourse as 'crossing the line', parents and adolescents listed its adverse consequences, such as unexpected pregnancy, abortion, and STIs, which could cause physical harm and psychological effects for adolescents. Therefore, parents and adolescents further constructed adolescent sexual intercourse as dangerous and risky. Yu (female, aged 16) reported that sexual intercourse caused 'horrible' outcomes, such as pregnancy and STIs, including HIV:

> *I know someone already had sex. Last year, three girls were found to be pregnant during health screening in a junior middle school. This can transmit diseases like AIDS, horrible*.

Parents often described pregnancy and abortion, as well as the subsequent physical and psychological influences, as detrimental consequences of sexual activity among adolescents. Ping (M) discussed pregnancy and abortion with her daughter, including reputation damage and physical harm:

> *Sometimes reading adolescent pregnancy cases in newspaper, I said 'look, young girls do not have self-respect (having sex), she was in such a condition (pregnant and abortion) and her body was hurt. There will be very bad influence on her reputation for her whole life; she will suffer a substantial loss in her life. So something cannot be transgressed the boundary, you must pay attention to and never do such things that absolutely cannot be done.'* (Ping (M), aged 42, with an 18-year-old daughter)

Ping used a directive tone to admonish her daughter to avoid sex by describing its life-long detrimental consequences. In the context of this study, the terms 'self-respecting' and 'boundary' were culturally-denoted as meaning adolescent sexual abstinence in China (Cui et al. 2012; Huang, Y et al. 2009). Ping used these social constructs of 'self-respect' and 'boundary' in an attempt to frighten and prohibit her daughter from sexual activities. In the Chinese patriarchal and collectivist culture, adolescent pregnancy not only threatens individual virtue, but is also attached to stigma and damages the reputation of one's entire family (Loke & Lam 2014; To, Tam & Chu 2012).

In China, most premarital adolescent pregnancies are terminated through induced abortion which is legal and permitted based on individual consent and health status, especially under the one-child family policy. Investigations show that 97.9% of pregnant female graduate students reported a history of abortion (Zhou, Y et al. 2013), and some of these adolescents experienced repeated abortions for various reasons such as non-use of contraception or contraceptive failures (Cheng, Y et al. 2004; Zhou, Y et al. 2011). Few pregnant adolescents choose to be a single parent after considering the protection of their reputation and their future marriage prospects within the traditional social stigma of adolescent pregnancy and the one-child policy (Zheng, W et al. 2011).

Furthermore, Chinese parental objection to engagement in RE and adolescents' corresponding wariness of parents contributed to adolescents concealing their pregnancy from their parents and not seeking parental financial support to pay for the abortion. The secrecy and stigma of adolescent pregnancy further aggravates the consequences of abortion. As well, the costs of having an abortion are not covered by Chinese social medical insurance. Chinese adolescents at secondary school rarely work part-time and/or earn pocket money like their Western counterparts due to intensive school study time and attending additional out-of-school tutorial

classes, and thus are not financially independent (Li, W & Li 2010; Salili, Zhou & Hoosain 2003). Therefore, most pregnant adolescents resort to private or unlicensed small healthcare providers for cheaper abortion services, compared to the large public hospitals, but do so with the increased risk of unsafe treatment due to poor qualifications (Yang, R, Pang & Zheng 2011). Lin commented on the harms of adolescent pregnancy and abortion:

> *I read in the newspaper that girls get pregnant and go to hospital for an abortion. If they don't have money and dare not to ask for any from their parents, they will choose a small hospital or clinic without a good environment. It (abortion) must have an impact on the body or a psychological influence. I can't say exactly because I have never experienced this. My mum told me if it is not a good operation, she cannot get pregnant again* (Lin, female, aged 16).

Mass media reports and cautions from her parents enabled Lin to develop a consciousness that adolescent sexual intercourse was dangerous with the consequences of pregnancy. However, she acknowledged a lack of specific knowledge of the health effects of abortion. In this sense, the media and parents generally convey a risk perspective towards adolescent pregnancy without elaborating on concrete information. This finding aligns with previous research that found that less contraceptive and reproductive information was covered than non sex-related topics (e.g., study) in Chinese parent-adolescent conversations (Cui et al. 2012; Zuo et al. 2013).

In addition to discussing the social and health risks of adolescent sexual behaviour, some adolescents defined its acceptability based on the setting where it occurred, i.e. private or public. The collectivist ideology of Confucianism in China values social harmony over individual activity, which shapes the social interaction of the people (Yan, J & Sorenson 2004). Due to the social prohibition of adolescent sexual activity, some adolescents perceived that sexual intimacy should be expressed privately rather than publicly to avoid social and moral judgement. For example, Meng assumed that the public often related adolescent RE to sexual activity, criticising it as 'bad':

> *Other people might wonder what the two teenagers are doing there, hand-in-hand. Other people's eyes … Even when the two are together innocently, other people might think of that thing (sex), some bad things* (Meng, female, aged 16).

Meng's concern indicates that the influence of social norms on individual perception remains under the influence of the collectivistic culture of China. Due to concerns about the social response, some adolescents regard RE as a socially-sensitive issue due to its sexual component and the ensuing public judgement. For instance, Jie (female, aged 15) implied that engagement in RE was a disgrace to, and disobedience of, her family:

> *I feel that becoming involved in love affairs is like something being deprived from my body … like I am making a huge mistake and doing something disgraceful against my family, because my family is very strict on this.*

In line with the adolescents' descriptions about the inappropriateness of sexual behaviour in public, parents thought that public places, such as schools, were safe for adolescents, as these environments would impose restrictions on adolescent sexual expression, and thus reduced the likelihood of adolescents engaging in sexual activities. Zhang (M), aged 43, with a 16-year-old daughter, stated: *"as long as they are at school, they won't do serious things."* However, adolescents in this study witnessed their peers developing romantic experience and engaging in sexual behaviours at school. Zhang's beliefs about the safety of school in relation to adolescent sexual abstinence may reflect the fact that she was not well-informed about adolescent interaction in the current school context. Similarly, Qing (M), aged 45, believed that her 18-year-old daughter was sexually-restrained because she limited her dating to public settings:

> *They [my daughter and her boyfriend] usually just go to public places like the library, the cinema, or restaurants. They can travel with other people but cannot go alone because [sexual] problems can happen.*

Adolescents distinguished between acceptable and unacceptable sexual behaviour based on the degree of sexual involvement and the related social and health consequences, as well as the nature of the setting in which it occurred. In comparison to defining adolescent sexual behaviour as being of a light or heavy type based on its potential health consequences in other studies (Crockett, Raffaelli & Moilanen 2006; Jones & Furman 2011), adolescents in this study situated their understandings of their sexuality within the wider socio-cultural context. Overall, they conceptualised light sexual behaviour as being permissible, while rejecting sexual intercourse due to socio-cultural proscriptions and parental prohibition.

Compared with adolescents, parents appeared to be stricter in relation to the acceptability of adolescent sexual behaviour. Parents generally viewed any form of adolescent sexual behaviour as being unacceptable and expressed disapproval of it. For instance, Song (F), aged 44, who supported RE for his 17-year old son, restricted his son's sexual behaviour to *"holding hands, not even hugging".* Likewise, Cui (M), aged 46, told her 17-year-old daughter to *"avoid physical contact, even touching hands [with the boy]"*. This difference in the acceptance of the extent of sexual intimacy between parents and adolescents implies that adolescents are more open in their sexual behaviour than their parents. This discrepancy may be associated with their distinct socio-cultural environments that create a generational

difference and shape the construction of adolescent RE and sexuality among parents and adolescents.

4.4 Generational difference: a modern and more open society

Parents argued that current adolescent RE was distinct from what they considered to be RE in their adolescent years. These generational differences mainly encompass demonstrations of RE and the associated attitudes, which correspond with the socio-economic and cultural transitions over time in China (Li, L, King & Winter 2009).

Some parents mentioned that RE was clandestine and even shameful among young people during their adolescent years. However, romantic experience is more acceptable among current adolescents who have developed different views about romance and sexuality from their parents. This difference corroborates with the work of Parish, Laumann and Mojola (2007) who stated that sexual culture in China has changed from being traditional to being more open since the economic reforms of the 1980s. Yan (M) and Hu (M) described their experience when they were adolescents:

> *When we were at school, there were some steps [to prevent RE]. Boys and girls were not allowed to talk with each other and sit together* (Yan (M), aged 47, with an 18-year-old daughter).

> *We were very closed-minded in high school. For example, a boy had a crush on me and passed me a note to express this; I had feelings of fear and embarrassment. At that time, it was a shameful thing, but now it is not for young people* (Hu (M), aged 45, with a 17-year-old daughter).

Parents in this study who were born in the 1970s or earlier went through their adolescence in a dramatically different time, where conservative sexual values were the mainstream (Gao, YY & Zhang 2008), and sex was a taboo subject (Hoy 2001; Wang, B et al. 2005). This social and historical context shaped parents in developing relatively conservative attitudes and behaviours in relation to RE and sexuality. In the 1980s, when the parents in this study were adolescents, they developed romantic interests but could not express them overtly due to the restrictions placed on them by their school, with mixed-gender education, and the socio-cultural shame attached to it. Young Chinese students before the 2000s encountered severe punishments, including expulsion from their school, if they were found to be engaging in a romantic relationship and sexual intercourse (Farrer 2006; Higgins et al. 2002). Parents who lived through this period experienced repression and sensitivity of RE and sexuality issues. This experience may have shaped some parents to perceive school as a safe environment for

their adolescents because they were prohibited from romantic and sexual engagement in the schooling system of their youth.

In comparison, current adolescents are living in a different social and cultural context in which previous repressive sexual values have become more liberated with the process of modernisation in China (Zheng, W et al. 2011; Zheng, WJ et al. 2014). Some parents have realised that the changing sexual values in wider society exert a strong influence over adolescent romantic and sexual attitudes and behaviours. For example, Jiao (F) illustrated the dramatic change in sexual norms between the two generations by comparing their distinct responses when coming across sexual behaviour.

> *When I was young, people turned pale at speaking of sex. Now the whole environment and social atmosphere has changed. Talking about sex is a feeling of happiness for current young people, like 'How charming I am because I had sex!' … In our times, having sex before marriage would be spurned by the partner. But now it becomes a kind of capital to show off* (Jiao (F), aged 50, with a 15-year-old son).

Jiao pinpointed the difference in talking about sex between his generation and current young boys, from silence to viewing sex as a sign of masculinity. It appears that the change of sexual expression is more evident among males than females.

Meanwhile, mothers stated that the more liberal sexual culture in society encouraged adolescents to embrace a more liberal sexual attitude, and therefore, to engage in sexual behaviours. For instance, Cui (M), aged 46, with a17-year-old daughter, illustrated the change in social norms about sexual behaviour, from confining sex within marriage to a tolerance of premarital sex.

> *In the past, (sex) can only happen after marriage, but now it occurs a lot before marriage. Children might feel that interaction between males and females is frivolous.*

Adolescents acknowledged that they experienced more openness in romantic engagement and related conversations than their parents when they were adolescents. Tian described the generational differences based on her parents' narratives:

> *My parents told me that boys and girls never walked together and had some contact … they kept a distance and were ashamed of getting too close. We are exposed to different things now … We view this (RE) as very common. But they must be shy on hearing of this term and embarrassed to talk about it at that time. It doesn't matter for us to speak of this term, and now boys and girls discuss it together. So, we are at a bold age and very open* (Tian, female, aged 16).

Adolescents in contemporary China are living in a more globalised and technologically-oriented environment than their parents. This environment includes rich media such as the

Internet, which significantly contributes to different sexual views and practices (Cheng, S, Ma & Missari 2014). Adolescents recognised that the media influenced their construction of RE and relevant practice. For instance, Hong (female, aged 17) stated that the media portrayal of RE provided an idealised image that drove her to experiment with it:

> *The other thing … we watch some TV series or movies which were performed by adults, but probably were stories about romantic love at our stage. After watching these, we feel like a temptation to try it … love is so wonderful that we want to try it on our own.*

The media serves as an important context for adolescent sexual socialisation within the ecological model of adolescent sexual health (L'Engle, Brown & Kenneavy 2006). The impact of the media on adolescents' romantic involvement has been documented in the literature, such as increasing romantic relationships and earlier sexual intentions and behaviours (Cheng, S, Ma & Missari 2014; Fortenberry 2013; L'Engle, Brown & Kenneavy 2006). Chinese adolescents, particularly those living in urban regions, now have greater access to a variety of media (e.g., the Internet, television, books, and magazines) which transmit sexual material (Chen, X & Chiu 2010; Li, L, King & Winter 2009).

Parents stressed that current adolescents are more exposed to diverse sexual content in various forms of media, such as through pictures, videos on television, and the Internet. The parents realised that these contextual differences shaped adolescent sexual values and behaviours. Hu, aged 45, with a 17-year-old daughter, argued that the easy accessibility of information placed adolescents at risk:

> *I find that now nearly every child can get on the Internet. Children's exposure to adult things (sexual materials) too early is not good, but they do exist.*

In addition, parents recognised that external factors, such as peer pressure outside of the family, increasingly exert an influence over adolescents. Jiao (F), aged 50, with a son aged 15, pointed out the incrementally-increasing occurrence of adolescent sexual intercourse under peer influence through the media.

> *It (sexual intercourse) does occur. Now in university, it is said that students will be viewed as odd people if they never have sex. This idea has been spread to middle school, through the Internet.*

Parents are simultaneously experiencing the changes that China is undergoing, including a sexual culture shift and greater exposure to westernisation (Gao, YY & Zhang 2008). Research indicates that people's sexual attitudes and sexual behaviours have evolved substantially to become more liberated in China (Zhang, K et al. 1999). The shift in sexual values is more evident among young Chinese people (Wang, B et al. 2005), leading to a

significant generational differences in RE and sexuality between adolescents and their parents.

4.4.1 Parental disapproving and adolescents concealing

Observing the changing sexual values of an open and modern society, the parents tended to hold a more risk-based perspective toward RE and the sexuality of adolescents who hold more liberal sexual views, and may therefore act more liberally. Therefore, most parents expressed objection to their adolescents' explicit romantic engagement and wanted them to avoid the risks. Adolescents were aware of parental disapproval of RE and were in fear of being found out by their parents, as Lin (female, aged 16) said: "*No current parents approve of it and you have to be cautious to hide it from parents*".

Consequently, RE was clandestine among most adolescents due to perceived parental objection. Tao explained that his mother imposed a threat to prohibit him from romantic engagement, and therefore he kept her uninformed of his RE or even deceived her:

> *When I go out for dating, I don't tell my mum, or I deceive her saying that I go to my classmate's house for playing computers. I don't intend to hide it from her, but I have no choice. My mum is very traditional and she strongly opposes engaging in love now. She once said "either girlfriend or me, you decide!" So I cannot tell her. Otherwise, I don't know what she will do impulsively* (Tao, male, aged 16).

However, adolescents interpreted their parents as being open or conservative based on the parental response to adolescent RE, i.e., approval or disapproval. Some adolescents challenged their parents' standpoint of delaying RE until university as overly-conservative and expressed disagreement. Lan illustrated that her mother's consequence-focused perceptions of RE represented her conservative nature:

> *My mother always tells me that I must complete my school first and then I can only find a boyfriend in university … This is a very traditional thought … I feel my mother indeed is too traditional, because she only sees one side of it, and she doesn't see the positive aspects* (Lan, female, aged 16).

By pointing out their parents' conservative attitudes toward adolescent RE, some adolescents expressed discordant opinions from their parents and engaged in romantic activities without parental permission and knowledge. Tao (male, aged 16) complained about his mother's conservative nature, especially when he observed various parental attitudes toward RE in his social environment:

> *The parents of one of my friends don't oppose him having love affairs. My aunt doesn't object to my cousin, she said my cousin can bring his girlfriend home and let her have a look. I don't know why my mom is so conservative and too traditional.*

With exposure to Western culture, Yu likewise stated that the West was more open in RE and sexuality issues than China:

> *In China, it (RE) is secretive from parents … Only when the two (couple) plans to get married, they meet each other's parents. But in the West, love affair is overt and young people say frankly they are in love. Teachers say openly like 'did you kiss?' … I think the Western countries are more open and neutral toward adolescent romantic issues than China. Chinese parents think it is an issue leading to bad effects and forbid it. We have no choice but to conceal* (Yu, female, aged 16).

Through observing alternative approaches adopted by other parents in China and the West, some adolescents constructed RE differently from their parents and complained about their parents' conservative reactions to RE. They expressed a desire for RE but predominantly behaved in a secretive way within the relatively conservative Chinese culture and strict parental discipline, indicating that adolescents may encounter conflict with their parents on this issue. Hong (female, aged 17) pointed out that RE negatively affected the parent-child relationship in situations in which the parents disapproved of, and found out about, their adolescent's romantic involvement:

> *Parents know that you are having love affairs and they must object, while you two are passionate in a relationship and then you dispute it with the parents. This causes a conflict, influencing the parent-child relationship.*

Hong constructed RE as a potential source of parent-adolescent conflict, and therefore developed vigilance against her parents. However, the traditional values of family and filial piety in China emphasises the importance of respecting and not defying one's parents (Fuligni & Zhang 2004). Therefore, parental disapproval might not be negotiable, but was at odds with adolescents' desire for RE.

Contrary to the concealment of romantic involvement among most adolescents, a few disclosed their RE to their parents for advice. Such disclosure may be attributed to the parents' open attitude. For instance, Luo (male, aged 16) proactively sought advice from his parents when he faced or came across some relationship issues:

> *When I meet some problems, like we have quarrels [with girlfriend], I ask my parents' advice about how to deal with that.*

Some adolescents talked to their parents and were given advice to assist with their decisions about romantic engagement. Ying spoke with her mother about the courtships she faced and described the responses by her mother as follows:

> *Sometimes, when certain boys expressed love to me, I told my mum. She would say 'you can' and give me some suggestions like 'I need to look at the boy's character and personality first. If he is nice then I can start a relationship with him after graduation. Now it is better to get along as a good friend, closer than friends but more distant than lovers' … that means the relationship is not so intimate, no intimate contact. She also said 'If he is not very good, do not make the relationship with him a deadlock or too embarrassing.'* (Ying, female, aged 15).

Ying did not conceal her romantic issues to her mother. In this instance, Ying's mother elaborated on her views and gave Ying more autonomy to make her own decision, whilst reminding her to maintain appropriate intimacy with the potential romantic partner and to refuse a courtship in the proper manner. The cases of Luo and Ying were exceptional examples in this study that differed from others who hid their RE from their parents. Luo and Ying's parents accepted their romantic engagement and provided support and advice on relationship issues, which enabled their adolescents to share their thoughts with them. Therefore, the parents' attitudes toward RE largely determine whether adolescents inform their parents about RE and also influence how they communicate about these issues.

4.5 Girls' vulnerability and 'self-respect'

In addition to the generational differences in adolescent RE and sexuality, parents and adolescents conveyed a gendered-perception of adolescent RE in which girls were perceived to be more vulnerable in romantic and sexual issues than boys.

4.5.1 A gendered perception of adolescent romantic experience and sexuality

Both parents and adolescents stated that girls were more emotionally, sexually, and socially vulnerable during RE than boys. This vulnerability was associated with the different ways of handling RE issues between boys and girls, and the consequences of RE for both, reflecting a socio-cultural construction of gender in sexual issues.

Adolescents commented that boys were more capable in dealing with RE issues, including associated conflicts with study, and relationship failure, while girls were more emotionally vulnerable. Xiao and Hong expressed their understandings of gender difference in RE:

> *At junior middle school, one boy and one girl in a relationship in my class studied well. In the end, the boy succeeded, while the girl failed to enter a famous high school; because the boy is rational and can withdraw from the relationship decisively, but the girl is emotional and is unable to extricate herself from it* (Xiao, female, aged 16).

> *A boy can easily dissociate himself from one experience. But if a girl is refused or breaks up with a boy, she will be distressed for a long time. In this aspect, a boy is stronger and girl is weaker* (Hong, female, aged 17).

As Xiao mentioned, the gender norms of masculinity and femininity often define boys and girls as rationally-oriented and emotionally-oriented respectively in China. This construction entails girls' greater emotional involvement in RE than boys, and thus the experience of vulnerability in the case of relationship dissolution. Under this gendered construction of RE, these adolescent girls tended to label themselves as being 'weaker' than boys in relation to RE issues. This construction reflects the patriarchal cultural belief of Confucianism that males are considered to be superior to, and more powerful than, females (Chan 2009).

Girls were perceived as being sexually vulnerable, while boys were seen as being at less risk due to the outcomes of unsafe sex (e.g., pregnancy and abortion), and the social norm of premarital chastity of girls. Yang and Jie cited their friends' sexual behaviours, and highlighted the girls' suffering and boys' relative lack of susceptibility in premarital sexual behaviour.

> *One of my friends did the stupid thing (having sex), she got pregnant. She had to have an abortion because she was unmarried. She might have an illness or can't get pregnant in the future. But there is not any influence on the boy* (Yang, female, aged 16).

> *For boys, the harm [of having sex] is little, but for girls, it might be a lifetime of shame if she doesn't deal with the relationship well. I had a friend and she had sex in a relationship. After that she became more introverted or even closed. She dared not to look straight into others eyes during talking. I feel it might be a great trouble for her in the future* (Jie, female, aged 15).

Jie emphasised that sexual intercourse caused more negative social effects on girls due to the shame of adolescent sexual behaviour and its long-term impacts, which is associated with the persistently valued social norms of female premarital virginity in China (Cui et al. 2012). In addition, a young woman's sexual behaviour ruins both her individual virtue and the reputation of her family in the collectivistic Chinese culture (Kim 2009). Therefore, female adolescents are responsible not only for controlling their own sexuality, but also for preventing embarrassment for their family.

For the same reason, parents emphasised girls' vulnerability and demonstrated distinct attitudes toward their adolescent romantic and sexual involvement depending on the gender of the adolescent. Cui (M), aged 46, stated: *"as a mother of a girl [17 years old], I really worry. It is different to raise a boy. In sexual issues, girls suffer more than boys.*" Ma (M) was

concerned that early sexual engagement would lead to multiple sexual partners and the degradation of sexual value for adolescent boys:

> *After the first experience of sex, boys might behave more casually (in sexual matters), thinking that he can do this now, then he can do more as he gets older. It will become a non-serious thing; just like a physical need instead of basing on mutual love … Boys do not pay attention to the first time [of sex] for girls. They might become promiscuous, changing girlfriends like changing clothes … For my son, I am also worried and I don't want him to be like this* (Ma (M), aged 43, with a 17-year-old son).

Conversely, Jiao (F) claimed that he would not worry about his son's romantic and sexual behaviour:

> *When a boy reaches a certain age, if he needs some [RE], then he will go for it. He won't lose anything, regardless of having sex or not. As parents of a boy, we don't consider this (adolescent sex) and worry. We don't talk about it. It is a problem that should be considered by parents of girls* (Jiao (F), aged 50, with a 15-year-old son).

Jiao perceived that boys were not susceptible to sexual issues, and appeared to accept his son's sexual behaviour, but had no related communication with him about these issues. The accounts from Cui and Jiao indicate that a double standard of sexual behaviour applies to current boys and girls who are judged by different societal standards and expectations in contemporary China. On a societal level, female chastity is more valued and thus is more heavily regulated than male virginity (Tang, Wong & Cheung 2002; Zhang, LY et al. 2004). Therefore, girls are expected to maintain sexual abstinence before marriage, while boys are granted more permission in sexual issues (Xiao, Mehrotra & Zimmerman 2011). The sexual double standard escalates girls' vulnerability, and shapes how parents converse with boys and girls about RE and sexuality.

4.5.2 Talking about 'self-respect' with girls and responsibility with boys

On account of the perceived vulnerability of girls, parents often place them as the target of communication, while showing less concern about boys in relation to sexuality. In practice, parents spoke with their daughters about sexual abstinence and safety from sexual harassment, while they spoke with the boys about sexual morality and responsibility. For instance, Zhen (F), aged 43, stated that he spoke with his 15-year-old son about sexual outcomes from a responsibility perspective.

> *Tell him that having sex would cause a girl's pregnancy, and generally, she won't give birth. So this (sex) is not responsible for the girl's body (health).*

In contrast to Jiao's practice of accepting his son's sexual behaviour while remaining reticent about the issue, Zhen's discussions with his son about responsibility represent a more modern approach to adolescent sexual health promotion involving boys (Brindis et al. 2005).

In contrast, parents (mainly mothers) delivered a message of maintaining 'self-respect', as well as the risks of sexual behaviour to girls to encourage abstinence, in line with the traditional sexual belief of female premarital virginity (Cui et al. 2012). Qing (M), aged 45, with an 18-year-old daughter, said: *"I always instil in her the importance of self-respect and self-regard for girls"*. Some parents like Qing were uncomfortable with speaking about sex or sexuality frankly, so instead, used the euphemistic term 'self-respect'. Self-respect carries a cultural connotation as a traditional ideology of behaving properly and avoiding 'premature' love and sexual behaviour, especially for girls (Huang, Y et al. 2009).

Adolescent girls understood the euphemism of self-respect to mean no sexual behaviour from the parents' messages about the undesirability of adolescent sexual behaviour and the associated label of disgrace in society. For example, Yu explained that a way of demonstrating self-respect is to maintain premarital sexual abstinence:

> *Perhaps from year five, my mum educated me not to do that thing (sex) before marriage. I think that means remaining a virgin until the day of marriage. She said 'in future, when you are in love with a boy, and that boy takes you to a hotel, you should never go. Girls should have self-respect.' She gave me examples of many girls who got pregnant because of having sex and then the boys deserted the girls; this is not self-respect* (Yu, female, aged 16).

In addition to sexual abstinence, some parents, particularly the mothers of girls, extended their communication to include protection against potential sexual assault. Parents realised that potential sexual assault could happen to adolescent girls, and incorporated stories about risky sexual situations into their communication with their adolescents, especially girls, to ensure their safety. For example, Cui (M), aged 46, told her 17-year-old daughter to be careful of males outside of the family.

> *I tell my daughter not to stay alone with a male in a room. I tell her who she can stay with, like her father, grandfather, uncles, and cousins, these relatives won't hurt her.*

Cui addressed the potential sources of sexual risk to her daughter based on her knowledge of sexual harassment in society. This quote corresponds to the increasing child and adolescent sexual abuse cases perpetrated by people they know, including family members, in China (Chan 2009; Lin, D et al. 2011). However, Cui believed that people within the family were

more trustful, reflecting a lack of parental knowledge about sexual abuse (Zhang, W et al. 2013).

Jie recounted what her parents discussed with her about dealing with potential sexual harassment at school and in other public settings.

> *My parents tell me how to cope with things like boys or male teachers in school who might do something bad to me. For example, if some boys touch my face or hands intentionally, and I warn them but they continue, I will take some defensive actions taught by my parents … If encountering some bad guys on the street, I will divert their attention by saying something and then running away immediately; or I will do something to hurt the guys* (Jie, female, aged 15).

This study demonstrates that parents tend to discuss such issues more with girls than with boys, and this can be attributed to the gendered perception of adolescent sexuality in China. This finding aligns with previous reports that female, rather than male, adolescents are also the main focus of sexual communication in the USA (Guilamo-ramos et al. 2007; Swain, Ackerman & Ackerman 2006; Trinh, SL et al. 2014), and other Asian countries (Trinh, J et al. 2009; Zuo et al. 2013). Communication between parents and adolescents reflects the cultural ideology around sexual practice in China being gender-based, and influenced by the traditional social and cultural constructions of gender and sexuality in China (Chong & Kvasny 2005). Gupta (2000) stated that the construction of gender and sexuality are based on a power imbalance between the genders, where men have greater control than women. In China, the long-lasting Confucian patriarchal values still remain (Xiao, Mehrotra & Zimmerman 2011), where males are dominant and females are expected to be subordinate to and oppressed by men, and to be passive rather than autonomous in matters of sexuality (Huang, Y et al. 2009; Zhou, S & Zhu 2004).

Chinese women are constantly constructed as a victimised and marginalised group in regards to sexuality, which is further constructed as being accompanied by negative social, physical, and psychological impacts on women (Pei, Petula & Lun 2007). In this study, parents and female adolescents constructed girls as being more vulnerable than boys in relation to sexuality. For instance, Tian and Hong acknowledged their own vulnerability by respectively stating that *"boys victimise others, while girls are victimised by others, so girls are more in danger"* and *"girls are the weak group, while boys are the strong group."* Such perceptions may prevent girls from engaging in RE. Alternatively, girls might take for granted that they lack power and control over their own bodies and relationships, which further intensifies their vulnerability. Therefore, the double standard of sexual behaviour in China is deeply ingrained,

and constitutes one of the main reasons for the gendered perceptions of adolescent RE and sexuality, and the subsequent gendered communication.

In brief, parents and adolescent girls in this study underlined the greater vulnerability of girls in RE, while rarely mentioning the vulnerability of boys. The gendered constructions of RE and sexuality resulted in the parents worrying more about the girls and talking more with them about RE and sexuality than they did with the boys. However, the literature found that girls and boys were equally vulnerable to the negative influences of romantic relationships, but with different resulting manifestations (Chen, Z et al. 2009; Joyner & Udry 2000; Shulman & Scharf 2000). Specifically, girls manifested internal symptoms such as depression due to their greater emotional engagement, while boys primarily displayed behavioural problems, such as delinquency and earlier sexual involvement (Chen, Z et al. 2009; Hou et al. 2013; Joyner & Udry 2000).

Gender stereotypes in sexuality exist in almost every society (Marston & King 2006). This study affirms the influence of sexual double standard embedded in Chinese culture in shaping the way that adolescents and parents construct adolescent RE and the content of family communication. Moreover, the gender-based communication approach leaves male adolescents in a less restricted position and rarely as the target of communication. This act further enlarges the sexual double standard among adolescents, and places girls in a more vulnerable position.

4.6 Conclusion

Adolescents and parents presented diverse understandings of adolescent RE in terms of its characteristics, educational and health influences, and in generational and gender differences. Both parents and adolescents recognised that RE was normal and imbued with symbolic meanings of attractiveness and maturity. Adolescents and a few parents viewed RE as providing a form of relaxation from academic pressure, promoting adolescents' well-being, and shaping future intimate relationship development. However, they perceived RE as not being long-lasting and as immature, with a distinction being made with marriage-oriented love. Meanwhile, RE entailed a number of risks for academic achievement, mental health, sexual health, and future marriage and family, especially if sexual behaviours occurred in the RE context. The risks embedded within RE are linked with the social construction of love and adolescent RE within the Chinese culture of Confucianism that stresses the importance of

education, family, marriage, and women's premarital chastity (Gao, E et al. 2012; Huang, GH-C & Gove 2012).

The sociocultural risks of adolescent RE and sexuality, in particular, generate a gendered perception of RE and place females in a vulnerable position. Parents expressed their concerns about their daughter's romantic activities, not only in terms of academic attainment, but also in relation to the importance of 'self-respect' (i.e., not having sex). However, parents of boys mainly attended to the negative impacts of RE on educational achievement, demonstrating less concern about sexual risks. Therefore, parents showed a gendered form of communication in which they mainly confined their communication about sexual issues with girls while neglecting the boys. This parental practice reinforces the traditional and stereotypical gender norms in sexual behaviour that can increase sexual risk-taking behaviours for both boys and girls (Jewkes & Morrell 2010; Noar & Morokoff 2002), and undermines the concerted efforts needed by both males and females to promote sexual well-being (Martin, McDaid & Hilton 2014). Therefore, besides focusing on girls, parents should be encouraged to make greater efforts to target and engage boys in communication to influence their sexual decision-making.

The rapid sociocultural transformations in China during the process of modernisation and westernisation have created a generational difference in relation to the construction of adolescent RE and sexuality. Parents interpreted adolescent RE based on their own experiences during adolescence, as well as their perceptions regarding the contemporary sociocultural context. As a result of economic changes from the time when the parents were younger in China, they tend to place a higher expectation on the academic success of their adolescents as a part of fulfilling filial piety. Parents wanted their adolescents to focus on education rather than engaging in RE to ensure their adolescent's future prospects and their own future welfare. For this reason, parents predominantly took a problem-oriented perspective towards RE, and selected stories of risk and adverse consequences as the messages to discuss with their adolescents. These consequence-based parental messages were similar to the 'fear appeal' strategy used to promote adolescent abstinence and safer sexual activity reported by Afifi, Joseph and Aldeis (2008). However, parents in this study provided less information about how to avoid these consequences (e.g., contraception), apart from abstinence, probably due to their lack of knowledge and communication skills. Nevertheless, the parental messages of warning and prohibition play an ineffective role in achieving

parental expectations and ensuring the health of those adolescents who had already been in a romantic relationship or who had already been sexually active.

In contrast, adolescents were more inclined to address the positive components of RE and were eager to experience RE under the influence of school peers and the mass media. However, some adolescents had concerns and pressures placed upon them from family and their school, indicating that interaction within the ecological system shaped their constructions of RE and sexuality. Filial piety and parental prohibition of RE resulted in some adolescents waiting until the completion of high school to start engaging in RE, while others engaged in covert dating to circumvent parental knowledge and to avoid parental blame and conflict. Therefore, some adolescents were confronted with discordance between their inner desires and their external limitations, including parental control and cultural filial piety, which created a complicated RE-related decision-making process for adolescents.

Overall, the perceptions of adolescent RE and the topics embedded in parent-adolescent communication are largely influenced by the traditional cultural beliefs about education, sexuality, and the family. The increasing incidence of sexual practice among young people in the current Chinese sociocultural context that challenge the traditional norms has motivated parents to communicate more with their adolescents about these issues. The following chapter will describe the motives behind parent-adolescent communication about RE and sexuality, and how they communicate about these topics.

CHAPTER 5 MOTIVES FOR AND APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATION: PARENTING-DRIVEN COMMUNICATION AND EMPLOYMENT OF STRATEGIES TO REDUCE EMBARRASSMENT

5.1 Introduction

This chapter illustrates the motives for, and approaches to, parent-adolescent communication about adolescent romantic experience (RE) and sexuality. The motives for, and approaches to, communication are shaped by the sociocultural construction of adolescent RE and sexuality, as well as parenting values in Chinese culture. Parents reported three motives of communication, including *parental responsibility, familiarity, and staying informed.* Adolescents demonstrated their understanding of parental motives while expressing very few of their own motives for initiating communication. These motives shaped how parents and adolescents communicated with each other about RE and sexuality. In addition to these motives, the approaches used during parent-adolescent communication will be discussed in this chapter.

5.2 Parental responsibility

Both parents and adolescents recognised that parents were the initiator of, and the main people responsible for communication. Only a few adolescents in this study proactively initiated communication with their parents. Parents and several adolescents stated that communication was the responsibility of the parents to ensure the health and safety of their adolescents. The parental obligation to initiate communication was linked to their perceptions of their adolescents' mental immaturity and potential for risk-taking behaviours, especially under social influences outside of the family, including from the media and peers. In addition, parents believed that they could influence adolescent sexual decision-making which further motivated them to exercise their responsibility.

5.2.1 Responding to adolescents' immaturity to protect them from society

Parents were expected to be able to exert influence on their adolescents through communication to protect them from potential sexual risks arising from their immaturity and social influences. Ma (M) and Mao (F) articulated the necessity of communication based on their understandings of adolescents:

> *Because kids are not so mature in mentality, even if they have developed their body … we need to guide him frequently, use conversation or just chatting to let him have a notion in his head, to transmit information to him* (Ma (M), aged 43, with a 17-year-old son).

> *It is very important. Because kids are emotional, just depends on who he likes and does whatever he wants. Without parental communication and guidance, kids might fall into it [a relationship] and things [sex] happen. Communication is obviously necessary and essential to make things go in the right direction* (Mao (F), aged 45, with an 18-year-old son).

Ma and Mao believed that the gap between physical and emotional development limited the adolescents' capacity to make informed and mature decisions about RE and sexual issues, leading to risk-taking behaviours. From a social neuroscience perspective, this disparity in maturation contributes to risky adolescent behaviours that are propelled more by emotion and rewards than by rational decision-making (Sawyer et al. 2012; Steinberg 2008; Tao, FB, Sun & Hao 2010). Therefore, parents such as Ma and Mao were motivated to communicate with their adolescents to help them avoid sexual risks through transmitting parental sexual values and then ensuring that they go 'in the right direction'.

Parents' understandings of adolescent immaturity are also linked to ecological factors in the environment in which adolescents are situated. Parents recognised that their adolescents were interacting with a range of external factors, including their peers and the media in the contemporary socio-cultural context. Parents perceived that these factors imposed negative influences on their adolescents. The parents grew up in a different context where sexual culture was conservative, with no Internet and only limited sexual information in the media, whereas current adolescents are living in a different time with more exposure to a variety of media containing sexual messages that are beyond parental control. Zhen (F) stated:

> *When I was young, there was no Internet, few media, and few depictions about these [romantic and sexual] issues. It was closed. Now, it becomes more open. Current kids contact many more things on the Internet and on television. Something that happened will be reported immediately in these media. When you open TV and the Internet, everything is there. All of these influence him* (Zheng (F), aged 43, with a 15-year-old son).

Together with the immaturity of adolescents, the different contexts of the generations motivated parents to communicate with their adolescents to protect their health and safety in relation to RE. Hu, aged 45, with a 17-year-old daughter, stated that parents could have a more positive influence on adolescents compared to other sources of information:

> *Parent should speak it (sexuality) out and try best to exert positive impacts on the child. This is better and more direct than letting the child explore and experience it from other sources.*

Mass media is an important source of adolescent sexual socialisation (L'Engle, Brown & Kenneavy 2006), in which adolescents access sexual messages and can develop sexual

intention and behaviours (Bleakley, Hennessy & Fishbein 2011; Cheng, S, Ma & Missari 2014). The parents in this study recognised the influence of the mass media on their adolescents and believed that their communication may mitigate negative influences from the media. Cui (M) stated that the incomplete picture of sexual activity presented in the media motivated her to discuss the risks associated with sexual behaviour with her daughter:

> *I don't think they know the health impacts of sex. Because now, TV dramas and movies just show the pleasure of it (sex), nothing about the health aspects, like the consequences of pregnancy for an unmarried girl. So, girls go for abortion with no fear. Repeated abortions do harm to the uterus but they don't know this. So, we parents need to talk with the children* (Cui (M), aged 46, with a 17-year-old daughter).

Similarly, Zhang (M) mentioned that increasing premarital sexual behaviour, including the 'cohabitation phenomenon' among young people in China, worried her. Therefore, she was motivated to talk to her daughter about premarital abstinence to keep her within cultural boundaries and behaving consistently with family values:

> *I started to talk with her in junior middle school. I think it is good to talk earlier rather than waiting … If the child cannot get information from the parents, she gets it from other sources, but they are not necessarily correct. Or if she gets to learn this (sex) from boys, that would be more troublesome. You see that young people cohabit before marriage in society. Honestly, I cannot stand this. I told her 'never cohabit before marriage.'*(Zhang (M) aged 43, with a 16-year-old daughter).

Premarital sexual behaviour conflicted with parental constructions of sexuality and marriage, which particularly served as a motivation for the parents of girls to discuss the importance of abstinence with their daughters to protect their future marriage prospects, as Wei (M), aged 45, with a 17-year-old daughter stated:

> *It (communication) is the parents' obligation for the children's whole lifetime. I think a girl must keep herself clean before marriage. If I don't tell her, how can she have a good basis for marriage?*

Therefore, parental motivation to communicate with their adolescents was embedded in the socio-cultural context, and was associated with their construction of adolescents as being under a diverse range of social influences that brought potential risks to adolescent health and future marriage prospects.

Most of the adolescents demonstrated their understandings of the parental motives; however, they expressed few motives of their own to proactively communicate with their parents. Adolescents who initiated communication with their parents were motivated by the perception of their parents as being credible sources of information and experience. For instance, Ying was cognisant of the influence of mass media and other sources which may be contradictory.

Yet, she asserted that parents had the best intentions in mind for their children, and that she could screen these messages from other sources:

> *We are interested in this topic (RE and sexuality) … These things are widely spreading on the Internet or mass media. Children would access these sources if they did not talk with their parents. But the information there is mixed, good and bad; that would be even worse for children's development … But parents definitely consider the children's good and this is to your advantage … they can discard the dross and select the good issues to talk about with you* (Ying, female, aged 15).

With a belief in her parents' best intentions, Ying rationalised parental communication as a more reliable source of information. Furthermore, Ying acknowledged her immaturity which rendered communication as a parental responsibility to help her with RE-related decision-making:

> *In the adolescent period, probably [we] cannot take a comprehensive view on this (RE).We need to seek advice from others, including parents, and see how they think of this, then we make a decision … If parents don't talk with me about this (RE), possibly I will do something or make decisions based on my own thoughts that can have bad results* (Ying, female, aged 15).

Ying was not confident about her ability to make the right decisions about RE issues which were new experiences for her. Therefore, she felt in need of her parents' support through communication to avoid undesirable outcomes.

As well as acknowledging their own immaturity, many of the adolescents in the study mentioned that their parents had passed through adolescence themselves, which enabled them to have a good understanding of what the adolescent would be experiencing, as Xi (female, aged 15) described:

> *Parents passed through the adolescent stage and should have knowledge of what their adolescent child is thinking. Parents have a good sense of what to talk about with their child. This is for the child's benefits. [Communication is] very necessary, otherwise how can the child know?* (Xi, female, aged 15)

Although the parents experienced their adolescence in a different socio-cultural context, Xi valued her parents' experience and knowledge of adolescence. Xi felt that her parents were equipped with 'a good sense' of adolescence and could be a good resource for communication about RE.

5.2.2 Parents believed they can influence adolescents' sexual decision-making

As well as responding to adolescents' immaturity, parents believed that they had the authority and power to influence their adolescents' decision-making processes, particularly in relation

to postponing RE, delaying sexual engagement, and selecting a marital partner. Parents recognised that their adolescents became interested in, and curious about, romantic and sexual issues as they matured. They believed that communication was one pathway towards normalising and demystifying RE and sexuality for adolescents, and that this could reduce the likelihood of their engagement. Zhang (M) illustrated this as follows:

> *Talking lets her know that fondness between boys and girls is quite normal. It is just like everyone in the world needs food and is a kind of physical need. I tell her like this to dilute her curiosity; at least she won't feel very curious and mysterious. Sometimes, children don't have this sense and insist on engaging with boys to see how it feels …* (Zhang (M), aged 43, with a 16-year-old daughter)

Zhang also believed that her communication could influence her daughter's decision-making in relation to romantic engagement. Therefore, she mentioned her disapproval of RE to her daughter to help her refrain from it:

> *I tell her now it is not the time for engaging in love affairs … Maybe she cannot stop immediately, but she must keep some of my words in her mind, and I think she can control herself [from engaging in RE].*

In addition to delaying romantic and sexual engagement, parents perceived that the influence of communication expanded to their adolescents' selection of a future partner. Yan (M) asserted that her communication could make a difference in her daughter's decision about choosing a romantic partner:

> *I tell her what kind of boyfriend might suit her. This does not necessarily play a decisive role, but must become part of her consideration when she develops a relationship … The notions I inculcate in her do not exactly match with hers, but at least she could have some standards, a direction, or a goal* (Yan (M), aged 47, with an 18-year-old daughter).

Although Yan recognised that her daughter probably did not follow her standards completely, her belief in her potential influence on her daughter reflects the traditional practice of parental involvement in their children's selection of a marital partner in China (Huang, WJ 2005). In modern Chinese families, the influence and authority of the parents still exists, although the hierarchical parent-child relationship is starting to become more open to negotiation (Tse 2013). The above assertions by Zhang and Yan indicate that they wanted their adolescents to obey their rules about avoiding premarital sexual behaviour, and to follow their wishes and desires through exercising their authority as parents.

Some adolescents supported parental communication and acknowledged its effect because of their belief in parental authority and power. Jia believed that parents, as the 'best teachers',

had the power to deter their adolescents from engaging in sexual behaviour through communicating with them:

> *It (communication) is good. Though somebody doesn't like to listen, it is said that parents are the best teachers. They have some sort of deterrent power and can prevent some incorrect behaviour from happening, I mean sexual behaviour. So it can serve as a preventive action* (Jia, female, aged 15).

In China, the Confucian value of filial piety requires children to show obedience and reverence to their parents (Huang, CY & Lamb 2014). Therefore, Jia believed that her parents' words were a powerful influence on her behaviour.

5.3 Familiarity: parents know their own adolescents well

Apart from responsibility, parents believed that they knew their own adolescents well, especially their character and developmental status. Parents' familiarity with their adolescents enabled them to employ an individualised approach to achieving more effective communication. Yan (M), aged 47, claimed that she adjusted her approach to communication with her 18-year-old daughter based on her knowledge of her daughter's acceptance of certain topics:

> *Because I am with her in daily life and know her well, I know what topics are acceptable for her and what is unacceptable. If she can accept, I will say directly; if she cannot, I use examples.*

Parents also perceived that they had good knowledge of their adolescents' developmental status, providing them with a basis to decide when to initiate communication. Ma (M), aged 43, mentioned that she commenced dialogue with her 17-year-old son about RE from the time he entered senior high school when she recognised his romantic awareness:

> *I started to talk with him about such (romantic) things in senior high school … he didn't seem to have such a sense in junior middle school. I feel my son is two years more delayed than others in his psychological development.*

Accounts from Yan and Ma indicate that some parents decided what, and when, to communicate by taking their adolescents' personality and maturity level into account. This individualised form of communication resonates with the argument that parents have the strength of knowing their adolescents better than others in undertaking communication about sexual matters (Jaccard, Dodge & Dittus 2002).

The parental advantage of familiarity with their adolescents was reinforced by accounts from five other parents (i.e., Cui, Wang, Wei, Cheng, and Tang) who worked as teachers or

administrators in the two high schools from which the participants were recruited. These parents provided a special perspective on adolescent RE and sexuality, as they simultaneously worked with the adolescent students in the school. All five parents addressed parental communication from a supportive perspective. For instance, Tang (F), aged 46, with an 18-year-old daughter, pointed out the distinction between parent-based and school-based sexual education, and highlighted the advantages of parent-adolescent communication about RE and sexuality. Tang stated that sex remained a sensitive topic in school settings in China; as he put it: *"it is unrealistic to put sex education completely in school in China, [as it is] such a traditional society."* Tang also described the difficulties that school teachers encountered in relation to the embarrassment and uncertainty about the extent of sex education for adolescent students. One reason for this dilemma was the age gap between teachers and adolescents:

> *Imagine that those young teachers just start working for a few years … they feel difficult to talk about this [sexual] issue, hard to grasp the degree. Or when teachers over 50 years old talk about this topic, it is improper as well.*

Tang further claimed:

> *The family should take more responsibility. It is much easier between a mother and daughter, and a father and son, because of their long-time contact … Family is not a formal setting and is more acceptable for children.*

School is considered to be a conventional setting and a major channel for adolescent sex education (Fonner et al. 2014; Wang, X 2013). However, school teachers, such as Tang in this study, concluded that parents are more appropriate people to deliver sex education given the parents' familiarity with their adolescents and the informality of the family setting. Parents in this study were expected by the school to take more responsibility for undertaking sex education, as reported by Lian et al. (2006). The dilemma the school encountered in this study encouraged teachers to place a greater emphasis on parental involvement in adolescent sexual health.

Although parents stated their familiarity with their adolescents as one motive for initiating communication, this was not supported by the adolescents' accounts. As discussed in Chapter Four, most adolescents did not disclose their romantic thoughts and behaviours to their parents. Therefore, parents' familiarity with their adolescents may be limited to the broader aspects of their personality and developmental status, rather than their romantic and sexual issues.

5.4 Staying informed about adolescents

Apart from addressing the importance of parental communication for the benefit of adolescents, parents stated that they wanted to be informed of their adolescents' opinions and activities around RE and sexual issues through communicating with each other. Knowledge about their adolescents was important for parents to ensure that they were on the 'right track', and this brought them a sense of security. For example, Yan (M) examined her daughter's views on RE and sexuality in a conversation they had together:

> *Sometimes, I give an example and ask her opinion; she might say they should get married or break up … through her analysis of these examples, I know how she will handle these things and her attitude … I feel her analysis is correct and then I feel assured about her* (Yan (M), aged 47, with an 18-year-old daughter).

Parents also believed that communication could enable them to take proactive steps when they perceived that their adolescents' views were 'incorrect' during their conversations, as Cheng (F) described:

> *When we discussed romantic relationships among kids, she thought that was normal and we admitted that. But she thought two of her classmates having intimate behaviours in the class were also normal. I told her it was incorrect to make intimate behaviours in public at her age. Some students want to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend because they saw that somebody else had one. I told her this was not right* (Cheng (F), aged 42, with a 16-year-old daughter).

Due to the different views about sexuality between Cheng and her daughter, Cheng imposed his views about sexual behaviour on his daughter and told her to avoid peer pressure.

In addition, communication served as an aid for parents to understand and monitor their adolescent's RE status. Ma (M) stated that she could identify the signs of the RE involvement of her son through enquiry and observation of his responses during conversations:

> *I often ask him: "Is there any girl showing fondness to you, or you are fond of some girls?" I think if he really has such a thing, his eyes or a vigilant facial expression make me know … Through chatting, I get to know his thinking and status. At the moment, he doesn't conceal his thoughts from me, so basically I know him* (Ma (M), aged 43, with a 17-year-old son).

The above quotes demonstrate the parents' desire to understand their adolescents' thoughts, and communication was seen as an important strategy for parents to gather information and stay informed. However, there is no guarantee that the information they gather is accurate given that most adolescents were hiding RE from their parents in this study.

Conversely, a lack of communication caused parents to worry and have a sense of loss when their adolescents refused to disclose information to their parents. Ping (M), aged 42, with an

18-year-old girl, stressed the importance of communication from an informational perspective in the context of the one-child family:

> *Because the child is the only one [in a family] … if she doesn't communicate with you, you know nothing about her inner world, her thoughts, you just care for her eating and sleeping, issues of livelihood … sometimes, parents will have a great sense of loss [of connection].*

Communication seemed to be the only accessible way for Ping to understand her daughter's thoughts. In particular, the family structure of having a single adolescent child encouraged parents to communicate in order to stay connected with, and remain informed about, their adolescents. However, adolescents are in the process of striving for independence from family and parents (Peterson 2004), and they increasingly connect and converse more with peers than with their parents (Henrich et al. 2006; Sullivan et al. 2012). Many of the Chinese adolescents in a study by Tse (2013) were found to be unwilling to disclose romantic relationships to their family, or were evasive when asked about them by their parents. Most of the adolescents in this study consistently reported concealing RE from their parents. Therefore, parents often took the initiative to talk with their adolescents for the sake of increasing their knowledge about their thoughts on, and behaviours in, romantic and sexual issues.

A few adolescents who did communicate with their parents mentioned that parental discussion of romantic issues encouraged parent-child bonding and connection. Luo (male, aged 16) regarded communication with his parents about RE as an indicator of trust toward his parents, which contributed to a closer relationship between them:

> *I feel it (communication about RE) can bring my relationship with my parents closer. At least, it makes my parents know that I trust them.*

5.5 Approaches to communication

Due to the perceived motives, parents and adolescents communicated in specific ways. Four major themes about approaches to communication were identified: *development-based communication, talking indirectly by using humour and real-life examples, applying a direct approach with gender-matching, and adolescent using avoidant strategies.* In most cases, the parents initiated and led the communication, while the adolescents were the receivers of the messages. Therefore, the approaches described below primarily reflect the parents' strategies of transmitting their values, attitudes, and advice to their adolescents. Adolescents demonstrated a range of views and responses to the parental strategies of communication, including embracing, complaining about their parents' approaches, and avoiding communication.

5.5.1 Parents talked differently across adolescent developmental stages

With the emotional and sexual development of adolescents, some parents adjusted their method of communication about RE and sexuality with their adolescents in relation to the extent, approach, and content. The adjustment that parents made reflected the fact that they modified their constructions of how effective communication was during the process of the interactions with their adolescents. The adolescents also expressed their views about the changes in the communicative approaches.

As adolescents grew older, parents generally increased the frequency and depth of communication about romantic and sexual issues. Mei (M), aged 45, explained that she now started to communicate more about RE with her 16-year-old daughter:

> *When she was young and was in junior middle school, we talked very superficially. But when she comes to senior high school, maybe she knows more and we talk more [about RE issues].*

In contrast to Mei, a few parents reduced the frequency of communication in the belief that their adolescents had matured cognitively, as Ping (M) mentioned:

> *At middle school, I asked her directly, 'is there anybody liking you?'… When she was very young, it was easy for her to have some accidents, impulses, or to do some stupid things because she didn't know. Now she is a high school student, she is growing up in various aspects. She can think over things in her head and has her own position. So, I won't say too much to her or intervene a lot. I just pay attention quietly to make sure the general direction is correct* (Ping (M), aged 42, with an 18-year-old daughter).

Ping had trust in her daughter's cognitive capacity, and thus avoided frequent communication about romantic matters to give her daughter more autonomy. She shifted her method of communication from directly probing to silently watching. Ping regarded less communication as less interference in her daughter's life. Ping's practice corresponds to the expectations of adolescents who strive for greater independence from their parents (Spear & Kulbok 2004). The difference between the practices of Mei and Ping indicates that they may have different understandings about adolescent development and so adjust their communicative approaches accordingly.

Hong reported that her parents included more sexual-related messages during the conversations when her awareness of sexuality had increased, yet the goal of her parents to keep her sexually-abstinent had not changed:

> *When I was in middle school, I didn't know a lot about things between boys and girls. My parents advised me to avoid intimate behaviours with boys, like touching of the head and face. Now I understand more about this, and my parents talk about it more deeply … When we talk*

> *about love affairs, we mention physical contact such as holding hands and kissing. But basically, their attitudes are the same … no such [sexual] behaviours* (Hong, female, aged 17).

As well as the frequency and content of communication, some adolescents reported that their parents changed their method of communication with them over time. Ying (female, aged 15) commented that her parents gradually transformed from an 'educative' approach into an informal chatting style:

> *When I was younger, my parents used an 'educative' tone to talk with me. As my age increases, they talk about this topic when we chat casually.*

This parental change towards informal talking contributed to the changing responses of Ying, as she now had more interaction with her parents about her thoughts on RE:

> *I talk more with my mother about my thinking at senior high school … Maybe I am influenced by one of my best friends in school. Her personality is extroverted and she speaks out what she thinks.*

Ying reported that her friends in school influenced her to talk informally with her parents. Ying's experience indicates that peer interaction has an impact on parent-adolescent communication.

Nevertheless, several adolescents stated that little change had occurred in the communication with their parents since the first conversation they had about RE. These adolescents complained that their parents reminded them to avoid engaging in RE by constantly repeating the same reasons, such as its negative influence on their study. This repetitive lecturing led to a resistance to listening, as Lan explained:

> *What they say never changes … I nearly forget what they have said … I don't expect a lot from them. What I expect is that they can talk less frequently, because it is the same every time, just those same sentences, like it influences your study. Initially I listened, but later I stopped listening to the same paragraph repeatedly …* (Lan, female, aged 17)

Other adolescents commented about the similarly rigid approach to communication of their parents, which was often a source of their reluctance to take notice of their parents' words. Bored with the unchanging method of communication, Lan expected more interactive conversations with her parents by pointing out that *"parents should listen to my thinking and then guide me"*. These complaints from adolescents indicate an incompatibility between adolescents' expectations of parental communication and current parental practice.

The above quotes reflect the significance of parents adjusting their communicative approach in accordance with adolescent development to achieve the desired outcome of communicating

the dangers of RE. Other researchers have emphasised the importance of an age- and development-appropriate method of communication with adolescents in relation to sexuality and RE (Lefkowitz & Stoppa 2006; Wakley 2011). In this study, some parents used a development-based approach to communication in relation to frequency, extent, and approach to discuss RE, based on their knowledge of their adolescent's development. This finding is consistent with a study by Walker, JL (2001) who demonstrated that some British parents used the skill of progressively and appropriately introducing and responding to sexual issues during their child's development. Therefore, parents with the skill of adjusting their approach to communication according to adolescent development have an advantage in applying a more individualised form of communication (Jaccard, Dodge & Dittus 2002). However, some adolescents complained that their parents' rigid and unchanging approach to communication caused their refusal to pay attention, suggesting that the function of parental communication in these families in influencing adolescent sexual health is dependent on parental skills.

5.5.2 Talking indirectly by using humour and real-life examples

Parents and adolescents often used humour and real-life examples to talk about RE and sexuality in an indirect manner to reduce embarrassment and to encourage their adolescent's receptivity.

5.5.2.1 Using humour in a non-serious context

Humour that occurred during meal time and in other informal contexts enabled parents and adolescents to initiate and maintain conversations about RE and sexuality more comfortably than would have been the case in more formal arrangements. For instance, Jia, aged 15, stated that joking while having a meal was a way for her family to start a conversation about RE:

> *Usually we talk when we have meals, they say something, like joking, rather than sitting down and starting the conversation seriously.*

Other parents and adolescents in this study also reported that their communication about RE most often occurred during meal time as an informal occasion when parents and their adolescents meet and talk in Chinese families. Hence, meal times provide the opportunity for parent-adolescent interaction in terms of inculcating particular meanings, and socialising adolescents into socio-cultural activities (Ochs & Shohet 2006). In particular, humour during meal time created a relaxed atmosphere for chatting about RE in an acceptable way for both the parents and the adolescents. Other studies have suggested that humour functions through downplaying the seriousness of discussing sexuality which puts parents and adolescents at

ease, leading to a more open form of communication (Afifi, Joseph & Aldeis 2008; Turnbull, Werscha & Schaik 2011).

Parents also used humour to broach RE topics with their adolescents. Zhen (F) described how he used a joking approach as an indirect way to start a conversation with his son about a relationship that he wanted to know about:

> *Accidentally, I found there was a girl's name on his mobile screen. Initially, his mother and I didn't do anything, we didn't know what to do ... Later, when we adults and kids from several families together talked about kids and joked about a kid having a girlfriend, then I asked him, 'How about you? Do you have a girlfriend?'*(Zhen (F), aged 43, with a 15-year-old son)

For some parents, the use of humour was also a way of conveying parental disapproval. Yang, a girl aged 16, described a joking conversation with her mother in relation to courtship:

> *I feel my mum disapproves of it ... she said 'the boy's eyes are so small, and yours are not big. If you two are together and have a baby in the future, the baby must have smaller eyes.' Just like this kind of kidding.*

This finding resonates with a study by Lefkowitz and Stoppa (2006) who reported that indirect communication about sexuality through the use of jokes provided adolescents with an understanding of their parents' views.

Conversely, humour is used by adolescents to avoid further conversations with their parents. Shan, a 17-year-old boy, described how his joking response limited further discussion about a direct question from his parents:

> *My parents are very traditional, they know something about [sexual behaviour among adolescents], but they rarely talk about it with me. If they talk, they generally ask me whether I have a girlfriend. I say 'I am so short, how can I have one?'*
>
> *Then what did your parents say?* [The interviewer]
>
> *They didn't say anything. We often joke …*

Sha stated that his parents' traditional attitudes made talking about sexuality uncomfortable, therefore he used humour to defuse the awkwardness of the situation, but he also used it as a strategy to avoid communication about sexual issues with his parents.

5.5.2.2 Employing real-life examples

Apart from humour, other strategies such as the use of real-life examples were often cited by both parents and adolescents to handle potential discomfort and to improve adolescent receptivity. The real-life examples included RE stories that happened to the parents themselves, third parties including acquaintances of the parents and adolescents, and

examples reported in the mass media. These examples were particularly related to negative consequences resulting from sexual behaviour among young people, such as pregnancy and abortion. Parents used these examples as strategies to express their sexual values and their disapproval of adolescents' sexual engagement.

Cui (M) commented that directly communicating about sex with her daughter was embarrassing, while the use of media stories enabled her to start the conversation:

> *Mostly, when we watch TV and there are some [sexual images], like kissing, I tell her directly 'you cannot do this'. With this, I don't need to figure out what words to use. I can just use the scene in front to tell her instead of using some specific [sexual] words. Or, something happened as the newspaper reported, like meeting with the cyber-friends in a distant place, or sleeping in a hotel (having sex), I said to her these things are not allowed absolutely …* (Cui (M), aged 46, with a 17-year-old daughter)

Even though the media provided families with the opportunity to communicate, some parents still communicated euphemistically about sex which also conveyed their cultural attitudes. Ping (M), aged 42, with an 18-year-old daughter, said:

> *Occasionally, there are some events and I extend some words [from those events] to talk with her. Like reading some reports in a newspaper, I say "look, young girls do not have self-respect (having sex), she was in such a condition (pregnant and abortion)".*

The use of the media by parents indicates an implicit approach to talking about sex with their adolescents. For adolescents who perceived that talking about sexuality was embarrassing, the use of third-party examples was an indirect but acceptable way of transmitting parental views. Xi (female, aged 15) pointed out her preference for an implicit, rather than explicit, form of communication about sexuality to avoid embarrassment:

> *Generally, my mum talks implicitly, then I understand what she is referring to. I understand her good intentions … I feel that being implicit about sex is better, because of my embarrassment.*

Xi acknowledged that she was able to capture the meanings behind these indirect conversations. Likewise, Hong (female, aged 17) illustrated that her parents talked about sexual behaviours among young people in an indirect way:

> *There are some reports in the newspaper about cohabitation between teenage girls and boys. My parents mentioned this, but their mention of the issue was euphemistic. They didn't say I should not, or advised me not to do something. But they said that these girls are not good.*

Hong was able to interpret her parents' euphemism that sex was associated with bad girls to encourage sexual restraint. Adolescents can make sense of these generally cautionary or case-leading conversations according to their cognitive and social development (Sawyer et al.

2012). However, the indirect approach to communication did not appear to cover specific information, and thus, was quite limited, as Hong indicated that her parents did not offer any advice about adolescent sexual behaviours, except for conveying vague hints about sexual restraint.

Some parents used the media in a non-verbal manner to influence their adolescents. For instance, Qing (M), aged 45, cited her practice with her 18-year-old daughter in relation to offering her media material for self-learning:

> *Sometimes after I read the newspaper with cases of teenage pregnancy or abortion, I put the newspaper in front of her intentionally. Or I see something on the Internet; I will print out and put it on her table. I want her to know that these behaviours are wrong … I feel that this works well because she likes reading. I find that she obtains information well from reading, she can remember more profoundly. Sometimes, if I say something to her, she might not pay attention* (Qing (M), aged 45, with an 18-year-old daughter).

Similarly, Yun (F), with a 17-year-old daughter, believed that encouraging his daughter to read media excerpts about romantic experience was positive; as he put it: *"guiding her to read more books and getting her to understand this is better than face-to-face communication"*. Both Qing and Yun took advantage of the media in the belief that their daughters could acquire information contained in the media and gain more benefit from self-learning than from parental communication. With a reliance on the media for information about romantic and sexual issues for their daughters, Qing and Yun could avoid the embarrassment of talking about sexuality.

The embarrassment of talking about sexuality that parents and adolescents encountered was shaped by the social and cultural norms that restrict public discussion about sexual issues in China (Gao, Y et al. 2001). Leiber et al. (2009) and Liu, M (2012) found that taboos about talking about sexuality continue to exist in China. In this study, the word 'sex' was found to be rarely used in the family context. Alternatively, media with sexual content provides a more comfortable context for parents to start a sexually-related conversation with their adolescents. In this study, parents such as Cui and Ping used the media as a context to explain their rules without the embarrassment of uttering the word 'sex'. The non-verbal communicative practices of Qing and Wei implied that some parents completely relied on external resources for adolescent sexual education. These findings resemble other studies in the West (Kim & Ward 2007) and other Asian countries (Trinh, J et al. 2009), which found that parents who felt embarrassed discussing sex with their adolescents used implicit and non-verbal approaches, including the use of external examples to convey their sexual values.

As well as reducing embarrassment, both the parents and the adolescents articulated that the use of such examples could facilitate adolescents' receptivity. This receptivity links to adolescent resistance to traditional parenting 'preaching' practice. Xiao commented that her mother stressed generalised rules and used a 'preaching' method when she was young. As Xiao grew older, her mother gradually incorporated examples into their communication, which Xiao perceived as being more interactive and acceptable:

> *During junior middle school, my mum always preached at me, simply talking about reasons. When I went to senior high school, she changed to another approach. For example, now she uses stories, talks about some of her experiences, and then refers to the reasons, hoping that I can accept these …* (Xiao, female, aged 16)

The preaching method reflects the traditional parenting practice in China which focuses on stressing family rules to the children, rather than treating children as independent individuals (Zhang, W 2013). However, Li stated that adolescents had developed a more independent style of thinking about RE with the assistance of real-life examples, and thus did not support their parents' lecturing:

> *I think it is wise to give some examples to children and let them think on their own. For example, parents can tell children about things at the high school stage, like boys courting girls and how did that go. Now, we are high school students, we can feel and experience their stories vicariously. Otherwise, if parents just give orders, some children won't comply, nobody likes being lectured. Children now have some ability to think independently. Through these examples, they can think about what they should do, and what the boundaries are …* (Li, female, aged 16)

Li continued by adding that parents who used examples in their conversations substantiated their own points of view and this had potential far-reaching effects, rather than a bland lecturing style which often led to a lack of response by the adolescent:

> *If parents keep saying no love affairs in high school to the children, they feel bored and then just forget. But if the parents use examples close to the adolescents' lives for discussion, then children feel that their parents are talking sincerely. Even though children won't completely follow the advice from the examples, they will pay attention to these later* (Li, female, aged 16).

The adolescents' preference for examples reflects their stage of cognitive development. Adolescents in high school have achieved a more formal-operational level incorporating more developed abstract thinking (Sawyer et al. 2012) which enables them to analyse and interpret real-life examples and then to generate their own understandings. As Li mentioned, adolescents welcome examples from which they can develop their own judgement and use their own ability, rather than being told what is right and wrong by their parents.

Some parents recognised adolescent resistance to their 'preaching' and turned to the credibility and acceptability of real examples for their adolescents. Therefore, Cheng (F), aged 44, integrated examples into his conversations with his 17-year-old daughter:

> *Sometimes, I use some real cases from the Internet, newspapers, books, or that I have heard from others. These cases are more credible and easier for children to accept … Probably now, what children don't like most is preaching.*

Besides the third-party examples portrayed in the media, some parents shared their own experiences to engage adolescents in communication about RE. For instance, Wei (M), aged 45, recognised that her own RE stories could capture the interest of her 18-year-old daughter, and thus enhance her attention:

> *I shared my experience with her, like when boys were writing letters to me in high school, how I dealt with that … She is interested in listening to my experiences, real stories, or adapted ones.*

Some adolescents supported the value of examples about their parents and thus wanted their parents to use their own stories in communication. However, not all parents shared their experiences with their adolescents, as Lan, aged 17 stated:

> *I think if my mother can give examples about herself in this aspect [RE], I feel I could understand better. But she never said that...*

5.5.3 Applying a direct approach with gender matching

Despite the generally implicit approach articulated by most parents and adolescents, there were a few exceptional cases in which parents and adolescents talked about sexuality more directly. For example, Yu (female, aged 16) stated that her mother acted in a straightforward manner because she firmly stated the importance of premarital sexual abstinence to give her a warning:

> *She said very frankly: "Don't do that thing (sex) before marriage … in future, when you are in love with some boy, and that boy takes you to a hotel, you should never go … If you are not a virgin, how can your husband love you?"*

Yan (M) also talked in a straightforward way with her daughter about delaying sexual intercourse and the voluntary basis of such decisions:

> *I said to her: "I don't object that you have a boyfriend. But in order to maintain the happiness, it is better to delay the time of having a sexual relationship … Boys and girls sleep together after three days' interaction, and possibly, they break up after one week. This is not worthwhile … If you have sex with him; the first time for a girl is very precious. The boy is not necessarily the person you will marry with, but must be the one you love most and love you the most; then you will have no regrets … It doesn't matter you have sex with somebody, but you must love each other, rather than that you are unwilling but forced by his courtship, or the boy*

> *doesn't like you, you use this (having sex) to get him."*(Yan (M), aged 47, with an 18-year-old daughter)

Contrary to other parents making oblique references to sex, Yan and the mother of Yu were able to talk explicitly about sexual issues that related to their daughters. While this was not a common practice among the participants in this study, such conversations demonstrated the individual differences among parents in communicating about sexuality with adolescents. Yan and the mother of Yu's may represent a group of more open parents who can communicate with their adolescents about sexuality in a direct and explicit manner to exercise their influence on their adolescents' sexual health. These parents might not feel embarrassed talking about sexuality, or they have overcome this discomfort in order to explicitly impart messages that assist adolescents to make decisions.

As well as parental openness, a gender match between the parent and their adolescent appeared to be important for undertaking communication about sex more directly. Parents and adolescents embraced same-gender communication, in which conversations about RE and sexuality happened more often between mothers and daughters, and fathers and sons.

In this study, parents expressed their views about same-gender communication about sex. For example, Ma (M) who had nursing experience, found that talking about sex with her son was difficult due to the gender difference, and therefore she left this task to her husband:

> *I know some of his developments in general, but I am female, so I am not quite clear about what's that going on … I had a conversation with his father, he is a doctor. I asked him if our son has not [sexually] developed. He said 'at the beginning, it is not so frequent for (sexual) desire or emission, maybe once in several months …' I did a nursing course before, but I am not male, so I did not pay attention to this …* (Ma (M), aged 43, with a 17-year-old daughter)

Adolescents stated their preference for same-gender communication with the belief that perceptions and feelings were similar, and thus greater mutual understanding would exist between the same genders. Ying commented that talking with her father was uncomfortable due to physiological differences between males and females:

> *I seldom talk with my father about this, because I am a girl, talking about this with the opposite sex feels strange. Generally, I talk with my mum because, at this age, with biological development and sexual characteristics, I am more similar to my mum, like we talk about the first menstruation ... Thinking is much more similar between the same genders* (Ying, female, aged 15).

Similarly, Rui (male, aged 17) stressed the different roles of his parents through which his father discussed sex with him:

My mother generally doesn't talk to me about it (sex). What she talks about with me is mainly about study. Sometimes, my father chats with me and covers this topic.

For these families, gender-matching between a parent and the adolescent was important for the initiation of communication about sex. The literature also reports that gender-related knowledge contributes to adolescents' preference for sexual discussion with their parent of the same gender (Kirkman, Rosenthal & Feldman 2005), with parents also having the same preference (Ballard & Gross 2009). Previous studies have examined the role of gender in parent-adolescent communication about sex, finding that more conversations occurred between the same gender of parents and adolescents (Trinh, J et al. 2009; Zuo et al. 2013).

5.5.4 Adolescents avoided talking about themselves to manage parental response

While parents employed strategies to talk to their adolescents about RE and sexuality, adolescents developed their own approaches to communication. As mentioned previously, parents and adolescents predominantly used third-party examples to talk about romantic and sexual issues. Another value of using stories about other people is its contribution to de-identifying the adolescents and their behaviour while conversing with parents. Adolescents particularly used the strategy of avoiding talking about themselves during communication about RE with their parents to manage parental responses, such as parental suspicion and the subsequent lecture. Hong (female, aged 17) indicated that she would not talk to her parents about her own intimate behaviours due to the potential parental lecture:

About my intimate behaviours, like who touched my head and who hugged me, I won't tell my mum because I am afraid that she might lecture me. I fear her nagging...

Adolescents seemed to be more comfortable talking about RE stories related to other people than their own experiences. Lin explained that talking to her mother about others meant that she could talk about RE without any trouble:

When I hear of some events that are sensational, I tell my mum what other people did. For example, two students [in a romantic relationship] were caught by the school when they were together … the consequences are serious. My mum also asks me how one of my classmates is going, I might say she has a boyfriend or whatever … after all it is not about me, I feel it is ok to tell my mum (Lin, female, aged 16).

Lin recounted that it was forbidden for students to engage in romantic relationships in school, and the consequence of being discovered by a teacher was very serious. The way in which the school handled adolescent RE issues strengthened Lin's awareness of the disapproval of romantic engagement by adults. Similar to other adolescents in this study who reported that

they understood about parental disapproval of romantic engagement, Lin stated that talking about herself caused some discomfort, while talking about others with her mother was safer.

Despite a preference for de-personalising communication by adolescents, some parents initiated conversations about the RE of their adolescents. These conversations remained at the level of asking whether the adolescent had an infatuation with a particular boy or girl, or if they are being courted by the opposite sex. Adolescents tend to respond to such parental inquiries based on their perceptions of the parental attitude toward RE. For instance, Tian described her selective disclosure to her parents about her romantic involvement to avoid their 'education':

> *My parents are likely to be suspicious of the relationship between a boy and me ... If I say I like some aspects of a boy, they will start to educate me for half or one hour. So, I talk less about which person I like. But when it comes to some boys expressing fondness of me, I might tell them immediately, but claim that I won't go further with them and just be common friends to assure them … Somebody liking me is a proud thing and my parents are happy as well. If they got very angry, I won't tell them …* (Tian, female, age 16)

Tian carefully decided the content of the communication based on her construction of boys' courtship as a positive part of her self-identity, and the perception of her parents' pleasure of this recognition and their objection to her real romantic engagement. Tian selectively shared her experience of being courted, but refused to discuss her romantic interests toward others with her parents. While this selected disclosure is one strategy that adolescents used to protect themselves from facing parental suspicion and a lecture, this avoidant strategy thwarted the parents' motives of staying informed about their adolescents.

5.6 Conclusion

During communication between parents and adolescents about adolescent RE and sexuality, the parents were the predominant initiator. Parents perceived that it was they who should take primary responsibility for talking about RE and sexuality with their adolescents, in order to assist them to cope with negative influences from the media and their peers, to make sound decisions, and to abstain from sexual behaviours. The parents' knowledge of their adolescents' character and developmental status served as an asset for effective communication. Although adolescents were the chief beneficiaries of such communication, the parents perceived communication as being reciprocal in terms of being informed of their adolescents' RE and promoting their sense of security, which was particularly important for one-child families. The parents' motives indicate their intention to communicate with their adolescents, and embodies the notions of cultural parenting values and filial piety in China, in which parents

take responsibility for protecting the children (Park & Chesla 2007; Wu, P et al. 2002), while children revere their parents' authority (Fuligni & Zhang 2004).

The motives serve as prerequisites for communicating about RE and sexuality. In practice, parents employed strategies for overcoming sensitivity related to discussions about sexuality, and for enhancing adolescents' receptivity of communication, such as using humour and real-life examples. Meanwhile, the examples used were mainly from third-parties, such as the media, while fewer were about adolescents themselves, indicating an indirect and implicit form of communication. Parents' reliance on third-party examples was however a means of unilaterally expressing their expectations of their adolescents, but unfortunately, this approach fails to evaluate their adolescents' need for, and acceptance of, parental messages. A few parents could talk directly about sex, particularly through gender-matching between the parent and their adolescent which was perceived as being particularly important, indicating that gender matters in relation to more direct and effective communication about RE and sexuality.

Some adolescents, especially those who had experienced positive communication episodes with their parents, recognised that they played an important part in promoting their sexual health given the parents' credibility, authority, and power based on their understanding of the parental role as educator and authority in China. Parents' beliefs about their influence on adolescent sexual health through communication, and the recognition of this by some adolescents, echoes the findings of Bragg and Buckingham (2013) who established that parents play an important role in their children's sexual socialisation and that communication is one part of this process. However, few adolescents in the current study expressed their motives to proactively talk to their parents about these matters.

The interaction between parents and adolescents shaped the approaches to communication, the adolescents' responses to the parental approach, and their decision to communicate with their parents. Some parents could adjust their approach to communication based on their perceptions of the developmental status of their adolescent, reflecting their familiarity with their children. However, some adolescents complained that their parents could not respond to the changes in their development or their needs, leading to their resistance to parental communication. Adolescents refused to talk about themselves to avoid undesirable parental reactions, such as suspicion and criticism. Therefore, better quality parental attempts are needed to engage adolescents to elicit their own sexual beliefs and behaviours during discussions about third-party examples.

The approaches used by parents often demonstrated a didactic and parent-dominant communicative style, with a focus on transmitting socially- and family-acceptable beliefs about sexuality and marriage, while adolescents' perceptions and practices remained largely invisible in the conversation. The dominance of parents and the invisibility of adolescents' voices might be due to the imbalance in the power relations between parents and adolescents. In China, this imbalance is particularly associated with the traditionally hierarchical parent-child relationship (Yan, J & Sorenson 2004) and filial piety that highlights children's respect for, and obedience to, their parents (Fuligni & Zhang 2004). The relationship between parents and their adolescents further complicates their communication about RE and sexuality, which is shaped by a range of personal, interpersonal, and environmental factors. The next chapter will focus on these factors by including the voices of those participants who had negative communication experiences, or who had not communicated about these issues at all.

CHAPTER 6 NOT RIGHT NOW: FACTORS SHAPING PARENT-ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION ABOUT ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE

6.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the factors that influence the practice of parent-adolescent communication about adolescent romantic experience (RE). Four major themes were identified: *timing, assumptions, parent-adolescent relationship,* and *discomfort and uncertainty*. These four major themes consist of both barriers and facilitators to communication. They are inter-related and influenced by individual parents and adolescents, and the inter-personal and socio-cultural dimensions. The themes of *timing* and *assumptions* mainly reflect personal factors that reside within parents and adolescents, as well as their respective understandings of each other. The theme of *parent-adolescent relationship* demonstrates inter-personal factors, including the quality and nature of the interaction between parents and adolescents as shaped by the socio-cultural values inherent within parenting practice. The theme of *discomfort and uncertainty* mainly demonstrates the socio-cultural factors that play a part in sexuality and discussions about sexual issues. All these themes are situated within the Chinese socio-cultural context, and will be discussed in this chapter.

6.2 Timing

Timing is an important factor influencing parental and adolescent communication, which also plays the role of inhibiting or facilitating discussions about RE and sexuality. Three sub-themes have been identified from the responses of the parents and the adolescents: *not right now, starting sexual conversation earlier*, and *picking an opportune time and place*.

6.2.1 Not right now: adolescents had not engaged in RE

Adolescents' romantic and sexual status tends to be the key trigger for sexual conversations between parents and adolescents. Due to the contextual significance of RE on sexual behaviour, parents and adolescents often stated that adolescents' non-participation in romantic issues was the reason why they did not initiate sexual-related communication with the family. Most parents perceived that the absence of romantic engagement was equated with sexual abstinence; therefore, they would not initiate a conversation about RE and sexuality with them.

However, adolescents perceived the absence of romantic engagement as both a barrier and an enabler to communication.

Adolescents believed that their parents did not initiate conversations about RE, or had only limited communication, because they trusted their adolescents to abstain from romantic involvement. For example, De stated that his parents rarely had conversations with him about RE due to their trust in him not to engage in RE:

> *We occasionally mention this topic, I remember just once they asked me whether boys and girls develop love relationships in school … then they advised me not to engage in it (RE). Because my parents have confidence that I will not have such relationships at high school, they do not talk about this* (De, male, aged 17).

Likewise, Yang, aged 16, mentioned that she had promised her parents that she would not engage in RE before university:

> *My parents are clear about me and I told them I would not think about getting involved in RE before university. Generally, I can act on what I say, so they trust me and don't talk a lot about this.*

The promise of not becoming involved in RE by adolescents enabled them to gain the trust of their parents, which then reduced their further related communication.

In other cases, however, adolescents' non-romantic involvement served as an enabler for conversing with their parents. Lin (female, aged 16) stated:

> *Because I am not involved in a love affair now, I am not afraid of talking with my parents. I talk with them quite frankly. We talk about some other students … If I have a boyfriend, I absolutely won't talk with my mum and certainly try every means to avoid this*.

Lin was aware of her parents' discipline and disapproval of RE. Therefore, her absence of romantic engagement encouraged her to talk with her parents about RE issues without concern. This finding was similar to the results of a study by Afifi, Joseph and Aldeis (2008) who found that white American sexually-abstinent adolescents could comfortably communicate with their parents about sex without anxiety and avoidance.

Parents relied on their judgement of their adolescents' romantic status to determine the timing of communication about sexuality. If their adolescents had not been involved in RE, the parents stated that communication was a 'not-right-now' issue, as Mao (F) commented:

> *I have not talked about this (sexual behaviour) now, because I have not found my son has reached this extent. Through communicating with his teacher, he doesn't have such a relationship* (Mao (F), aged 45, with an 18-year-old son).

Likewise, Ning (M) postponed her decision to communicate about sexuality with her daughter until she had a boyfriend in university, which she perceived to be a more appropriate time to engage in RE:

> *One of my neighbours is an obstetrician in a hospital, she told me two teenagers went to a hotel for sex and the 15-year-old girl got pregnant. This case made me realise the severity of adolescent sexual problems … I will and can talk with my child in the future, but not right now … She is too young, just has some [sexual] sense. I think once she is ready to find a boyfriend in university, I will start to talk about this topic* (Ning (M), aged 45, with a 15-year-old daughter).

As well as depending on their knowledge of the romantic status of their adolescents, the parents managed the timing of communication based on their perceived ability to control their adolescents. Parents appeared to worry less about their adolescents at the high school stage, when they still stayed at home and were under parental supervision. Therefore, they delayed communication until a time when they had less control over their adolescents, such as when they started to attend university. Cui (M), aged 46, discussed her plan to have a more comprehensive conversation about sexual matters with her 17-year-old daughter before university, after which she would not be physically able to monitor her daughter:

> *I plan to have a long conversation with her before she goes to university about relationships, dating, and safe sex. Because she will be out of my sight, then I can't know what she does.*

Likewise, Yuan (M) stressed that she should talk about contraception and STIs prevention with her 16-year-old son in the future when he moves away from home and engages in a romantic relationship and sexual behaviours:

> *If he really has such [sexual] behaviour, we must talk to him clearly about the harm, including being infected with diseases and producing a baby. In other countries, girls are prepared with condoms … Boys should know that girls might get pregnant if they have that thing (sex) … In future, my child will be far away from me, going abroad or other places for study … I need to figure out how to tell or teach him, so that at least he won't get infected with such diseases … This is a really big issue* (Yuan (M), aged 47, with a 16-year-old son).

The accounts of Cui, Ning, and Yuan indicate that some parents had not yet discussed safe sex with their adolescents, but had considered covering this topic in the future when their adolescents were more likely to engage in RE. These parents thought that their adolescents had not engaged in romantic and sexual relationships, and therefore applied a 'waiting' approach. This finding suggests that parents believed that the absence of RE was equated with them being sexually inactive. This notion is supported by the literature which indicates that adolescent sexual activity mostly occurs in the context of romantic experience (de Graaf & Rademakers 2011; Royer, Keller & Heidrich 2009). Previous research has also found that

parents were more likely to discuss sexual topics with their adolescents if they believed that they had been involved in a romantic relationship (Eisenberg et al. 2006; Hyde et al. 2013; Kirkman, Rosenthal & Feldman 2005), or after their adolescents' first sexual experience (Beckett et al. 2010). Yet according to Wyckoff et al. (2007), this timing has little effect on adolescent sexual health.

Furthermore, most adolescents in this study reported concealing, or disclosing little information about, their romantic activities to their parents, leading to parents' inaccurate knowledge of their romantic and sexual activities. Therefore, the timing of sexual conversations based on the parents' judgement of their adolescents' RE development may be unworkable, in that they may miss opportunities to prepare their adolescents to make healthy and informed decisions about sex and relationships (Eisenberg et al. 2006). Miller, KS et al. (2009) suggest that parents start communicating early when their children are younger and not involved in sexual issues, as this would be the best time to develop their responsive skills in relation to discussions about sex.

6.2.2 Starting earlier: promoting comfort and depth of sexual conversations

Some parents and adolescents identified that starting to communicate early about sexuality was a facilitator of communication. The 'early' conversation (when the child is younger) rests with parental efforts to establish a basis for having conversations about sexual issues progressively as the child ages with greater comfort and depth.

Some adolescents reported that their parents started communicating with them about RE and sexuality quite early (e.g., prior to high school), and recognised that this acted as a stimulus for ensuring more comfortable discussions as they moved into a stage when they were more cognisant of sex and more likely to be sexually active. For instance, Yu pointed out that her mother initiated sexual conversations with her when she mentioned sexual messages that she had heard in school courses:

> *When I was in Grade five or six, we had a class called hygiene and health. I was excited about the new knowledge and after school I talked with my parents. After that, they realised I had become interested in this [sexual] thing and my mum started to instil in me about self-respect, no sex before marriage, and so on … these notions have become my own beliefs. Now, I have grown up and understand well what they told me … We often talk. I have been at ease and do not feel sensitive when talking about this topic* (Yu, female, aged 16).

Yu stated that the early discussion of sexuality not only facilitated the internalisation of her mother's sexual values, but also laid a foundation for subsequent conversations in greater depth and with more ease.

Likewise, Xiao (female, aged 16) commented that early conversations about sexuality improved her acceptance of her parent's values, and therefore promoted ease of communication:

> *I think my communication with mum goes well. Maybe because when I was young, in junior middle school, she often talked with me. So now, I would think as what she has told me, and therefore we can reach agreement.*

Yu and Xiao embraced early parental initiation of communication about sexuality before they encountered real romantic and sexual situations. This form of parental practice is supported by the work of Davis et al. (2013) who identified that sharing information about sexuality from an early age worked as a facilitator of sexual health communication between black youth and their parents in Nova Scotia, Canada. Adolescents' experiences in the current study indicate that early discussion about sexuality in their family partly contributed to their internalisation and acceptance of their parents' sexual attitudes.

From a parental perspective, the early initiation of communication about RE reflected their beliefs about the importance of these issues, especially in relation to their own experiences during adolescence. Xiao illustrated that her mother delivered early RE-related conversations with her due to her own lack of exposure to parental communication:

> *My mum said: "now parents must communicate [RE] with children to guide them." She said her mum never talked this (RE) with her when she was a teenager* (Xiao, female, aged 16).

Parents perceived that initiating early communication benefited the flow and comfort of conversations about RE. Cheng (F) identified that prior communication laid a foundation for talking about sensitive sexual topics with his daughter:

> *I feel our communication about it (RE) is OK, without obvious barriers. Because communication with a child is a continuous process, we have built a good pattern since she was very young. So now, talking about it does not sound abrupt. Otherwise, for such a sensitive topic, it must be difficult* (Cheng (F), aged 42, with a 16-year-old daughter).

A previous qualitative study also found that an early, close, and interactive communication pattern between parents and children assisted sexual conversations to happen naturally, and contributed to the perceived openness of their communication about sexual issues (Pluhar & Kuriloff 2004).

6.2.3 Picking an opportune time and space to talk about RE

For those parents and adolescents who could talk to each other more frequently and comfortably, they acknowledged that an opportune time, location, and context was essential

for discussing RE, and that this acted as a facilitator of effective communication between them. The adolescents highlighted that the appropriate timing of communication was connected with a context that was informal, pleasant, relaxing, and private where they were ready and willing to share their thoughts. Yu and Ying illustrated their experiences:

> *I think we need a harmonious time for effective communication … an opportune time is when we are alone and have nothing to do, such as during meal times and when we are chatting in a relaxed way … Generally, we (my mum and I) talk about intimate issues at home and my father is not on the spot* (Yu, female, aged 16).

> *At home, we need to pick an appropriate time to talk. If I want to talk with my parents, I need to think about a time when they are in a good mood and feel like chatting with me. Otherwise, if they are busy and I talk, they might put me off and I cannot get help* (Ying, female, aged 15).

Yu emphasised that a private space without her father's presence was crucial for talking to her mother about intimate topics. Ying took the initiative to talk to her parents, stating that the opportune time depended on the readiness of both herself and her parents within an appropriate space. This finding aligns with the argument of Lefkowitz and Stoppa (2006) who stated that a less awkward and more natural context is an opportune time to discuss sexual topics with children.

Most participants reported that their communication mostly occurred within the family home. Other sites outside of the home were also possible when the parents and the adolescents were taking part in relaxing activities together. Rui (male, aged 17) stated that *"When we take a walk along the beach after dinner, sometimes my father mentions this (RE) and we talk."* These statements about the timing and context of communication about sexuality echo the indirect style of communication between parents and adolescents that contains elements of informality and relaxation.

Adolescents in this study engaged in such conversations within an informal setting, which would function as a buffer against the embarrassment and discomfort of sexual conversations. This finding differs from that of Pluhar and Kuriloff (2004) who reported that most African-American mothers and daughters preferred a focused, one-on-one form of communication, rather than a conversation that occurred as part of daily activities (e.g., driving or watching television) in order to have a more in-depth discussion about sexual topics. This discrepancy may reflect cultural differences in sexual communication between different countries.

6.3 Assumptions

Assumptions by both parents and adolescents often inhibit parent-adolescent communication. Parents' assumptions about their *adolescents acquiring good sexual knowledge* hinder their coverage of sexual information during their communication. For adolescents, the assumptions of *communication generating parental suspicion and worry* and *repeated parental communication meaning mistrust and control*, discourage adolescents from initiating such conversations with their parents.

6.3.1 Parents assumed that adolescents had good sexual knowledge

Parents assumed that their adolescents had obtained sexual knowledge through multiple channels, including school education and other sources, such as the media and their peers, which rationalised their lack of related communication. For example, Wang (M) illustrated her lack of talking about safe sex information during conversations with her daughter:

> *This point (safe sex), usually I don't talk about specifically, because nowadays, children read more and they are different from us when we were young with only textbooks and little contact with other things. Now, she learns a lot from biology class in middle school that probably covers physical issues of the human being. So, she knows more [about sex]. I just point this out and don't need to talk very specifically …* (Wang (M), aged 44, with a 17-year-old daughter)

In other cases, when the parents tried to talk to their adolescents about sexual information, they encountered rejection. Qing (M) cited her experience with her daughter, who indicated that she had already gained information about sexual issues through the media and at school:

> *This thing (protection) such as contraception, I planned to talk with her during the school holidays, but she said 'you don't need to talk with me, I have learned it.' It just ended up like this. When I gave her news reports, she said 'I already know and there are lots of such things on the Internet … I had biology classes, so don't let me see these things …'* (Qing (M), aged 45, with an 18-year-old daughter)

Qing was convinced by her daughter's assertion and did not engage with her further in sexual-related conversations, such as discussing what she had learned.

However, the literature suggests that formal sources or programs to provide sexual information, education, and services for adolescents are deficient in China (Zhang, LY, Li & Shah 2007). Sex education in Chinese schools is not always accessible and tends to be quite superficial with a focus on biological knowledge, whilst maintaining an abstinence-based approach (Aresu 2009; Li, L, King & Winter 2009). Meanwhile, the mass media often includes age-inappropriate and unreliable sexual information (Li, L, King & Winter 2009). Previous studies have consistently found that sexual knowledge among Chinese adolescents is

inadequate (Kong 2010; Liu, WL 2008). In this sense, parental assumptions, and adolescents' claims about their mastery of sexual knowledge may be erroneous, as reported by (Hyde et al. 2013). In other words, parents may incorrectly assess, or may be ignorant of, their adolescents' sexual knowledge, which partially causes the parents to exclude specific sexual information from sexual-related conversations, thus hindering the progress of communication. In addition, parental assumptions and adolescent rejection of communication indicate that some parents play only a limited part in teaching their adolescents about sexual and relationship issues.

6.3.2 Adolescents assumed that communication caused parental suspicion and worry

Some adolescents assumed that communication with their parents about RE and sexuality would give rise to suspicion and worry. This assumption led to adolescents' fear of initiating a conversation with their parents, and adopting avoidant or perfunctory behaviours when parents attempted to talk with them. Xi and Shan expressed their fear of proactively talking with their parents about RE issues which may possibly have resulted in their parents' misunderstanding and judgement:

> *Parents will suspect or criticise me after I talk about these things with them, so I dare not tell them …* (Xi, female, aged 16).

> *I fear my parents might misunderstand me if I talk with them. Like, some students in my class engage in RE, and sometimes I talk with parents about these, they will ask me whether I have had it or if I am hiding something from them* (Shan, male, aged 17).

Some adolescents pointed out that their parents' intense scrutiny of their behaviours strengthened their fear of their parents' inquiry and suspicion, and this contributed to their reluctance to talk to their parents. Jie described her experience:

> *When I get home from school, answering calls from boys is troublesome because my mum will ask me who made the call … She doesn't quite respect my privacy. From middle school, some boys liked me and wrote something in the alumni book, she read it without notifying me and she thought I was in love … Even that was for protecting me, I feel at least she should let me know in advance* (Jie, female, aged 15).

Jie illustrated her mother's strict supervision of her through questioning of her social networking and intruding into her privacy. This parental control and monitoring of adolescents' behaviours reflected the parents' vigilance over their adolescents' RE issues. However, the invasion of adolescents' privacy may damage their trust in their parents and lead them to avoidant responses to parental communication (Mazur & Ebesu Hubbard 2004).

In China, the concept of privacy did not develop until the introduction of economic reforms and the opening up policy in the late 1980s (Tse 2013). Three decades of rapid socio-economic development and Western influence has gradually prompted the pursuit of individual space and discussion of privacy issues; however, the protection of personal privacy in mainland China has not yet been adequately developed (Naftali 2014). The boundary of privacy between the parent and the child is still vague in the modern Chinese family (Tse 2013). Within the hierarchical family relationship, parents in the dominant position can cross their subordinate children's boundaries of privacy and obtain their personal information; this is not regarded as offensive (Tse 2013). Adolescents in this study displayed a consciousness of their own personal space and, as a result, attempted to negotiate their privacy with their parents, reflecting their developmental need for independence (Arnett 2010). However, the influence and authority of the parents still exist, and they can intrude into their adolescents' private lives, which engenders aversion and avoidance of adolescents in initiating discussions with their parents, and becomes an obstacle to productive communication.

Apart from the concern about parental suspicion, some adolescents stated that the initiation of RE-related conversations would potentially result in their parents' worrying. For instance, Jia and Ya stated that parental worry was a major concern that resulted in their evasion of RE-related conversations with their parents.

> *Even I know if I talk with them about it, my parents won't be suspicious of me … but I fear that they will worry about me"* (Jia, female, aged 15).

> *I fear that talking with my parents about this (RE) causes their concern. Parents work very hard and do lots of things, so I don't want to let them worry about this* (Ya, male, aged 16).

In order to reduce their parents' worries, adolescents chose to circumvent communication about RE issues. This decision indicates that these adolescents attended to the feelings of their parents and wished to ease their burden. In the Chinese culture, filial children should not disappoint their parents and cause them to worry (Fuligni & Zhang 2004).With adherence to the notion of filial piety, some adolescents in this study avoided talking about RE to relieve their parents from worrying about them, which may not be the case for adolescents in other cultures. For instance, African-American adolescents withhold information about romantic issues from their parents because they view these matters as private and not harmful (Smetana 2010; Smetana et al. 2009).

The concerns and fears expressed by adolescents were associated with their understanding of RE as a source of worry for their parents. For these adolescents, the consequences of

broaching the topic could result in the parents casting doubts on their romantic involvement or becoming upset. Therefore, avoidance of communication by adolescents may contribute to achieving their desire for autonomy on RE-related issues while not defying their parents' authority and violating filial piety.

6.3.3 Repeated parental communication meant mistrust and control of adolescents

Some adolescents indicated that while they understood their parents' good intentions, they complained about their frequent and repetitive 'preaching'. Several adolescents suggested that repetition represented the parents' strict discipline and mistrust of them, as Sha (female, aged 16) described:

> *I don't like their approach. They are so nagging. I have told them I would not engage in love at high school. But they still don't trust me, thinking that (RE) is dangerous and talking with me again and again. So sometimes I just ignore their words.*

Adolescents claimed that they were cognitively capable, and therefore, that their parents should have more confidence in them, rather than raising the topic so frequently. Jie illustrated her experience:

> *At high school, I feel I have some ability of judgement … It is OK they (parents) educate me occasionally, once or twice, but too much is boring. I can even recite what they have talked to me fluently, but I am still there listening, just nod … Some communication is certainly good, but not repeated several times. I know my mum is [doing it] for my own good, but if she talks too frequently, though I agree with her, I still feel a little bored* (Jie, female, aged 15).

Despite feeling bored about being 'educated' by her mother, Jie allowed her to dominate the conversation and listened passively without offending her. Jie's response to her mother reflects that parents are the authority figure to whom adolescents are supposed to show obedience in Chinese culture (Fuligni & Zhang 2004; Yan, J & Sorenson 2004). Studies show that parental trust promotes the sharing of information by adolescents with their parents (Smetana 2010), and serves as a protective factor against risky adolescent sexual behaviours (Borawski et al. 2003). However, the parental mistrust that the adolescents felt in this study inhibited them from actively engaging in communication with their parents.

In addition to mistrust, some adolescents perceived repeated parental communication as a sign of parental control and a lack of freedom, although they recognised the rationality of the communication, as Rui described:

> *There must be some communication, because the child doesn't understand well and parents have experienced that stage … but there should not be too much … don't say it (RE) too*

> *frequently. Sometimes, the parents of my classmates ask questions like 'Are you in love? What is going on? Who made the call?' five or six times a day. Parents should free the children to some extent* (Rui, male, aged 16).

The freedom that Rui sought, and the trust that Sha mentioned above, demonstrated the adolescents' aspiration for independence and autonomy from their parents as part of their development (Arnett 2010; Spear & Kulbok 2004). Some adolescents in this study perceived parental control as a form of mistrust, rather than being absolutely legitimate, as traditionally emphasised in Confucian ideology (Liu, YL 2013). In the current study, excessive parental repetition resulted in the covert resistance of adolescents in ignoring their parents' words, and thus, the communication was often ineffective. This finding is different from a study by Martino et al (2008) who found that repetition in American parent-adolescent sexual communication enhanced their closeness and increased the openness and perceptions of their ability to talk about sex. Adolescents' rejection of repetition in the current study may be related to the nature of parent-adolescent communication, such as preaching the risks and prohibition of RE, and the hierarchical structure of the Chinese family.

6.4 The parent-adolescent relationship

The relationship between parents and their adolescent children influences the initiation and maintenance of communication. This theme includes four sub-themes, namely *the generation gap and adolescent rebellion; building a 'friendship'; open and supportive communication;* and *adolescents talked differently with parents and peers.* These sub-themes represent both barriers and enablers of the parent-adolescent communicative process.

6.4.1 The generation gap and adolescent rebellion

Both parents and adolescents frequently identified the generation gap as one of the obstacles to their communication about RE and sexuality. The generation gap is a universal phenomenon in all societies, and often leads to generational conflicts regarding values, attitudes, and behaviour patterns between parents and adolescents (Patil 2014). The distinct socialisation experiences of the parents and their adolescents shape their different sexual values.

In relation to adolescent RE and sexuality, the parents held relatively more traditional notions and conservative views, and attempted to transmit these to their adolescents. However, adolescents had experienced the more recent processes of modernisation and liberalisation (Zheng, W et al. 2011; Zheng, WJ et al. 2014). Yan (M) stated that the generation gap meant

that parents could not completely capture their child's real thoughts, because the gap acted as a 'wall' which blocked their communication:

> *I feel I know her; but it is difficult to get to know her real thoughts and emotional experiences. This is the generation gap. For example, I read news about a high school girl meeting her boyfriend online and then they rented a house and lived together. We parents think it is a kind of degradation and cannot accept this. But the young children do not necessarily consider it as serious or unreasonable. So, we two generations have different perceptions about the same thing. If we have totally the opposite opinions, that is like a wall standing in front of her and she will directly turn around and walk away* (Yan (M), aged 47, with an 18-year-old daughter).

Adolescents frequently cited the generation gap as a major reason for limited and ineffective communication with their parents. Tian (female, aged 16) stated that the generation gap resulted in a lack of mutual understanding between her and her parents about adolescent RE:

> *Now, it is said that three years gap brings out a generation gap. There is a huge age difference between us. We cannot have many good talks. Their times are different from ours. Sometimes they cannot understand our thoughts. Of course, we also cannot understand the strict distance between boys and girls during their adolescent years.*

In line with the generation gap, adolescent rebellion was another factor cited by parents and adolescents that exacerbated the generation gap and further impeded the process of communication. Adolescent rebellion has been defined as being distant from, and rebellious against, authority figures such as parents (Li, S et al. 2013), which is a normative part of adolescent development for emancipation and independence from the parents (Arnett 2010; Raby 2005).

Several adolescents claimed that they did not want to talk to their parents because they perceived themselves as being in a rebellious stage of life. For example, Li and Tian explained how they experienced rebellion against parental communication:

> *I was very rebellious for a period of time. I was deaf to my mum. Though I was not in any romantic activities at that time, I just resisted every word from her … But my rebellion passed very quickly, lasted for four or five months. I think it (rebellion) is an unavoidable period* (Li, female, aged 16).

> *Now we are at adolescence, while the parents are close to menopause. They are nagging and we are rebellious, just the opposite. They take nagging as a kind of love for their children, while we feel that they say the same thing all day. Usually, I just say 'you are boring' in words, but I feel that the parents are correct in my mind* (Tian, female, aged 16).

Li and Tian regarded rebellion as an inevitable barrier to communication with their parents. Tian appeared to be struggling with the contradiction between her feelings of rebellion and how she understood her parents' good will.

Parents also emphasised that their adolescents were at a rebellious stage that made communication about RE and sexuality more difficult. Cui (M), aged 46, with a 17-year-old daughter suggested that:

> *In feudal paternalism, children cannot oppose what their parents said; otherwise that was disobedience and offense. But now children resent parents' lecturing and get tired of their parents.*

Cui attributed adolescent rebellion to the relaxation of historical paternalism in current family relationships. This change in family relationships led to parents being confronted with challenges because they could not enforce absolute obedience on their adolescents.

6.4.2 Building a 'friendship'

The generation gap and adolescent rebellion were in line with the clash between Chinese traditional culture and Western ideology. The hierarchical parent-child relationship and the value of filial piety within the long-lasting traditional Confucian family ideology remain an influential force which shapes the interaction between parents and adolescents in China (Fong 2007). In the meantime, under the influence of westernisation and modernisation over the past three decades, China has experienced a cultural transformation in relation to inter-generational communication (Tomasik & Silbereisen 2011). Young Chinese people are becoming increasingly independent and individualistic (Yan, Y 2010), and expressing a strong desire to maintain equal status in inter-generational relations (Zhang, YB & Hummert 2002). Therefore, there is a juxtaposition between traditional hierarchical notions and increasing modern egalitarianism in inter-generational relations in contemporary China (Zhang, Q 2007; Zhang, YB, Harwood & Hummert 2005), which influences parent-adolescent communication about RE and sexuality.

This cultural clash has driven some adolescents and parents to negotiate their relationship in a way that facilitates sexual communication, such as through developing an egalitarian 'friendship-like' relationship. For some other parents, however, this clash created a number of challenges for communication.

Some adolescents claimed that an equal parent-adolescent relationship created a precedent for parents to engage adolescents in communication in contemporary China. Xi rejected the historical practice of children being in complete submission to their parents. She situated the current parent-adolescent relationship in modern Chinese society as seeking more equal conversations with parents, such as occurs in the West:

> *Parents talk slowly in a mild way, rather than irritably. Because nowadays, the relationship between the parent and the child should not be like that in feudal society kneeling to parents when meeting them; instead, it should be like friendship as most foreign countries do* (Xi, female, aged 15).

Similar to Xi's support of egalitarian parent-adolescent relationships, other adolescents stated that an equal and close relationship between parents and adolescents alleviated the negative influence of adolescent rebellion, and thus enabled sexual-related communication. Some adolescents expressed their satisfaction with their relationship with their parents, primarily through characteristics of 'friendship-like' closeness, equality, warmth, and trust. Xiao and Jing illustrated that the 'friendship-like' relationship with their parents was one contributor to their positive communicative experiences:

> *It is warm in the family … I remember when I was in primary school, my mum said to me that 'we are good friends in the future, on some issues, don't like being parents and child'. My Mum hopes that we are in a relationship without a gulf. Now, she is very close to me, and I feel we two don't have that generation gap. I trust my mum and listen to her* (Xiao, female, aged 16).

> *I feel no barriers because they do not talk to me in a commanding way. They are composed and calm when we talk. I feel they are my friends, one of the best friends* (Jing female, aged 15).

Some parents also embraced the notion of egalitarian family relations, and defined a 'friendship style' as the optimum parent-adolescent relationship, as they felt it would reduce barriers to their communication. For instance, Qing (M) indicated that she made efforts to develop a friendship-like relationship with her daughter that promoted more interactive communication between them:

> *I always try to be friend with my daughter, and she tells me everything from her childhood. She can be communicated with … We discuss things. I don't speak with her in a condescending tone. In my home, we call each other's name and we do not have seniority rules like in the patriarchy family* (Qing (M), aged 45, with an 18-year-old daughter).

In contrast, some parents felt that the idea of parents being friends with their adolescents was an impossible ideal due to the deeply-ingrained generational differences and traditional parenting style. Their identity as a parent figure posed a barrier to parent-adolescent communication about sexuality, especially when the parents attempted to inculcate their sexual values and notions into their adolescents. Yan (M) and Cui (M) illustrated their dilemma in supporting a 'friendship', while maintaining their traditional parenting practice:

> *It would be the best if I can be her (my daughter) friend. But it is difficult because something is just there, like your age and experience. I am over 40 and this determines that we cannot have complete congruence. For example, she has a boyfriend and you will observe this boy,*

> *judge, and even criticise him from an angle of the elder. So it is an unavoidable conflict* (Yan (M), aged 47, with an 18-year-old daughter).

> *I support the idea of parents being friends with their children, but the position as a parent is a fact. She (my daughter) must be wary of her parents … We tend to compare the present with the past, and try to instil in children our notions and values. She argues that times have changed now … Now they are living in a different world. So as parents, it is very difficult to communicate with children* (Cui (M), aged 46, with a 17-year-old daughter).

Although Yan and Cui realised the value of being friends with adolescents, they underlined the irreconcilable dilemmas as they tried to retain parental power in adolescent romantic issues, while understanding that their adolescents were a different generation living in a distinct context. The parenting practices of Yan and Cui reflected their adherence to the traditional authoritarian parenting style in China, emphasising obedience and conformity of adolescents with low levels of parental responsiveness (Hoskins 2014), and which contradicted current adolescents' expectations.

6.4.3 Open and supportive communication

As well as advocating for communication on the basis of an equal relationship, adolescents stated that parental openness toward adolescent RE and sexuality was significant in initiating a relevant and interactive dialogue. The openness of parents could eliminate adolescents' concerns about negative parental reactions, and thus encourage them to engage in discussions about sexual issues on an ongoing basis with their parents. Ying commented that parental openness meant that they showed an interest in adolescent RE topics, and were willing to discuss these issues, rather than responding evasively and in an extreme fashion:

> *My mum is very open. Some of my classmates told me that at the mention of boy-girl issues, their parents avoid it and are very strict. But my parents appear to be interested in this topic and do not respond extremely. So, I find that it is not a big deal, and I speak to them when there is something on my mind; then they start to discuss it with me. Gradually, it becomes a normal activity and part of life. We do not have lots of disagreement and big conflicts on this issue* (Ying, female, aged 15).

In contrast, parental conservatism in relation to RE and sexual issues prevented some adolescents from talking to their parents. Shan commented that his parents' sensitivity and objection to RE led to very little communication with his parents, despite his wishes for more open communication through which he could gain parental support:

> *I talked little about this (RE) with my parents. If my parents were open on this issue or were willing to understand me, rather than being very sensitive and just object when talking about this topic. In fact, I hope parents can tell me something and help me. Then, if I have something and go back home, I can feel there is support, rather than just getting more angry* (Shan, male, aged 17).

Likewise, Lin explained that her parents' conservative and controlling nature resulted in a lack of communication about RE between them, which she saw as different to that experienced by Western adolescents:

> *There is no communication about it (RE) between us. My parents are very conservative. For example, there are some [pornographic] clips on TV, they never let me watch. They just do not allow me to get involved in any love affairs ... I watch several European and American television series, their parents and children always communicate. Maybe, these parents are more open and support their children a lot, giving some good advice, like when you break up, they will comfort you and offer some suggestions. This kind of pattern is what I hope for with my parents. Then I can naturally tell parents things in my heart, and parents will neither object nor agree, but give me some suggestions and guide me based on their experience* (Lin, female, aged 16).

The expectation that Lin expressed above indicates that exposure to Western parenting practice has resulted in Chinese adolescents resisting against traditional controlling parenting practices. Adolescents in this study felt that current parental communication about RE issues did not contain enough openness and support. Therefore, given the culturally-sensitive nature of RE and sexual topics, parental openness was salient for encouraging adolescent involvement in relevant communication, and in reducing their anxiety about their parents' judgemental responses.

Several parents also believed that being approachable, open, and receptive enabled adolescents to participate in such communication. Ping (M), aged 42, with an 18-year-old daughter, commented:

> *If parents are willing to open their heart and accept everything of their children, then they are willing to communicate with you. The only thing parents can do is to guide her, rather than 'educate'. This education is with quotation marks, meaning lecturing or criticising.*

Given the different environments in which the parents and their adolescents have been raised, parental openness also meant that they could develop a better understanding of the lives of current adolescents. Xiao perceived her mother as being open and receptive, because she observed her attempts to understand her and stay connected through exposing herself to the adolescent world:

> *She accepts us, accepts the thoughts of us born in the 1990s, and accepts something on the Internet. I feel my mum is more open, and quite understands us. She tries to understand me, and expose herself to the things that we are now exposed to as much as possible to ensure that there is no gulf between her and me. I feel happy and satisfied with my communication with her* (Xiao, female, aged 16).

Therefore, maintaining connection with adolescents and their surrounding environment is one way for parents to have better and more open communication with their adolescents.

Parents being open and supportive also meant that they actively listened to adolescents' opinions, and this fostered a more reciprocal pattern in which the parents could offer specific guidance and practical suggestions or advice. Ying and Jie commented:

> *I think parents firstly should listen and then express their opinions. That is, they do not interrupt immediately at the mention of this topic, but listen to the child, and let them finish talking with a mild attitude and showing interest* (Ying, female, aged 15).

> *Parents can provide more suggestions rather than giving orders … talk about the practical measures, like if you are in love and encounter issues like the other wants to hug you or kiss you; or when you break up and cannot step out of the distress, what you should do. Parents should tell you realistic and feasible methods or techniques, rather than always saying 'you should tell me this and that'* (Jie, female, aged 15).

The open and supportive communication that adolescents described in this study is similar to the authoritative parenting style that is characterised by warmth, responsiveness, and a supportive attitude, which encourages adolescent autonomy and appropriate supervision of adolescents (Auslander et al. 2009; Hoskins 2014). A number of studies have found that authoritative parenting can benefit adolescents in reducing risky sexual behaviours (Rhucharoenpornpanich et al. 2010; Velez-Pastrana, Gonzalez-Rodriguez & Borges-Hernandez 2005) and developing healthy romantic relationships (Auslander et al. 2009). Previous studies have reported that an authoritative parenting style was related to parents talking more about sexual topics when their children were younger (Askelson, Campo & Smith 2012). Parent-adolescent communication which feature less dominance, and more openness and receptivity, reduced adolescent avoidance, and thus enabled sexual conversations in American (Afifi, Joseph & Aldeis 2008) and British families (Elley 2010).

6.4.4 Adolescents talked differently with parents and peers

Linked with the parent-adolescent relationship, adolescents mentioned their varying perspectives and experiences of talking with peers as opposed to talking with parents in terms of personal preferences, and the degree and effects of communication. Some adolescents suggested that they preferred to discuss RE issues more with friends than with their parents; however, others stated that their parents were a preferable and more reliable source of RE and sexuality information.

Adolescents' preferences for discussing RE and sexual issues with friends aligns with their social development, in which they are increasingly socialising and connected with their peers in the transitional period between childhood and adulthood (Henrich et al. 2006; Smetana, Campione-Barr & Metzger 2006). Adolescents experience understanding and support with

their friends, and thus converse more with them about relationships and sexual issues (Collins & Steinberg 2007; Suleiman & Deardorff 2015; Sullivan et al. 2012). Adolescents in this study attributed their preference for talking with their friends to their common experiences and views, as well as indicating that their friends were more approachable and accessible for support.

Tian stated that she could talk with her friends more freely without the pressure that often occurred in parental communication:

> *We are at a similar age, and our thoughts and feelings are similar, so we have a lot to talk about. With parents … the generation gap … talking with them is often accompanied by lecturing or criticising. But with friends, we just speak out and listen to each other's thoughts and experiences* (Tian, female, aged 16).

Ya (male, aged 16) consistently acknowledged that familiarity among peers made their conversations easier, more straightforward, and fun:

> *We are classmates and know each other well, including our stories. So, they are easy to understand if I mention such a thing, and I just talk directly and freely. Sometimes, we make fun. With parents, I need to explain to them the whole thing before we start.*

In addition, some adolescents perceived that their friends provided more practical support and less interference in RE issues than their parents, as Lin and Tao suggested:

> *Friends definitely will not object to my love affair. Instead, sometimes they could give you some suggestions that parents might never give, and they support you to do things. I can talk about everything with my friends* (Lin, female, aged 16).

> *I don't like talking with my parents, and friends can give more useful ideas. Parents belong to an old generation and know less* (Tao, male, aged 16).

This finding is consistent with a study by Suleiman and Deardorff (2015) which revealed that a number of US adolescents (45%) reported that their friends positively influenced their romantic and sexual behaviours through providing relationship advice and support with sexual health information.

These quotes above demonstrate that some adolescents viewed that talking with peers was less concerning, and more reciprocal and accessible, reflecting that their peers are highly influential in their lives (Giordano 2003; Henrich et al. 2006; Whitfield et al. 2013). The egalitarian relationship between peers may enable adolescents to talk about 'everything' with their friends without concern, indicating that RE and sexual conversations are not sensitive issues in this context, and that communication between them is more direct. However, there can also be negative influences from peers, such as compelling adolescent individuals to

engage in risky behaviours (Suleiman & Deardorff 2015), suggesting that friends are not always reliable sources of information and support.

In this study, not all the adolescents preferred to talk with their peers about these issues. Adolescents who expressed a preference for talking with their parents stated that they could guarantee confidentiality, while talking with their friends might result in rumours being spread. They also believed that their parents raised and knew them well, and were able to guide them based on their own rich experiences, as Xi commented:

> *I don't want to talk much with my classmates. Because I am afraid that they might tell others and rumours may start flying and make it difficult in the end. But parents don't know my fellow students, and they will keep the secret if I speak my thoughts to them … Parents have raised me for decades and know me quite well … They have rich experiences and know a lot, so when I talk with them, they will guide my direction, and tell me to distinguish between right and wrong. This can avoid many things that otherwise might be undesirable and out of control* (Xi, female, aged 15).

Xi illustrated several advantages of talking with parents, including the natural bond between them, and their rich experience for providing direction. These perceived parental assets strengthened adolescents' beliefs that talking with their parents can avoid undesirable outcomes. Ying (female, aged 15) also made this point by comparing the cognitive levels of their parents and peers:

> *Friends are adolescents too; some of their thoughts are likely to be incorrect. So if parents don't avoid talking with the child, the child can see the issue (RE) more comprehensively, and benefit more than talking with their friends.*

Xi and Ying believed that parental communication was more effective and beneficial, and thus discussed RE and sexual issues more with their parents. Therefore, adolescents' perceptions of the relationship between, and communication patterns of, their parents and peers shaped their decisions about who to talk with about romantic and sexual issues.

In addition, both Xi and Ying were in the younger phase of the middle adolescent stage, and thus may have been under stronger parental influence than older adolescents (Smetana et al. 2009; Soenens et al. 2006), which may contribute to their preference for talking with their parents rather than their peers. As well, gender may be a factor influencing adolescents' decisions about communication with peers or their parents. A previous study in China showed that boys were more likely to talk about sexual issues with their peers, while girls talked more with their mothers (Zhang, LY, Shah & Baldwin 2006).

6.5 Discomfort and uncertainty in talking about sexual topics

Parents and adolescents reported that discomfort in discussing sexual topics, and parents' lack of sexual knowledge and related communication skills influenced their decisions about whether, and how, to talk about sexuality.

The sensitive nature of sexual topics remained a barrier that confronted some parents and adolescents with challenges and difficulties in starting sexual-related conversations. Parents often claimed that sex was a 'hard' and embarrassing subject that they hesitated to broach with their adolescents. Mei (M), aged 45, with a 16-year-old daughter, said: *"I did not talk with her about this. This (sexual) topic is very sensitive, hard to say …"*

Likewise, Mao (F), aged 45, recounted that he could not discuss sex directly and comfortably, like other general topics, with his 18-year-old son:

> *This topic (sex) is relatively embarrassing, hard to talk about … unspeakable. It (talking about sex) is not like asking about his study; that is straightforward. I think parents should communicate about this, but we have concerns and need to consider how to start talking …*

Although Mao indicated his intention to discuss these issues with his son, the 'unspeakable' nature of sex meant that he was not confident about this, and therefore, he struggled to start a conversation.

The discomfort that parents experienced in this study is similar to Western parents who encountered a certain level of unease in discussing sex with their adolescents (Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2008; Jerman & Constantine 2010). However, the parents in this study were born in the 1970s, and grew up in a context where sexuality was a cultural taboo and closely linked with procreation and social order in China before the 1980s (Leiber et al. 2009; Zheng, W et al. 2011). Therefore, they were more heavily influenced by the traditional construction of sexuality and were confronted with the challenge of raising the 'unspeakable' issue.

Some adolescents also felt discomfort in engaging in communication about sexual issues with their parents, despite identifying themselves as being more liberal in sexual matters than their parents (Li, L, King & Winter 2009). Such embarrassment constrained adolescents from initiating a sexual conversation with their parents, as Mai (female, aged 17) stated: "*during adolescence, it is embarrassing to talk about this thing (sex) with your parents."*

The discomfort experienced by some adolescents was in line with the results of a recent large-scale investigation in China conducted by Zuo et al. (2013), who found that the primary

reason for youth not discussing sex with their parents was embarrassment. In the current study, during the interviews, some of the adolescent participants became quite shy when saying the word ‘sex’ or ‘sexual behaviour’, and they often did not use sexual-related words or terms in a direct manner. Instead, they generally used a number of strategies to convey their meaning, including the use of a demonstrative pronoun, such as ‘that’, to refer to sexual behaviours, writing the character *Xing* (which refers to ‘sexual behaviour’ in Chinese), or saying the word in English to avoid embarrassment. As a result, these adolescents might experience similar discomfort to their parents in sexual conversations within the family.

In addition to their perceived discomfort, parents expressed uncertainty about their sexual knowledge and communication skills that further impeded communication with their adolescents. This uncertainty is closely associated with the parents’ experience of limited family communication and inadequate sex education from school when they were young. For example, Mei (M) who worked as a university teacher, cited her experience of the lack of sexual conversation with her own parents:

> *The difficulty is I don’t know where to start, from which topic or words to use to talk with her. What I received was traditional education, my parents never talked with me about this (sex) topic. How to talk and use what manner to express, I feel it is very difficult … Maybe I am not good at that (communicating), or because my own parents didn’t talk with me about that* (Mei (M), aged 45, with a 16-year-old girl).

Together with the sensitive nature of sex, Mei’s own experience of the lack of communication about sex with her parents, made it difficult for her to discuss sexual issues with her daughter. Mei’s account reflects the traditional parent-adolescent sexual communication practice prior to the Chinese reforms, and the policy of opening-up in 1978 (Chen, X & Chiu 2010; Liu, WL et al. 2011), in which discussion of sex-related issues in the family was socially and culturally unacceptable (Aresu 2009; Leiber et al. 2009). Consequently, the trans-generational imprint on present-day parents creates a barrier for some parents in sexual communication with their adolescents.

As well as discomfort, some of the parents noted that their sexual knowledge was limited, meaning that they were not able to impart specific knowledge to their adolescents, as Yuan (M), aged 47, with a 16-year-old son described:

> *What I know is that promiscuity [having multiple sexual partners] causes some diseases. I don’t know much specific knowledge ….*

The lack of parental sexual knowledge is associated with the limited sexual information they received from their schooling and other sources in their adolescence, and indeed, in their adulthood (Aresu 2009; Zhou, Y et al. 2013). Currently, most Chinese parents of adolescents reported that their sexual information was obtained from non-academic and non-scientific sources, such as magazines and newspapers (Liu, WL et al. 2011). Therefore, parents often encountered uncertainty about what, and how, to communicate with their adolescents about sex.

Facing uncertainty about the appropriate degree of sexual communication with their adolescents, some parents turned to their friends and/or the Internet for help, while others simply avoided the issue. Wei (M) and Tang (F) illustrated their different ways of dealing with such confusion:

> *When I am confused, I search for information on the Internet to see what other parents do* (Wei (M), aged 45, with an 18-year-old daughter).

> *Sometimes, as a parent, I feel it is difficult to maintain the degree of talking [about sex], deep or shallow. So often, I leave it aside* (Tang (F), aged 46, with an 18-year-old daughter).

For some parents, their uncertainty contributed to their communication of general warning messages, rather than talking about specific sexual issues. Hu (M) generally reminded her daughter of safety because she was unsure about how to initiate and phrase sex-related conversations with her daughter:

> *I realised that I should talk with her about sexuality, but now I don't talk specifically. I give her some hints, like a girl should learn to protect herself and not go out alone at night … I am thinking about talking more specifically, but have not figured out what approach to use, and to what degree I should talk … The difficulty is that I don't know where to start, from which topic or words to use to talk to her … I need to learn first how to effectively communicate with her* (Hu (M), aged 45, with a 17-year-old daughter).

Despite her uncertainty, Hu had a desire to learn more about effective approaches to communicating about sexuality, yet there was no specific service available to gain support and information about this, as she stated:

> *I hope there are some organisations or professionals who can provide health knowledge and information about parent-child communication. They can give parents and children a sort of help and guidance. But in our city, or even the whole society, there is no such organisation or just a few* (Hu (M), aged 45, with a 17-year-old daughter).

The scope of sexual conversation that some parents struggled with is similar to the debate about comprehensive or abstinence-only sex education for adolescents across the world (Aresu 2009; Eisenberg et al. 2008; Liu, WL et al. 2011). The research has identified that

Chinese parents often show an ambivalent attitude towards teaching adolescents about sex and contraception, which leads to their corresponding omission of these topics in practice (Cui et al. 2012; Liu, WL et al. 2011). With this ambivalence, and without external support, parents may not be able to step forward to cover specific and explicit sexual information during their conversations with adolescents.

Some adolescents reinforced parental uncertainty by stating that their parents were ignorant, and therefore, they found that talking with them was 'useless'. For example, Tao (male, aged 16) complained that his parents could not give him useful advice and assistance apart from highlighting the importance of studying:

> *The main thing is that we cannot talk. If my parents had more knowledge, perhaps I would be happy to talk to them ... I scarcely talk with my mum. Even if I talk to her, she cannot give me any relevant advice and help, except saying I should study hard … this is useless stuff* (Tao, male, aged 16).

In brief, parents often hesitated when communicating with their adolescents about sexual-related issues due to inadequate knowledge about sexual health and a lack of related communication skills. This was consistent with the findings of other studies conducted in China (Tu et al. 2005; Zuo et al. 2013), India (Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2012), and Vietnam (Trinh, J et al. 2009), where the lack of the parents' sexual knowledge and communicative skills were commonly recognised as barriers to effective discussions about sexual issues between parents and adolescents. This barrier poses a question about the parents' capabilities in communication with adolescents on sexual matters. Nonetheless, most parents in this study indicated an intention to communicate. Therefore, as these parents expected, external support and resources are particularly important for providing them with relevant knowledge, and to build their capability to discuss sexuality with their adolescents. In turn, this may strengthen adolescents' confidence in their parents.

6.6 Conclusion

Parents and adolescents encountered a number of challenges and barriers to the process of translating their intention to communicate into practice. Although there were a few examples of successful communication between parents and adolescents, most adolescents stated that the conversations with their parents needed to be improved in terms of enhancing interaction and openness, and in the provision of supportive advice.

In this study, the factors that influenced effective communication stemmed from both parents and adolescents, and were mostly consistent with previous studies across the world (Bastien, Kajula & Muhwezi 2011; Kirkman, Rosenthal & Feldman 2005; Trinh, J et al. 2009; Wamoyi et al. 2010). However, this study found that the barriers mainly stemmed from the parents, including their perceptions and assumptions of adolescents' mastery of sexual knowledge and sexual inactivity, and the parents' low levels of knowledge and skills. The factors that stemmed from the adolescents, such as their concerns about their parents' suspicions, worry, mistrust, and control, and their expected equal, open, and supportive communication indicate that greater parental efforts are needed to promote effective communication. These findings reflect some inconsistency with the work by Ogle, Glasier and Riley (2008) and (Hyde et al. 2010) who found barriers to communicating about sexual health between parents and their children mainly stemmed from reluctance of children.

These factors were interwoven within parent-adolescent interaction under the broad Chinese socio-cultural context with the clash between Chinese traditional and Western ideologies. In relation to this clash, some adolescents struggled with a balance between autonomy and conformity to filial piety, such as reducing parental worry, leading to their avoidance of initiating communication with their parents. Some parents expressed a willingness to embrace the notion of initiating an egalitarian relationship with their adolescents, while most tended to uphold traditional Confucian authoritarian parenting. Parents' adherence to tradition shaped their current communicative pattern as being parent-initiated, dominant, and less interactive, which inhibited adolescent acceptance of, and engagement in, communication.

To achieve more productive communication, the contribution and input of both parents and adolescents needs to be recognised, while parents need more help and support in overcoming historical, social, and cultural barriers. Encouraging an open and interactive form of communication between parents and adolescents would be conducive to clarifying the assumptions held by parents and adolescents, and to a better understanding of adolescents' concerns and expectations in contemporary China.

The next chapter will draw on these findings and focus on a discussion about the tensions that face both parents and adolescents in their communication about RE and sexuality.

CHAPTER 7 TENSIONS BETWEEN PARENTS AND ADOLESCENTS IN ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE AND COMMUNICATION

7.1 Introduction

The preceding three chapters have described parents' and adolescents' understandings of adolescent romantic experience (RE) and their communicative practice on these issues, including the risks of, and opportunities that arise from RE, parenting driven communication, and the perceived factors that influence such communication. There were both consistency and divergence between parents and adolescents in relation to perceptions about adolescent RE and the associated communication, which was shaped by Chinese socio-cultural factors. This chapter will draw together the three findings chapters to discuss the tensions arising between parents and adolescents in the Chinese context, through the lens of social constructionism and interpretive interactionism.

Three main tensions were identified within and between parents and adolescents that arose from their perceptions of adolescent RE, parenting practice, and communicative patterns. These tensions largely reflect the challenges to traditional beliefs about adolescence, sexuality, and parenting during the process of modernisation in China under both global and Western influence. In accordance with the preceding three findings chapters, the three tensions to be discussed are: (1) adolescents' desire for RE exploration versus parental control; (2) parents' intentions to communicate versus personal and environmental constraints; and (3) adolescents' expectations of parental communication versus current parental practice. For adolescents, as the only child in their families, these tensions may be more pronounced given their single-child status. As well, female adolescents may encounter more tensions due to the socio-cultural constructions of women in China.

7.2 Adolescents' desire for romantic exploration *versus* parental control

The tension between adolescents' desire for romantic exploration as opposed to parental control arose from the discrepancy between parents and adolescents in relation to their perceptions about adolescent RE. Adolescents generally perceived RE as a symbol of being mature and grown-up, and an essential experience during adolescence in which they could develop autonomy, independence, and self-identity. With the prevailing occurrence of RE among high school students (Chen, Z et al. 2009; Li, ZH et al. 2010), and the portrayal of

romance in the media, especially from the Western media (Zhou, S & Zhu 2004), adolescents expressed a desire to engage in RE and articulated the benefits of RE in terms of alleviating academic pressure and laying a foundation for future intimate relationship development. By contrast, although some parents perceived RE as a normal part of adolescent development, they generally framed adolescent RE as being detrimental to their adolescents' future and health, and verbalised these detriments in order to exercise a measure of control over the adolescent to prevent their romantic engagement. Therefore, while adolescents desired RE as a normal part of their development, they encountered parental intervention in the form of disapproval, monitoring, and disciplining of their romantic activities. The tension between adolescents and their parents is increasingly apparent under the influence of globalisation and the traditional Chinese culture, which are juxtaposed in contemporary China.

The reforms and the open-door policy in China from 1978 onwards has brought dramatic socio-cultural changes, and has prompted China to experience the process of modernisation and worldwide globalisation (Wang, X 2013). Through exposure to an information technology-rich environment, and connection with global networks including Western media, Chinese adolescents have developed more diverse beliefs and values about sexuality and parent-child relationships (Chang, Hayter & Lin 2014; Tomasik & Silbereisen 2011; Wang, X 2013). In this study, adolescents described a more liberal set of attitudes about adolescent RE and a desire for more supportive parenting practice, such as in the West. The exposure to Western culture influences adolescents in terms of expecting similar practices from their parents, instead of their current stricter control and intervention. Therefore, despite the traditional parental and societal disapproval of adolescent RE in China (Farrer 2006; Pan 2006), Western influence adds a justification for engaging in RE for adolescents who are increasingly seeking freedom and independence from their parents (Collins & Steinberg 2007). Yan, Y (2002) argued that nowadays, popular culture and the mass media have altered the practice of courtship among young people in China, which emphasises individual identity construction and the legitimacy of a personal desire for intimacy in romantic love. Young people increasingly underscore individual rights and privacy in love and intimacy, rather than being subject to the traditional intrusion of parental authority (Yan, Y 2002).

Globalisation contributes to changing parenting practices and parent-child relationships, especially among urban Chinese families with the introduction of the one-child family policy. Parents in China started to value and encourage the autonomy, assertiveness, and self-reliance of their children for successful adaptation to a society affected by trends in the global

economy (Chen, XY et al. 2010; Settles et al. 2013). While parent-child relationships now involve more parental warmth and less assertion of power (Tomasik & Silbereisen 2011) in relation to adolescent sexuality as a longstanding sensitive socio-cultural topic, the related parenting practice may not have changed as much. This study found that parents still attempted to exert control, rather than granting autonomy over adolescent romantic and sexual involvement. For example, parents invaded their adolescents' privacy (e.g., reading their adolescents' diaries and logging on to their adolescents' social networking sites) to check their romantic inclinations and activities. Parents also used persuasive or threatening messages to admonish their adolescents so that they would refrain from developing a romantic relationship or to end a relationship if their parents knew about it. Parents also controlled adolescents' exposure to sexual images in the media, through changing television programs, covering their eyes, or asking them to stop watching when there was a sex scene on the screen. The explicit interventions of parents reflect their control over adolescent romantic issues despite encountering some measure of adolescent resistance.

Despite the influence of globalisation and modernisation, the traditional cultural and social norms of Confucianism, which have been followed by Chinese people for more than two millennia, remain significant and strongly shape personal, familial, and social relationships (Tomasik & Silbereisen 2011). One salient Confucian value is filial piety which serves as an important guide for parent-child interactions, and has deeply influenced ethics and morality in Chinese families (Salili, Zhou & Hoosain 2003; Yeh et al. 2013). Within the ideology of filial piety, children are inculcated to perform filial duties in relation to repaying and supporting their aging parents (Pomerantz et al. 2011), as well as showing respect and obedience to their parents in their daily lives (Huang, CY & Lamb 2014; Park & Chesla 2007). Family hierarchy and harmony are two other central concepts in Confucianism, and rebellion against the parents' authority is viewed as unacceptable. Therefore, although adolescents in this study had a desire for RE, or had engaged in RE, most of them disclosed little information about their own romantic issues to their parents in order to maintain inter-generational harmony by avoiding potential conflict with their parents.

Filial piety is also closely linked with education, which is highly valued both for self-improvement and for the family and society as a whole in the collectivist Chinese culture (Huang, GH-C & Gove 2012). Filial piety proposes that children repay their parents by working hard and achieving educational success (Naftali 2010). According to Confucianism, education is associated with one's social class which was traditionally regarded as an

indicator of success (Huang, GH-C & Gove 2012). In contemporary China, scholars are believed to be of a higher social class, and education provides a route to achieve this 'scholarly' status as well as upward social mobility through obtaining a quality education (Li, G et al. 2010). Therefore, education associated with social class influences the life of Chinese individuals and their families in relation to employment and subsequent marriage and relationships, suggesting the centrality of education to most Chinese families (Hong, X 2013; Huang, GH-C & Gove 2012).

In the current study, parents often emphasised that the main responsibility of their school age adolescents was to excel academically, and they simultaneously framed RE as a form of interference to adolescents' education. As a result, the priority of education constituted a major reason why parents prohibited their adolescents from engaging in RE at high school, particularly given that this is a critical stage for preparing for the highly-demanding national college entrance exams (Lou, CH et al. 2006). Meanwhile, several adolescents also expressed concerns about the negative impact of RE on academic performance, and cited filial piety as a major motive for their educational efforts to achieve future prosperity in order to better reward their parents. In this situation, many adolescents displayed hesitation when facing romantic involvement because of their sense of filial piety. Cross-cultural studies suggest that adolescent romantic experience is less prevalent among Chinese adolescents than their counterparts in Western cultures, such as Australia (Moore & Leung 2001), the USA (Chen, Z et al. 2009), and Canada (Li, ZH et al. 2010). The Chinese cultural values of filial piety and education partially contribute to these cultural differences.

Furthermore, the one-child policy has dramatically changed the Chinese family structure, making most adolescents the only child in a family, especially in urban areas (Wang, X 2013). The single-child status of adolescents means that they have less opportunity to grow up and interact with the opposite sex in the family context (Wang, X 2013), and tend to interact more often with peers for intimacy and support which provide a context for dating (Li, S et al. 2013; Smetana, Campione-Barr & Metzger 2006). At the same time, the era of the only child coincides with a period of increasing prosperity in China, providing them with greater access to the Internet and other technologies which also have more sexual-related information (Deutsch 2006). Li, S et al. (2013) reported that 'only-child' college students demonstrated a more open attitude toward sexual behaviour, and engaged in romantic/sexual relationships more than those with siblings. In this sense, adolescents as the only-child in a family may be comparatively more likely to have a desire for, and to participate in, romantic activities.

However, parents correspondingly placed high expectations on education for their only child, and made every effort to ensure that they concentrated on academic pursuits (Fong 2007), resulting in the parents' more intense interventions over their adolescent's romantic involvement. For some adolescents, the single-child status may heighten filial piety because they have no siblings to share the responsibility of supporting their parents in the future (Deutsch 2006). Therefore, for this group of adolescents in this study, they may encounter greater tension between their desire for RE and concerns about the negative outcomes of romantic engagement on their education than their counterparts in previous generations and in other countries.

In addition to educational outcomes, sexual health related to RE was a parental concern that explained parental control over their adolescents' romantic involvement. While parents prioritised education over romantic involvement equally for boys and girls, they displayed gendered perceptions that girls were more sexually-vulnerable than boys in relation to RE. These gendered perceptions are associated with the construction of masculinity and femininity in China, which is characterised by a power imbalance between females and males, and which highlights the importance of maintaining the pre-marital virginity of girls (Liu, F 2006, 2013; Sheng 2012). Consequently, the tension between parents and their adolescents is especially noticeable for female adolescents, due to the traditional and still persistent beliefs about femininity in China.

Mainstream feminism in China seldom associates power with sexuality, except in relation to sexual violence issues, although it does claim women's power and rights in the public sphere, such as in education and health (Huang, Y et al. 2009). In terms of sexuality, feminist discourse in China still focuses on the subordinate and oppressive status of women to men, often portraying women as passive victims, or encouraging silence on issues of sexuality (Huang, Y et al. 2009; Zhou, S & Zhu 2004). In the collective-oriented Chinese society, sexual behaviour in young women not only threatens their individual virtue, but also ruins the reputation of their family (Kim 2009). This sexual double standard is deeply rooted in Confucianism and persists in China into the present, in which female chastity is more highly valued, and thus more closely regulated, than male virginity (Li, S et al. 2013; Zhang, H, Stanton, et al. 2004). Therefore, engagement in sexual relations is more restrictive of females than males, and even young married women still feel obliged to meet the sexual demands of their husbands (Pan 2006) to meet the gender expectations of a woman being a 'virtuous wife and good mother' (Evans 2010; Sheng 2012). In the current study, parents and female

adolescents illustrated traditional gendered perceptions about sexual behaviour by referring to the vulnerability of female adolescents in sexual issues. Therefore, for the sake of fitting into traditional cultural norms about femininity, parents frequently used the term 'self-respect' to influence their daughters, which means behaving 'properly' and avoiding 'premature' love and sex in the traditional ideology. Accordingly, female adolescents received more prohibitive messages from their parents about romantic and sexual involvement than male adolescents, which are consistent with previous reports in other countries (Rosengard et al. 2012; Swain, Ackerman & Ackerman 2006).

With the rapid progress of globalisation and modernisation in China in recent years, young people's attitudes towards romance and sexuality have changed considerably in light of the pursuit of individual identity and freedom (Farrer 2006; Yan, Y 2002). Comparatively, parents had less experience of modernisation when they were young. As a result, parents retained more traditional notions of sexuality and parenting, and intended to limit their adolescent behaviour to traditional patterns. However, contemporary sexual values and practices among young people differ from their parents' traditional sexual beliefs. Therefore, there appears to be an accelerated generation gap between current adolescents and their parents, which exacerbates the tension between adolescents' struggle for romantic involvement and parental control over it.

In response to this tension, some adolescents restrained themselves from engaging in RE due to parental control, the persisting influence of filial piety, and socio-cultural norms about gender. However, most adolescents chose to disclose little information about their romantic issues, or to 'secretively' engage in romantic and sexual activities without parental knowledge and permission, which is consistent with the findings about dating behaviour among Asian-American adolescents (Lau et al. 2009). The 'secretive' ways of adolescents serve as a form of covert resistance to parental control, indicating adolescents' challenge to parental power and authority accompanied by the rise of their autonomy and independence. Parental control is related to various stages of adolescent development and behaviours, including reducing adolescent sexual activity and pregnancy, especially during early adolescence (Huang, DY, Murphy & Hser 2011; Miller, BC 2002). However, there is some research that suggests that excessive or coercive parental control might be problematic and associated with negative outcomes, such as earlier sexual initiation (Longmore, Manning & Giordano 2001) and other general health-related behaviours, such as poor diet and sleep (Philips et al. 2014). This

possible negative influence of parental control suggests that parents need to pay attention to the extent and manner in which they exercise such control.

In the current study, parents wanted to protect their adolescents from potential risks involved with RE (e.g., detriments to education and health) through imposing control. However, adolescents stated that the ideal parent-child relationship should be like a friendship entailing equality. This finding aligns with previous research that shows that young Chinese people prefer to be treated as an equal by their parents, and are less committed to the traditional value of hierarchy than previously (Zhang, YB, Harwood & Hummert 2005). Therefore, in contemporary China, parents are not as able as previously to completely rely on their power to control their adolescents in romantic and sexual matters during their adolescent years. Alternatively, parents need to recognise adolescence as a time for negotiating acceptable levels of parental regulation and adolescent autonomy (Smetana, Campione-Barr & Metzger 2006).

The tension between parental control and adolescents' desire for certain freedoms to explore RE may generate conflicts between them, and thus put them in certain disconnected situations. Adolescents stated that parental communication, rather than control, would be a good method of dealing with adolescent RE. For example, Lan (female, age 16) stated that *"I think parents should not strictly regulate, but communicate and discuss, listen to my thinking and then guide me. This is open-minded ..."*. From this perspective, parents' communicative efforts to increase adolescents' ability to cope with potential romantic and sexual involvement may be a more practical and effective strategy than parental control. In parallel with the tension discussed above, two other major tensions related to communication exist within parents, and between parents and adolescents, which will be discussed respectively below.

7.3 Parents' intention to communicate *versus* personal and environmental constraints

The tension between the parental intention to communicate versus personal and environmental constraints was mainly embedded in the parents themselves, reflecting their dilemma between their intentions and the difficulties they encountered in practice. Under the dramatic social transformations that have occurred recently in China, parents recognised that adolescents' perspectives and behaviours in relation to romantic and sexual issues were influenced by multiple sources, including the media, peers, and the broader socio-cultural context intertwined within the bio-ecological system (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Modern Chinese

society has placed adolescents in a diverse and more liberalised sexual culture where young people are more involved in sexual activities earlier and more frequently than previous generations (Farrer 2006; Li, ZH et al. 2010; Parish, Laumann & Mojola 2007). Driven by the societal and cultural changes, parents in this study intended to cultivate their adolescent's sexual well-being, and believed that communication would promote this by alleviating these external influences on their adolescents.

Parents in this study claimed that their adolescents were at a developmental stage which involved RE and associated sexuality, while they took the responsibility of 'guiding' their 'immature' adolescents to ensure that they remained 'on the right track' through communication, particularly given the single-child family structure. To fulfil this responsibility, parents transmitted restrictive sexual values and beliefs through addressing the negative consequences of involvement in romantic and sexual activities. They also highlighted the difference between romance, love, and marriage in order to encourage adolescents to adopt a future-oriented perspective, rather than engaging in RE in the present. With concern about adolescents' future family and marriage prospects, parents often impressed upon them the partner selection criteria that they perceived as being desirable. Some adolescents acknowledged that they had internalised their parents' sexual beliefs and attitudes, and therefore chose to avoid romantic engagement and remain sexually-abstinent, indicating that parental communication plays a part in adolescent romantic and sexual decision-making. The literature has consistently emphasised that parents play a role in adolescent sexual socialisation both directly and indirectly (Bangpan & Operario 2012; Bragg & Buckingham 2013; Deptula, Henry & Schoeny 2010). Nevertheless, the communication undertaken by parents in this study was primarily a tactic they used to ensure that their adolescents developed familial and socially acceptable beliefs about romance and sexuality, allowing them to behave consistently with these values.

Despite their intentions to communicate, parents encountered a number of difficulties such as a lack of sexual knowledge and communicative skills about sexuality, as well as challenges in dealing with the generation gap where some adolescents rebelled against their authority. The difficulties that parents encountered stemmed from historical and cultural factors, especially in relation to their lack of exposure to sexual education from their own parents and schools during their adolescent years (Aresu 2009; Leiber et al. 2009). Sex education in China was promoted in the late 1980s (Aresu 2009), and was officially enacted as an obligation in middle schools by the central government in 2002 (Wang, X 2013). However, the sex

education provided by the schools is not particularly informative, due to the primary focus being on biological facts about puberty, coupled with ethical, moral, and ideological values to allege 'abstinence' as the only acceptable way to become sexually-moral individuals (Aresu 2009; Wang, X 2013). In this study, most of the parents were born in the 1970s, and thus, received little information from school and family sources. Moreover, the parents in this study reported very few services available for them to seek assistance when they felt uncertain about how and what to talk about with their adolescents in relation to romantic and sexual issues. The unavailability of supporting resources further contributed to the lack of preparedness and discomfort for the parents when discussing RE and sexuality with their adolescents. In addition, some parents claimed that sex was embarrassing and/or 'unspeakable' to discuss with their adolescents, reflecting the traditional taboo against open discussions of sex, not only in public, but also among family members in the Chinese culture (Okazaki 2002; Wang, X 2013).

Apart from the limitations inherent within the parents themselves, some also encountered adolescent avoidance and rejection during their communication. Parents attributed adolescents' ignorance towards their communication to the generation gap and adolescent rebellion resulting from the clash between traditional Confucian ideology and westernisation. Parents upheld the traditional Confucian parenting values; however, they could not enforce absolute obedience upon their adolescents in contemporary Chinese society who were becoming increasingly independent and individualistic (Tomasik & Silbereisen 2011; Yan, Y 2010). Most adolescents concealed their romantic and sexual issues from their parents in order to maintain their autonomy and to circumvent potential criticism and troubles. Adolescents' increasingly seeking independence impeded the achievement of their parents' intentions to stay informed about their adolescents' activities through their communication.

In addition, some of the parents in this study, especially the five school teachers, emphasised that parents should take more responsibility for sex education than the schools, given that the family was an informal setting, and the parents knew more about their own adolescents. Lian et al. (2006) reported that middle school teachers in China held similar attitudes. Nevertheless, most parents in this study assumed that their adolescents had not engaged in RE or sexual activity, and/or had been equipped with sexual knowledge from their schooling and the media, and were subject to discipline in the school environment. Therefore, apart from the lack of sexual knowledge reported by some parents, these assumptions resulted in parents having very little discussion about sex with their adolescents by adopting a 'waiting' approach. In

addition, they predominantly promoted abstinence as the only method of avoiding sexual risk without providing information about safe sexual practices (e.g., contraception and STI prevention). For this reason, parents' intentions to communicate were predominantly based on transmitting parental beliefs and monitoring adolescents. Shtarkshall, Santelli and Hirsch (2007) stated that sex education programs should promote sexual literacy through a structured process, while sexual socialisation is a process through which individuals acquire an understanding of ideas, beliefs, values, meanings, and codes of conduct. Based on this distinction, and parental practice, the parents in this study played a broad and more indirect role in adolescent sexual socialisation, rather than conducting specific sex education. Previous research has found that the inclusion of the topic of abstinence in family discussions influences adolescent sexual decision-making in terms of reducing sexual engagement and the number of sexual partners (Haglund & Fehring 2010). However, given that adolescents are becoming increasingly sexually-active in China, and without other formal sources of sexual health knowledge (Yu, XM, Guo & Sun 2013), parental practice in this study may only partially influence adolescent sexual well-being.

Akers, Holland and Bost (2011) stated that intentions, skills, and the absence of environmental barriers or the presence of facilitators are required for parent-adolescent communication about sexuality to occur. Most parents in this study showed an intention to communicate and perceived this to be a positive practice which served as a significant starting point and a primary impetus for facilitating discussion about sexuality with their adolescents. However, their personal limits in relation to sexual knowledge and communication skills inhibited the translation of their intentions into action. Moreover, parents were confronted with adolescent resistance due to the accelerated generation gap. Therefore, parents may be not able to provide complete and accurate information or confidently communicate their knowledge to their adolescents without additional support, given the sensitive nature of discussions about sexual issues. The literature indicates that there are successful programs designed to promote parents' confidence and competence in discussing sexuality with their adolescents, such as through workshops (Klein et al. 2005), videos (Wang, B et al. 2014), and the use of multimedia computer programs (Turnbull, Werscha & Schaik 2011). These strategies could be utilised to improve parental knowledge, and thus, to facilitate more productive parental communication about adolescent sexual health.

Interpersonal communication is a bi-directional process in which the interaction between the sender and the receiver of information is an important force influencing the outcome of

communication (Finnegan & Viswanath 2008). The current study found that, in most cases, parents were the senders of the information while adolescents were the receivers. On the part of the adolescents, their intention to communicate with their parents was relatively low. This low intention is probably due to the gap between adolescents' expectations of parental communication and parental practice, as discussed below.

7.4 Adolescents' expectations of parental communication *versus* parental practice

The tension between adolescents' expectations of parental communication and parental practice demonstrated that traditional parenting practices in China contradicted adolescents' expectations. Despite a desire for increasing autonomy during adolescence, adolescents still needed support from external sources to face the potential challenges and to make RE-related decisions (Schalet 2011). With only limited information from their school due to the narrow scope of sex education (Wang, X 2013), adolescents in the current study hoped that their parents would be a source of support, and argued that communication about sexuality was part of parental responsibility. This perception of parental responsibility is related to beliefs about inter-generational reciprocity in Confucianism (Park & Chesla 2007; Yan, Y 2002), in which parents are supposed to treat their children with affection and care, while the parents' performance is judged according to whether their children grow up to be good or poor citizens (Park & Chesla 2007). Adolescents in the current study mentioned that their parents discussed romance with them, but most stated that the communication was not in line with their needs and expectations, especially in terms of the approaches used and the messages conveyed during communication.

Adolescents recognised their parents' credibility and experience, and that they have their best interests at heart. They expected and valued their parents' support and assistance if provided in an acceptable way, such as through offering practical and specific advice when they faced RE-related decisions and confusion about the diverse sexual values and practices of their peers. This expected support was connected with adolescents' desire for having a friendship-based relationship with their parents who, in such a case, would be accessible, non-judgemental, and could build an equal relationship with them. In this set of circumstances, adolescents would be able to share their romantic thoughts and activities comfortably with their parents. However, only a few adolescents said that they were happy with their parents' communicative style, while the majority complained about either a lack of, or unpleasant, communication (e.g., parent-dominated, over-repetition, or lecturing). From the perspective of

the adolescents, most parents in this study did not fulfil this expectation, which created a tension between the parents' current and ideal roles in adolescent romantic and sexual issues.

As some of the parents indicated, it was difficult for them to undertake the ideal role of being friends with their adolescents, despite their awareness of the significance of developing an equal relationship pattern within the family. The difficulties exist in the hierarchical parent-adolescent relationship of Confucianism that emphasises adolescent submission to parental authority in China (Huang, CY & Lamb 2014; Park & Chesla 2007). Therefore, in reality, parents may be unable to shift their current practice to a manner that meets adolescents' needs in the contemporary context. Due to the ingrained notion of family hierarchy and filial piety (Yeh et al. 2013), adolescents conveyed less willingness to communicate with their parents about RE and sexuality. Consequently, adolescents generally responded to parental communication by using strategies such as silence, passively 'listening' to their parents' preaching, or responding flippantly, rather than either initiating a conversation or actively engaging in communication with the parents. However, these strategies tended to weaken the sense of connection between the adolescents and their parents, further inhibiting adolescents from seeking advice from their parents and preventing parents from staying informed about their adolescents' romantic thoughts and activities. In this situation, some adolescents felt frustrated and helpless in dealing with RE issues because they stated that they could not rely on their parents for help and support.

The parent-dominant communication found in this study provided adolescents with little opportunity to clarify their opinions and to ask questions, increasing the likelihood of the parents being ignorant of their adolescents' needs. The didactic style of parental communication, consisting of cautionary messages, is at odds with adolescents' expectations of more interactive, open, and supportive communication based on an equal friendship-like relationship. Through a more reciprocal style of communication, adolescents wanted to explore both their own and their parents' views and experiences, and then gain advice and support from their parents. The expectation of a different communication pattern was influenced by Western culture, as reported by adolescents when they were exposed to Western parenting approaches in the popular media. However, few parents in this study could fulfil the expected practice given that the traditional authoritarian parenting style within the Confucian ideology remains a parent-dominant and lecturing communication style (Zheng et al. 2011).

This study found that the approach to communication was mostly implicit, while only a few adolescents and parents reported the occurrence of open and direct communication about sexuality within the family. In those cases of direct communication, parents often initiated the conversation and conveyed messages about restrictive sexual values and their expectations to prevent their adolescents from engaging in romantic and sexual activity. Some adolescents in this study commented that they understood that the implicit communication was related to their parents' upbringing in a traditional conservative sexual culture, and that they could capture the meanings behind these implicit messages. Nevertheless, the implicit manner also resulted in the information that adolescents received from their parents being rules rather than practical advice or strategies for dealing with romantic and sexual situations that the adolescents faced.

Despite a general desire for a more reciprocal form of communication, some adolescents were hesitant about initiating discussions about RE with their parents. This hesitation mainly arose from their negative communication experiences with their parents and/or concerns about the outcomes of such communication (e.g., parental suspicion and worry). For example, most adolescents defined their parents as being of a conservative generation, and their values as being old-fashioned and unacceptable to young people. Some adolescents perceived that their parents were not informative due to their discomfort in talking about sexuality, coupled with their limited knowledge of sexual issues. These judgements about parents lead to adolescents viewing the outcome of communication as futile or 'useless'. Hence, the tension between adolescent expectations of parental communication and parents' actual communication hinders adolescents' attempts to initiate and engage in communication with their parents about RE and sexuality. In addition, the influence of power relations prescribed by the socio-cultural norms in relation to parent-child relationships in China may serve as a further restricting influence on adolescents approaching their parents for advice. Therefore, parents' desire for power and authority serves as a constraint on adolescents' communication behaviour in China.

With respect to the messages discussed in such communication, parents mainly expressed their perceptions and disapproval of RE to their adolescents, with a focus on their belief that RE had detrimental impacts on adolescents' education and health. Some adolescents claimed that such consequence-oriented communication was a form of preaching and rather futile because it did not provide specific advice about RE and sexuality as they expected. Meanwhile, adolescents perceived that their parents' repetitive communication about the

negative consequences of RE carried with it a sense of mistrust in them, reinforcing their resistance to communication. Adolescents in this study wanted more detailed and specific information from their parents as a source of support, which is consistent with the findings of a study among American adolescents (Rosengard et al. 2012). In the current study, adolescents' expectations of specific information and trust indicated the importance of parents balancing the frequency of communication and delivering a variety of messages. In addition, as a result of parents failing to play the role that their adolescents anticipated, they turned to their peers and other sources of information, such as the Internet, for advice and support. The gap between adolescent expectations and parental practices suggests that the parents are only one part of the ecological system that influences adolescent RE, rather than being the sole source of adolescent sexual health promotion. It appears that supplementary efforts from additional sources are also needed.

7.5 Conclusion

The tensions discussed in this chapter cast light on the incompatibility between adolescents' needs and parenting practice in the context of rapid modernisation together with the traditional parent-child relationship norms in China. Parents generally had the intention to communicate, yet they faced personal, interpersonal, and socio-cultural constraints in doing so. Adolescents expected and valued their parents' support through communication if it was provided in an acceptable manner. These tensions are multifaceted and indicate a need for cooperative efforts by both parents and adolescents through a mechanism that can engage them together in conversation.

Overall, parents served as a source of sexual socialisation during their adolescents' romantic and sexual development through communication, yet their practices were not always embraced by the adolescents. One reason is that parents generally dominated communication using a lecturing style with limited practical application, leaving little room for discussion or asking about adolescents' opinions. Adolescents tended to ascribe greater responsibility for initiating and maintaining a conversation about RE and sexuality to their parents, while they themselves remained passive or avoidant during communication. As a result, adolescents generally used avoidance as a strategy to respond to parental communication. Therefore, applying appropriate approaches that grant adolescents their own voice and a sense of autonomy during the conversation may be conducive to alleviating the tensions, and thus, promoting reciprocal communication.

Both parents and adolescents need support in a range of dimensions to address these tensions in order to facilitate more effective communication. For parents, they require knowledge about adolescent development and sexual health, and the capacity to confidently start and maintain an interactive and open conversation about RE and sexuality with their adolescents. Parents also need to be informed about their adolescents' expectations of such communication, in order to change their current practice into a more acceptable approach, with a balance between being controlling and a friend to their adolescents. In relation to the content of communication, parents could attempt to accommodate their adolescents' need for more practical messages about romantic issues through balancing their cautionary messages about the negative consequences of RE with more of an understanding approach.

Adolescents also need more sexual and reproductive knowledge in order to make informed sexual decisions, as their parents play only a limited role in providing explicit sexual information. Based on adolescents' expectations of more supportive parental communication, adolescents might also make more effort to connect with their parents. Adolescents can be encouraged to approach their parents when they need help and support when they are facing romantic and sexual issues.

In addition, developing a partnership between family and other sources (e.g., school, and health professionals) may be a strategy that can be used to apply available resources to better help adolescents to make well-informed RE and sexual decisions. From the interviews, it can be seen that the voices of both parents and adolescents provide insights into efforts to better promote adolescent sexual well-being through parent-adolescent communication. The following chapter provides a summary of the study and focuses on the implications for practice and future research, with a consideration of the limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

This study set out to explore how parents and adolescents perceived, and communicated about, adolescent romantic experience (RE) in the context of rapid economic development and socio-cultural transformation in contemporary China. The existing literature has identified increases in adolescent sexual health problems in China and the importance of parental communication about sexuality in adolescent sexual health promotion. This study has addressed the knowledge gap in relation to the underlying beliefs of parents and adolescents about RE and related parent-adolescent communication as being under-researched in China. A qualitative approach was used to obtain multiple viewpoints from a sample of parents and adolescents from urban North-Eastern China.

This chapter provides a synopsis of the key findings of this study, and a discussion on the implications for practice. This is followed by the contribution of the study, the limitations, implications for future research, and an overall conclusion.

8.2 Synopsis of findings

A thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews with parents and adolescents, underpinned by social constructionism and interpretive interactionism, provides insights into their subjective interpretations of RE and the associated communicative practices. Firstly, parents and adolescents constructed adolescent RE as being developmentally-normal, yet with coexisting risks and opportunities. The perceived risks and opportunities reflect the social construction of love, education, sexuality, gender, marriage, and family shaped by the Chinese socio-cultural context. There were a number of similarities and differences in relation to RE perceptions between parents and adolescents, reflecting parental influence on adolescents' constructions of RE, and generational differences shaped by their distinct living contexts. From a developmental perspective, adolescents desired to engage in RE to demonstrate their sexual identity and maturity. In practice, adolescents made the decision about RE engagement under the influence of multi-system ecological factors, including social culture, media, peers, school, and family. During parent-adolescent communication about adolescent RE and sexuality, the risks from RE in relation to adolescents' education, health outcomes, and future prospects were the predominant messages that parents conveyed to their adolescents to prohibit their romantic and sexual engagement. Due to the combination of a personal desire

for RE, and parental prohibition, most adolescents chose to conceal their romantic activities from their parents, challenging the power relations between them. However, some adolescents encountered a contradiction between their personal desire for RE, and the cultural value of meeting their filial duty to their parents, and therefore decided to delay romantic involvement until they attended university.

Secondly, parents and adolescents had different motives for their communication. Parents were driven by a risk perspective, through which they perceived their parental responsibility as protecting adolescents from the risks of RE. Parents utilised their familiarity with their adolescents, and communicated to stay informed about and connected with them. Some adolescents recognised the value of parental communication in terms of parental authority, power, and credibility. With the intention to communicate, parents and adolescents used varying strategies to do so, demonstrating their similar dilemmas and discordant stances about parental communication. Both parents and adolescents employed humour, third-party examples, and euphemisms as indirect and implicit ways of overcoming the discomfort related to talking about sexuality. Parents used a didactic and dominant communicative approach to exert their influence to ensure that their adolescents' behaviours were acceptable at the social and familial levels. Most adolescents positioned their parents as active talkers, whilst regarding themselves as passive listeners, and thus, they were reticent and/or avoidant as a strategy to respond to parental communication. Gender-based communication aimed at girls using restrictive sexual messages reflects the gendered construction of RE and sexuality in China.

Thirdly, most parents and adolescents found that communication was challenging due to personal, interpersonal, and socio-cultural constraints. These constraints manifested in perceptions about the timing of communication, assumptions made by parents and adolescents about each other (e.g., adolescents' mastery of sexual knowledge, parental suspicion and mistrust), hierarchical parent-adolescent relationships, and discomfort and uncertainty. Generally, the constraints were inter-related and embedded in the socio-cultural norms about sexuality and parenting that are apparent in the clash between the traditional Confucian ideology and Western culture. Adolescents primarily contributed their reluctance to communicate to their parents' behaviours, and thus expected greater parental effort in initiating open, supportive, and reciprocal forms of communication. Due to historical, social, and cultural factors, parents encountered great challenges in talking to their adolescents who were socialised in a more open and modern society.

Overall, this study has demonstrated a number of tensions within, and between, parents and adolescents that influenced adolescent decision-making about RE engagement, and parent-adolescent communication about RE and sexuality. The tensions confronted by adolescents and parents reflect adolescent development and parenting practices during the modernisation process in China. Adolescents demonstrated a growing sense of self, aspirations for independence, and equality with their parents while, at the same time, being subject to the traditional cultural values of Confucianism, including that of filial piety. Adolescents recognised that parental communication can be a protective and guiding approach to influence their RE and sexual health in the current Chinese socio-cultural context. However, parents' lack of knowledge about adolescent development and sexual health, and their lack of effective communication skills impeded them from putting their intention to communicate into action. Adolescents identified a gap between their expectations of parental communication and the parents' current practice. Therefore, the actual communicative practice could be improved based on adolescents' willingness and expectations, and parents' intentions, knowledge, and capacity. These tensions imply that both parents and adolescents need external support for more productive communication as a form of adolescent sexual health promotion in China.

8.3 Recommendations for future research, practice, and policy

This study casts light on the needs of parents and adolescents in relation to sexual knowledge and parent-adolescent communication skills about sexuality in China. The findings have implications for future intervention programs to promote adolescent sexual health by health professionals with a component of parental involvement, and need to be studied in future research.

In China, adolescents (aged 10-19) make up 11.29% of the total population (*China Statistic Yearbook* 2014), and unprotected premarital sex increasingly occurs amongst this group due to a lack of sexual knowledge and a more sexually open culture (Hu, Y et al. 2011; Yu, XM, Guo & Sun 2013). Health professionals, including nurses, play a vital role in providing sexual health services and are in a position to influence adolescent sexual health in positive ways (Hayter, Owen & Cooke 2012; Lee, RL & Hayter 2014). In China, community health services have developed rapidly over the last decade, with the aim of providing prompt, convenient, effective, low-cost, and continuous health care services for all age-groups in the community through a primary healthcare pathway (Fu, Bao & Meng 2010). Nurses play an important role in delivering public health services through health education and health promotion to enhance

the health of all community residents at the community level, including adolesents (Yang, J et al. 2008; Yuan, Peng & Jiang 2012).

In this study, parents indicated their intention to communicate and wished to learn more about adolescent sexual health and communication skills. Health professionals, such as community and school nurses, can capitalise on this positive attitude and create accessible services to provide support for parents to improve their self-efficacy and to facilitate them in playing a role in adolescent RE. Based on adolescents' voices and actual parental practice, nurses could support parents in a range of ways. These components include providing knowledge about adolescent development and sexual health, highlighting the parental role as it is perceived by adolescents, improving more equal parent-child relationships, and building parents' capacity to confidently initiate and maintain interactive communication about sexuality. These components could be integrated into programs that target parents to facilitate RE and sexuality communication with their adolescents.

The approach to communication is critical with regards to engaging adolescents and reducing their mistrust and caution of parents in RE-related conversations. In practice, some parents and adolescents discussed third-party examples more comfortably, which had the function of alleviating embarrassment, and of de-personalising the adolescents, thus enhancing their receptivity to parental communication. Adolescents expected their parents to share their personal experiences during communication, and rejected the dominant preaching and lecturing approach of the parents. In accordance with these findings, health professionals can introduce scenarios to parents for those who feel embarrassed to talk about sexuality with their adolescents and to encourage parents to integrate their own stories into the conversation. Meanwhile, health professionals need to raise parents' awareness about adolescents' cognitive developmental characteristics, including the desire for independence and autonomy, to enable parents to approach communication in a way that is expected of them by the adolescents (e.g., using humour, in an appropriate frequency, repetition, and being open, interactive, and supportive).

Furthermore, some parents may not be aware of their adolescents' expectations for parental involvement during their romantic and sexual development, and/or may undervalue their input and then adopt a 'waiting' approach. Adolescents in this study reported the benefits of parents starting sexual conversations earlier in their lives in light of advancing their subsequent communication in a deeper and more comfortable way. The literature has shown the positive

effects of timely parental communication on adolescent sexual health outcomes (Akers, Holland & Bost 2011; Davis, Gahagan & George 2013). Health professionals could inform parents about the importance of timely conversations with their adolescents about romantic and sexual issues, especially before they become romantically and sexually involved. In addition, gender issues need to be taken into account due to girls' perceived vulnerability and boys being less of a focus in family sexual communication due to the double standard of sexual behaviour. The public health practice should address the deeply-rooted gender stereotypes to adolescents when working with them to assist their critical reflection on this issue. Health professionals could help parents recognise gender issues and to provide different messages for boys and girls to those that are currently being delivered. In particular, health professionals could encourage parents to focus on improving autonomy and negotiation skills for girls, while paying more attention to boys in terms of providing them with safe sex information.

For adolescents, the main issue is their passive position during parent-adolescent communication, which leaves their needs for parental support unrecognised by the parents. To some extent, Chinese adolescents may follow the Confucian ideology of filial piety with a focus on the adolescent deferring to their parents as the authority (Cheung et al. 2005; Xia et al. 2004), and thus choose to withhold their stories from their parents. In some cases, adolescents discussed these issues more with their peers due to the unavailability of their parents, or dissatisfaction with parental communication, and thus may be more influenced by peer norms in developing sexual values and making sexual decisions (Chang, Hayter & Lin 2014; Suleiman & Deardorff 2015; Sullivan et al. 2012). For this reason, health professionals can encourage adolescents to actively participate in communication with their parents, and assist them to find an opportune time and context to convey their opinions and expectations of their parents to facilitate greater reciprocity in conversations about sexuality. In addition, adolescents need to realise that their parents' sexual knowledge may be insufficient due to their experiences when they were younger, despite perceiving that talking about sex was a parental responsibility. In this situation, health professionals could provide other spaces for adolescents to talk about their RE and sexual issues, such as at school or in community health centres.

Some adolescents reported their lack of specific knowledge about sexual-related issues with their high schools not offering sex education programs. In 2002, the Chinese government officially obliged middle schools to provide sex education. However, in practice, the content

and quality of sex education varies among different schools and it largely remains an abstinence-based approach and thus lacks informative knowledge on contraception, reproductive health services and skill development (Wang, X 2013). In this current study, parents were found to play only a limited role in providing adolescents with specific sexual information, including safe sex practices. Consequently, current adolescent sex education in both family and school settings is inadequate to meet adolescents' needs in the context of the rapid behavioural and socio-cultural changes in China. A few adolescents in this study mentioned that they knew of one high school which provided information about safe sex to their students. They also endorsed this type of comprehensive sex education. Therefore, the policy should draw on the research evidence related to the effectiveness of comprehensive sex education in delaying sexual initiation and reducing sexual risk behaviour among adolescents (Fonner et al. 2014; Kirby 2008; Kohler, Manhart & Lafferty 2008), and promote its implementation in school settings to better meet contemporary adolescents' needs. In addition, as the main contraceptive education and service provider, the current Chinese family planning program still targets mainly married couples rather than unmarried young people (Zhou, Y et al. 2013), while adolescents have been found to engage in premarital sex and experience undesirable outcomes such as unintended pregnancy. Therefore, the family planning system could expand its clientele to include adolescent groups and provide them with reliable contraceptive information and services.

As the bio-ecological model indicates, adolescent sexual health is shaped by multiple systems. The challenges parents and adolescents encounter in communication about sexuality are profoundly embedded in the sociocultural constructions of adolescence, sexuality, gender and family. Therefore, the efforts by parent and adolescent individuals are inadequate to address adolescent sexual health. Joint efforts of different parties are required to help parents and adolescents work together to achieve more effective and reciprocal forms of communication. This study has shown that school was a place in which adolescents developed romantic activities, constructed their understandings of RE through peer interaction, and discussed romantic and sexual issues with friends. Parents mainly transmitted sexual values and rules for their adolescents. Some parents in this study indicated that the lack of parent-adolescent communication programs delivered by health professionals increased the challenge of dealing with their uncertainty about how, and what, to discuss with their adolescents about RE and sexuality. Therefore, establishing partnerships among family, school and health sectors could be a viable and complementary approach to improve adolescents' sexual well-being. Policy

makers can facilitate greater cooperation among these critical systems for adolescent health to help adolescents make informed relationship and sexual decisions.

In practice, programs can be developed to assist and support parents to become more comfortable and effective communicators through creating avenues and opportunities for the improvement of their relevant knowledge and skills. In school environments, besides promoting comprehensive sex education for adolescents, schools can develop programs to motivate students to discuss their perceptions of RE and sexuality as well as experiences of related communication in their family. Schools can involve parents in such activities to strengthen parent-adolescent connections given their emphasis on collaboration with parents to ensure adolescents' health and safety. Health professionals need to raise the awareness about the sociocultural dimensions of adolescent sexuality and related parental communication. As parents were in need of programs by health professionals, more resources should be allocated to initiate programs targeted at both parents and adolescents to enhance their active engagement in adolescent sexual health in a supportive environment. Health professionals need to raise the awareness about the sociocultural dimensions of adolescent sexuality and related parental communication. As parents were in need of programs by health professional, more resources should be allocated to initiate programs targeted at both parents and adolescents to enhance their active engagement in adolescent sexual health in a supportive environment. Existing programs implemented in other countries may be drawn upon to push forward such programs in China through referring to their successful components, such as family homework activities being collectively completed by adolescents and their parents (Grossman et al. 2013), multi-approach workshop delivery to parents at their worksites (Eastman et al. 2005; Schuster et al. 2008), or to both parents and adolescents (Villarruel et al. 2008). However, these components should be examined in light of the key problems faced by parents and adolescents in this study, and therefore may need to be tailored to suit the specific Chinese socio-cultural context to ensure their implementation in a culturally-appropriate way, such as integrating concepts of filial piety.

8.4 Contribution and strengths of this study

This study has focused on parent-adolescent communication about adolescent RE and sexuality. Using the lens of social constructionism, the subjective meanings of adolescent RE and the associated communication within the Chinese socio-cultural context have been identified. The methodological framework of interpretive interactionism assisted in providing an understanding of the interplay between parents and adolescents during daily life and in

communication practice, as well as their interactions with the broader ecological macro-system.

This qualitative study shows that the perceptions of adolescent RE and parent-adolescent communication about RE and sexuality are diverse and complicated in Chinese families. The study findings resemble other studies in the West and in Asian countries in some respects, such as parental embarrassment, and difficulties in discussing sexual topics with adolescents (Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2012; Kim & Ward 2007; Trinh, J et al. 2009). However, through an ecological framework and a social constructionist lens, it has been shown that Chinese parents and adolescents face greater challenges due to the accelerated generation gap in the context of rapid modernisation and the coexistence of traditional Confucian cultural values. These challenges manifest in the tensions within, and between, adolescents and parents in terms of adolescent desires, parental concerns, and social norms. In addition, the structural issue of the one-child family policy may reinforce these challenges for most families with the adolescent being the only child. Therefore, this study has generated important insights into generational and cultural change in China in the context of global influence. It adds a clearer picture to the body of knowledge from the Chinese socio-cultural perspective in relation to how to adapt strategies to promote adolescent sexual health.

In addition, the study makes four major contributions to the literature. Firstly, this study expands on earlier research by focusing on RE as an important part of adolescent sexuality to explore relevant parent-adolescent communication. This study shows that RE is a subject that can engage participants in China despite the traditional characterisation of sexuality being a taboo subject for public discussion. Secondly, inclusion of the perspectives of both parents and adolescents provides a more comprehensive picture of family communication about RE and sexuality in terms of identifying the similarities and differences between the two parties. In this way, the issues underlying the behaviours and beliefs of the adolescents and/or parents are more clearly presented, which can then be addressed correspondingly. Thirdly, the study findings corroborate the potential for, and benefits of, encouraging parental involvement in adolescent sexual health promotion through overcoming the barriers and utilising the enablers to communication. Fourthly, the qualitative methodology provided an opportunity for the participants to voice and share their perceptions and experiences about RE and related communication in the family. Simultaneously, the participants indicated that this was their first time of participating in an interview-based study in which their individual opinions were sought by a researcher. At the end of the interviews, some of the participants indicated that

they were more aware of their own opinions, and as well, the interview enabled them to reflect on their own practice. They seemed to appreciate the opportunity to speak out and reflect on their own practice, indicating that qualitative research methods could be employed more widely in relation to this sensitive topic in China.

8.5 Limitations, and implications for future research

The study achieved the purpose of the research, and answered the research questions, despite the findings of this study needing to be interpreted in light of limitations in relation to the sampling and data collection processes. Four major limitations are acknowledged which help to place the study in context, and also create opportunities for further research.

Firstly, the participants in this study are predominantly females with approximately 70% of the participants being either female adolescents or mothers. The participant recruitment process did not have specific criteria about gender and was based on voluntary participation. The majority of participants being female may reflect in practice that family communication about RE and sexuality more often occurred between mothers and daughters (Swain, Ackerman & Ackerman 2006; Trinh, J et al. 2009). In addition, the gender of the researcher as a young woman may also have influenced the outcomes for more female participants, as RE and sexuality is a sensitive topic which males might feel embarrassed to talk about with an unfamiliar person of the opposite sex. Future research can make greater effort to recruit more adolescent boys and fathers through using a male interviewer to explore their perceptions of adolescent RE and associated communication.

Secondly, given the relatively sensitive nature of the research questions and the social undesirability of adolescent romantic and sexual engagement, not all the adolescents may have disclosed their romantic and sexual activity to the interviewer. Likewise, the parent participants might also be unwilling to disclose sexual-related information about their adolescents, or they were uninformed about their adolescents' romantic and sexual activities. Moreover, the traditional cultural taboo about talking about sex, and the stigmatisation of having sex among young people, might limit their honesty and openness about adolescent sexual practice. However, steps were taken to elicit as much information as possible in an ethical way during the interview, such as de-personalising the interview questions. In addition, the parent participants include five teachers or administrators recruited from the same schools where the study was conducted. Due to the work background, it may be difficult to know if what these five teachers reported was from a parent's perspective or from a teacher's

perspective, especially when they talked about the role of schools in sex education and their perceptions of adolescent RE. Moreover, the requirement for written parental consent may have prevented some high school students from participating. Romantically and/or sexually experienced adolescents may have worried that simply asking parents to sign the consent form would result in parental suspicion about their own romantic and sexual behaviour. Therefore, no adolescents in this study mentioned that they were sexually active, and predominantly commented about the sexual activity of their peers. Consequently, it is possible that some adolescents and parents provided responses that are socially desirable rather than being accurate.

Thirdly, the adolescents interviewed were from two high schools in urban and suburban districts in North-Eastern China, while the parents were recruited from the same schools. This study did not analyse the differences between the two schools, due to the suburbanisation of the coastal regions of China since the 2000s which has strengthened the connection between suburban areas and metropolitan centres (Lamia, Edward & Zhang 2009). However, the modernisation process of China has had a greater socio-economic impact in urban rather than in rural areas (Chen, X et al. 2010; Higgins & Sun 2007), because young urban people hold more open attitudes towards sexual behaviour. The communicative experience of adolescents and parents in rural and remote areas are quite different from that of their urban counterparts (Zheng & Chen 2010). Therefore, the findings from the participants could not be generalised to adolescents and parents in the rural areas of China. Meanwhile, due to limited accessibility, out-of-school adolescents and adolescents from other types of schools, such as secondary vocational and technical schools, were not recruited, yet they might have different experiences and perceptions around parental communication in China. For instance, previous studies found that out-of-school adolescents engage in sexual behaviours more frequently and earlier than school students (Wang, B et al. 2007), and are more strongly influenced by peers due to living away from their parents (Hu, Y et al. 2011). In addition, high school students receive some sexual information through their school, and under the discipline of the school, are a group with less risky behaviours. The study sample of adolescent students may limit the transferability of findings to other groups of parents and adolescents. Future research should involve adolescents and parents from rural areas and non-typical high schools to compare the differences and similarities among different groups in order to examine the influence of the residential environment and school type.

Moreover, research has shown that familial structural factors such as single parenting, SES, and parental education are related to the sexual risk behaviour of adolescents (Boislard & Poulin 2011; Jordahl & Lohman 2009) and influence parent-adolescent communication about sexuality (Jaccard, Dodge & Dittus 2002; Wight, Williamson & Henderson 2006; Trinh, SL et al. 2014). In this study, all of the parent participants were married. Although five of the adolescent participants reported their parents were divorced in the demographic information sheet, none of them indicated the influence of living with a single parent on the communication during the interviews. As divorce is still a relatively sensitive and shameful topic in China (Kung, Hung & Chan 2004; Zhou, Q et al. 2014) this may have inhibited adolescents to consider and discuss how RE and sexuality may have been influenced by the non-intact family structure. Apart from parental marital status, the majority of the participants were from middle-class families and parents had a relatively higher educational attainment. This group of adolescents and parents may be more likely to participate in family research than those from lower SES families, who probably have different experiences and perceptions. Additional research is required to involve parents and adolescents with more diversity in these structural factors to provide a broader picture of this research topic among a wider population.

In addition, the adolescent and parent participants in this study were recruited and interviewed in a non-dyadic approach due to ethical considerations. Therefore, it is difficult to know who were adolescent / parent dyads amongst the participants as they chose not to report. The data in this study were not analysed as dyads of parents and adolescents. Therefore, the interviews with the parents and the adolescents generally reflect perspectives from the two groups, while the consistency or discordance between the communication experiences of parents and adolescents could not be verified from each other. In addition, the methods of data collection, which relied on individual interviews without observation, also created difficulties in describing the process of parent-adolescent communication practice in family settings. Future research could obtain further understandings of communication through recruiting dyads and designing activities such as assigning specific topics/fictional vignettes to dyads for discussion (Afifi, Joseph & Aldeis 2008; Wilson, HW & Donenberg 2004) in order to capture the nuances of interaction between parents and adolescents during their conversations.

Furthermore, most parents indicated that the opportune time for adolescents to engage in RE, and in more sexual behaviour would be in the post-secondary school or university period. Therefore, the parents would undertake more intimate sexual conversations with their

adolescents after high school. Future research could examine the communicative practice between college students (in the late adolescence stage) and their parents to verify the viewpoints and compare the differences between adolescents in high school and at the college stage. In this way, a more comprehensive understanding of the role of parents in adolescent sexual health at different life stages could be obtained.

8.6 Conclusion

This qualitative study makes several contributions to the research base by presenting parents' and adolescents' voices of RE and relevant communication in the family. This study has identified that parent-adolescent communication about RE and sexuality is diverse and complicated in families, with personal, interpersonal, and socio-cultural tensions influencing the outcomes of communication. Chinese parents and adolescents encounter more challenges due to the one-child policy, filial piety, rapid socio-economic development, and cultural transitions as a result of globalisation and westernisation.

The power relations between parents and adolescents result in the communication being parent-initiated and parent-led, which fails to accommodate adolescents' needs and expectations in the contemporary Chinese context of rapid modernisation and greater Western influence. Due to the juxtaposition between traditional and modern ideologies, both adolescents and parents are faced with challenges and tensions in relation to autonomy, parenthood, and the parent-adolescent relationship in adolescent romantic and sexual issues. The voices of parents and adolescents provide the direction for efforts that seek to mobilise family members to engage in discussions about sexuality, in which fostering an open, supportive, and reciprocal communication pattern is one of the key issues. Collaborations between the family, the school, and the Chinese health sector could also help parents and adolescents to address the tensions and to adapt to the changes in society for promoting adolescents' sexual well-being.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1A Interview guide for adolescents (with possible prompts)

1. Could you please tell me what romantic experience means for you?

2. Consider the words “romance”, “courtship”, and “love”, what images do these words convey to you?

3. To whom would you talk about adolescent romantic experience?

4. And to whom would you prefer to talk about adolescent romantic experience? What would you talk about with others regarding adolescent romantic experience?

5. How do you describe your relationship with your parents? (Do you often talk with parents on some specific topics, like adolescent romantic experience?)

6. What is your expectation of your parents regarding adolescent romantic experience?

7. Would you talk to your parents about romantic experience? Or would your parents talk to you on this topic? (Why or why not?)

8. Could you please tell me about what is it like talking to your parents about the topic if you have talked to them?

- How is your conversation initiated?
- What would you talk to your parents about in relation to romantic experience?
- What would your communication process like? (How does the conversation evolve?)

9. What influences the way you talk to your parents on this topic?

10. If you have any concerns about communication with your parents on adolescent romantic experience, how would you like to address them?

Do you have any further questions or concerns before we end this interview?

Chinese version of Interview guide for adolescents

访谈提纲（青少年学生）

1. 您是如何理解青少年罗曼体验/经历的？
2. 提到“罗曼”、“恋爱”、“爱”这些词汇，您想到的内容是什么？
3. 您会和别人谈论青少年罗曼体验/经历吗？(和谁谈论？谈论的内容…)
4. 您更喜欢与谁谈论青少年罗曼体验/经历？
5. 您如何描述您与您父母的关系？(您们是否经常就某一话题沟通，比如青少年罗曼体验/经历?)
6. 在青少年罗曼体验/经历方面，您对父母有什么样的期待？
7. 您会和父母谈论青少年罗曼体验/经历吗？或者您父母会和您谈论这个话题吗？(为什么谈论/不谈论?)
8. 您能描述一下与父母谈论青少年罗曼体验/经历的过程吗?

   (如何谈起的？谈论的内容？谈论的方式？谈论如何进展的?)
9. 您认为有哪些因素影响您与父母在青少年罗曼体验/经历上的沟通？
10. 如果您在青少年罗曼体验方面与父母沟通有疑惑/担忧，您是如何解决的？

在结束访谈前，您是否还有需要补充的问题或看法？

Appendix 1B Interview guide for parents (with possible prompts)

1. Could you please tell me about your understanding of adolescent romantic experience? How do you define it? (Form, content, characteristics, outcomes/significance…)

2. How would you describe your relationship with your child? (Do you often talk with each other on some specific topics, like adolescent romantic experience?)

3. How do you think parental role is to talk to your child about adolescent romantic experience?

4. How do you think parental communication with adolescent around romantic experience?

5 Have you ever considered talking with your child about adolescent romantic experience? (When, what and how, why?) /What prompted you to want to talk to your child?

6. Could you please tell me what it is like to talk with your child around adolescent romantic experience? /How would you describe your experience of talking with child about adolescent romantic experience?

- How is your conversation initiated?
- What do you talk about during your conversation with your child?
- What would your communication process like? (How does the conversation evolves and any strategies used?)
- How do you think your child responds to your communication?

7. What influences the way you talk to your child on this topic?

8. If you have any concerns about communication with your child on adolescent romantic experience, how would you like to address them?

Do you have any further questions or concerns before we end this interview?

Chinese version of Interview guide for parents

访谈提纲（父母）

1. 您是如何理解青少年罗曼体验/经历的？/您是如何定义青少年罗曼体验/经历的？（形式、特征、内容、意义/影响…）
2. 您如何描述您与您孩子的关系？（您们是否经常就某一话题沟通，比如青少年罗曼体验/经历）
3. 您是如何认为父母在青少年罗曼体验/经历中的角色的？
4. 您是如何看待父母就青少年罗曼体验/经历而与青少年沟通的？
5. 您是否与您的孩子谈论青少年罗曼体验/经历？是否有什么因素促使您想与您的孩子进行这方面的沟通？
6. 您能否描述一下与孩子谈论青少年罗曼体验的经历吗？

   （如何谈起的？谈论的内容？谈论的方式方法？谈论如何进展的？孩子的反应?）
7. 您认为有哪些因素影响您与孩子在青少年罗曼体验/经历上的沟通？
8. 如果您在青少年罗曼体验方面与孩子沟通有疑惑/担忧，您是如何解决的？

在结束访谈前，您是否还有需要补充的问题或看法？

Appendix 2A Research recruitment of adolescent participants

Research Recruitment of Adolescent Participants

Adolescent romantic experience and parental communication

Dear Adolescent Students,

You are invited to share your experiences and views by participating in a research project about how adolescents and parents communicate to each other about adolescent romantic experience.

Adolescent romantic experience is one part of the adolescent development journey, and it is a multidimensional topic concerning sexuality and intimacy establishment. Parents potentially play a great role in adolescent sexual health promotion through conversation with their adolescent children.

This research aims to understand how adolescents perceive adolescent romantic experience and communicate about this topic with their parents. You are invited to participate to offer your perspectives and views that are significant for this study.

What participation in the study involves?

Participation in this study involves taking part in an independent interview with the investigator (Ting Liu). This interview will take approximately one hour at a time convenient to you and in a location that you choose. To help with the data collection, the interview will be voice-recorded

Participation is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent or participate in this research. If you are interested in this research, please get your parental consent to let your parents know that you will be participating in an interview.

If you would like to be involved, please send your contact details to my email address liu0537@flinders.edu.au within two weeks from receiving this advertisement. Then I will contact you to send you a **Letter of Introduction, Information Sheet and Parental Consent Form** for your and your parents' reference, and arrange the time and place for your interview. I have a maximum number of participants required for this study, so there is a possibility that not all people who send me their contact details will be interviewed. **Thank you very much for your attention.**

Ting Liu

School of Nursing & Midwifery, Flinders University

Tel: +86 151 6542 6076

Email: liu0537@flinders.edu.au

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Chinese Version of Advertisement for recruitment of adolescent participants

弗林德斯大学 • 澳大利亚

“父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索研究”招募青少年

亲爱的青少年：

我诚挚地邀请您参与一个关于父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验／经历的研究项目，分享您的观点与经历。

青少年罗曼体验是个人发展过程中的一部分，它是个多维的主题，涉及到性健康及亲密关系的建立。父母在青少年健康性发展过程中发挥着重要作用，可通过与青少年沟通对话的方式影响青少年的态度、知识、决策过程等方面。

此研究旨在了解青少年如何看待青少年罗曼体验／经历，以及在此主题上如何与父母进行沟通。因此，您的个人视角和观点将为本研究提供关键信息。

研究涉及哪些内容？

参与此研究即参加一次独立的访谈。访谈将在您方便的时间和地点进行，约需时一小时。为了有助于数据记录，访谈将录音。参与研究是完全自愿的，您没有任何义务必须同意参加本研究。**您若有兴趣参加本研究，需要事先征得父母的同意**。

如果您愿意参与本研究，请您在收到此文档后两周与我邮件（liu0537@flinders.edu.au）或电话联系，告知我您的参与意愿和联系方式，而后我会与您联系，并发给您有关本研究的**详细介绍信、说明书和父母知情同意书**供您及您的父母参阅，并与您商议访谈的时间和地点。因为本研究可容纳的参与者数量有限，有可能最终未访谈所有的回应者。

非常感谢您的关注！祝您顺利愉快！

刘婷

弗林德斯大学护理与助产学院

电话: 151 6542 6076

Email: liu0537@flinders.edu.au

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Appendix 2B Research recruitment of parent participants

Research Recruitment of Parent Participants

Adolescent romantic experience and parental communication

Dear Parents,

You are invited to share your experiences and views by participating in a research project about how adolescents and parents communicate to each other about adolescent romantic experience.

Adolescent romantic experience is one part of the adolescent development journey, and it is a multidimensional topic concerning sexuality and intimacy establishment. Parents potentially play a great role in adolescent sexual health promotion through conversation with their adolescent children.

This research aims to understand how parents perceive adolescent romantic experience and communicate about this topic with their adolescent children. You are invited to participate to offer your perspectives and views that are significant for this study.

What participation in the study involves?

Participation in this study involves taking part in an independent interview with the investigator (Ting Liu). This interview will take approximately one hour at a convenient time for you and in a location that you choose. To help with the data collection, the interview will be voice-recorded

Participation is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent or participate in this research.

If you would like to be involved, please send your contact details to my email address liu0537@flinders.edu.au within two weeks from receiving this advertisement. Then I will contact you to send you a **Letter of Introduction, Information Sheet and Consent Form** for your reference, and arrange the time and place for your interview. I have a maximum number of participants required for this study, so there is a possibility that not all people who send me their contact details will be interviewed. **Thank you very much for your attention.**

Ting Liu

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Chinese Version of Advertisement for recruitment of parent participants

弗林德斯大学 • 澳大利亚

“父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索研究”招募青少年家长

亲爱的青少年家长：

我诚挚地邀请您参与一个关于父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验／经历的研究项目，分享你的观点与经历。

青少年罗曼体验是个人发展过程中的一部分，它是个多维的主题，涉及到性健康及亲密关系的建立。父母在青少年健康性发展过程中发挥着重要作用，可通过与青少年沟通对话的方式影响青少年的态度、知识、决策过程等方面。

此研究旨在了解父母如何看待青少年罗曼体验／经历，以及如何在此主题上与青少年进行沟通。因此，您的个人视角和观点将为本研究提供关键信息。

研究涉及哪些内容？

参与此研究参加一次独立的访谈。访谈将在您方便的时间和地点进行，约需时一小时。为了有助于数据记录，访谈将录音。参与研究是完全自愿的，您没有任何义务必须同意参加本研究。

如果您愿意参与本研究，请您在收到此文档后两周与我邮件（liu0537@flinders.edu.au）或电话联系，告知我您的参与意愿和联系方式，而后我会与您联系，并发给您有关本研究的详细介绍信、说明书和知情同意书供您参阅，并与您商议访谈的时间和地点。因为本研究可容纳的参与者数量有限，有可能最终未访谈所有的回应者。

非常感谢您的关注！祝您顺利愉快！

刘婷

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Appendix 3A Letter of Introduction to Adolescents

Professor Jeffrey Fuller
Associate Dean Research
School of Nursing & Midwifery
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GPO Box 2100 Adelaide SA 5001
Tel: +61 8 8201 7641
Fax: +61 8 8276 1602
jeffrey.fuller@flinders.edu.au

http://www.flinders.edu.au

CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION TO ADOLESCENTS

Dear adolescents,

This letter is to introduce Ting Liu who is a PhD candidate in the School of Nursing & Midwifery at Flinders University, Australia. She will show her student card, which carries a photograph, as proof of her identity during the study.

She is undertaking research leading to the production of a thesis on the subject of "An Exploration of Parent-Adolescent Communication on Adolescent Romantic Experience". The purpose of this research is to understand how parents and adolescents perceive and communicate adolescent romantic experience as well as the related factors. The knowledge developed from this research is expected to serve as a basis for exploring how to promote adolescent sexual health within the family microsystem.

Ting Liu would be most grateful if you are willing to volunteer to spare your time to assist in the research project, by granting to participate in an interview. This interview will take place in the place where you prefer and take approximately one hour. And the interview will be audio taped using a digital recorder in order to accurately capture your opinions for later data analysis. She will ask your consent on the attached consent form.

Your participation in this study will be treated with strict confidentiality and anonymity by Ting Liu. This means that you are not identified in all aspects of the interview, data record, data transcripts and analysis, and in the resulting thesis, report or other publications as well. The audiotaped data will be transcribed and translated from Chinese into English by the researcher. Be assured that only the researcher and her supervisors can get access to the information you provided. Other people including parents don't have access to it without your permission.

You are entirely free to withdraw from the study at any time or decline to answer particular questions without having to give a reason and without penalty.

Any enquires you may have concerning this project should be directed to me at the address provided above or by telephone on +61 8 8201 7641 or by email (jeffrey.fuller@flinders.edu.au).

Thank you for your consideration and assistance.

Yours sincerely

Prof Jeffrey Fuller PhD, RN
Professor of Nursing (Primary Health Care)
Associate Dean Research
School of Nursing and Midwifery

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project Number: 5917). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.

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Chinese version of Letter of Introduction to Adolescents

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CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

给参与访谈青少年的介绍信

亲爱的青少年学生：

这封信是向你介绍目前就读于澳大利亚弗林德斯大学护理学博士研究生刘婷和她正在从事的博士研究课题："父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索"。此课题的研究目的是探询父母和青少年在青少年罗曼体验/经历方面沟通的观点和看法，以为相关健康干预和健康促进项目提供依据。

如果您能抽出一点您宝贵的时间协助她研究项目的开展，参与她所设计的访谈，分享您的经验、意见、观点和看法，她将不胜感激。访谈大约持续 1 小时，为了准确记录您的观点，访谈内容将录音，以作为后续资料分析的依据，这需要获得您的书面同意。遵循伦理原则，此研究将严格遵守保密和匿名原则，即，在任何相关环节比如访谈、数据记录、文本转录和数据分析，以及最终的博士论文、相关报告或其他出版物中，您的身份都将不会被识别，而是采用匿名的形式。在访谈开始之前，你将被赋予一个假名，访谈录音过程中也不会问及您的名字。访谈结束后，由研究者将访谈录音转录成中文文本，而后由研究者将中文文本翻译成英文，整个过程同样遵循严格的保密和匿名原则，从而确保您所提供的信息是严格保密的，您的身份自始至终都不会被识别。

此外，在访谈过程中，您有权利要求中断访谈或者拒绝回答任何您不想回答的问题，而这不会对您产生任何负面后果。您将在充分知情的基础上与刘婷签署参与此研究的同意书，同意书的内容附于此介绍信之后。同意书的内容一式两份，您和刘婷将各自保存一份作为今后参考其内容的凭证。录音资料将按照弗林德斯大学的规定安全存放五年。

假如您有任何有关与此研究课题的疑问，欢迎您与我直接联系。我的通信地址如信笺右上角所示，我的电话号码：+61 8 8201 7641，传真号码：+61 8 8276 1602，电子邮箱地址：jeffery.fuller@flinders.edu.au

这项研究课题已经由澳大利亚弗里德斯大学社会及行为研究伦理道德委员会讨论并同意实施(项目号：5917)，您可同时与该委员会执行官直接联系，其电话号码：+61 8 8201 3116，传真号码：+61 8 8201 2035，电子邮箱地址：human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

非常感谢您帮助开展此项研究。

此致，

杰弗里．富勒教授
博士、副院长
护理与助产学院
澳大利亚弗林德斯大学

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Appendix 3B Letter of Introduction to Parents

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jeffrey.fuller@flinders.edu.au

http://www.flinders.edu.au

CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION TO PARENTS

Dear parents,

This letter is to introduce Ting Liu who is a PhD candidate in the School of Nursing & Midwifery at Flinders University, Australia. She will show her student card, which carries a photograph, as proof of her identity during the study.

She is undertaking research leading to the production of a thesis on the subject of "An Exploration of Parent-Adolescent Communication on Adolescent Romantic Experience". The purpose of this research is to understand how parents and adolescents perceive and communicate about adolescent romantic experience as well as the related factors. The knowledge developed from this research is expected explore how to promote adolescent sexual health within the family microsystem.

Ting Liu would be most grateful if you are willing to volunteer to spare your time to assist in the research project, by agreeing to participate in an interview. This interview will take place in the place where you prefer and take approximately one hour. The interview will be audio taped using a digital recorder in order to accurately capture your opinions for later data analysis. She will ask your consent on the attached consent form.

Your participation in this study will be treated with strict confidentiality and anonymity by Ting Liu. This means that you are not identified in all aspects of the interview, data record, data transcripts and analysis, and in the resulting thesis, report or other publications as well. The audiotaped data will be transcribed and translated from Chinese into English by the researcher. Be assured that only the researcher and her supervisors can get access to the information you provided.

You are entirely free to withdraw from the study at any time or decline to answer particular questions without having to give a reason and without penalty.

Any enquires you may have concerning this project should be directed to me at the address provided above or by telephone on +61 8 8201 7641 or by email (jeffrey.fuller@flinders.edu.au).

Thank you for your consideration and assistance.

Yours sincerely

Prof Jeffrey Fuller PhD, RN
Professor of Nursing (Primary Health Care)
Associate Dean Research
School of Nursing and Midwifery

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project Number: 5917). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.

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Chinese version of Letter of Introduction to Parents

Professor Jeffery Fuller
Associate Dean (Research)
School of Nursing & Midwifery
Faculty of Health Science

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CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

给参与访谈家长的介绍信

亲爱的家长：

这封信是向你介绍目前就读于澳大利亚弗林德斯大学护理学博士研究生刘婷和她正在从事的博士研究课题："父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索"。此课题的研究目的是探询父母和青少年在青少年罗曼体验/经历方面沟通的观点和看法，以为相关健康干预和健康促进项目提供依据。

如果您能抽出一点您宝贵的时间协助她研究项目的开展，参与她所设计的访谈，分享您的经验、意见、观点和看法，她将不胜感激。访谈大约持续 1 小时，为了准确记录您的观点，访谈内容将录音，以作为后续资料分析的依据，这需要获得您的书面同意。遵循伦理原则，此研究将严格遵守保密和匿名原则，即，在任何相关环节比如访谈、数据记录、文本转录和数据分析，以及最终的博士论文、相关报告或其他出版物中，您的身份都将不会被识别，而是采用匿名的形式。在访谈开始之前，你将被赋予一个假名，访谈录音过程中也不会问及您的名字。访谈结束后，由研究者将访谈录音转录成中文文本，而后由研究者将中文文本翻译成英文，整个过程同样遵循严格的保密和匿名原则，从而确保您所提供的信息是严格保密的，您的身份自始至终都不会被识别。

此外，在访谈过程中，您有权利要求中断访谈或者拒绝回答任何您不想回答的问题，而这不会对您产生任何负面后果。您将在充分知情的基础上与刘婷签署参与此研究的同意书，同意书的内容附于此介绍信之后。同意书的内容一式两份，您和刘婷将各自保存一份作为今后参考其内容的凭证。录音资料将按照弗林德斯大学的规定安全存放五年。

假如您有任何有关与此研究课题的疑问，欢迎您与我直接联系。我的通信地址如信笺右上角所示，我的电话号码：+61 8 8201 7641， 传真号码：+61 8 8276 1602，电子邮箱地址：jeffery.fuller@flinders.edu.au

这项研究课题已经由澳大利亚弗里德斯大学社会及行为研究伦理道德委员会讨论并同意实施（项目号：5917），您可同时与该委员会执行官直接联系，其电话号码：+61 8 8201 3116，传真号码：+61 8 8201 2035，电子邮箱地址：human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

非常感谢您帮助开展此项研究。

此致，

杰弗里．富勒教授
博士、副院长
护理与助产学院
澳大利亚弗林德斯大学

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Appendix 4A Information Sheet for Adolescents

Professor Jeffrey Fuller
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http://www.flinders.edu.au

CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

INFORMATION SHEET FOR ADOLESCENTS

Title: ***An exploration of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent romantic experience in Shandong Province of China***

Investigators:
Ting Liu
School of Nursing & Midwifery
Flinders University
Ph: +86 151 6542 6076

Description of the study:
This study called '*An exploration of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent romantic experience in China*'. This project will investigate the perspectives from both parents and adolescents on the issue of adolescent romantic experience and the associated communication between parents and their adolescent child. This project is supported by School of Nursing & Midwifery at Flinders University, South Australia.

Purpose of the study:
This project aims to obtain parents' and adolescents' understanding and experience of their communication on adolescent romantic experience. Specifically the project will;

- Obtain a greater understanding of parent-adolescent communication in terms of intention, content, personal agency and communication strategies;
- Identify factors that influence the occurrence of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent romantic experience.

What will I be asked to do?
You are invited to attend a one-on-one interview with the researcher who will ask you a few questions about your views about parent-adolescent communication on adolescent romantic experience. The interview will take about one hour. The interview will be recorded using a digital voice recorder to help with evaluating the results. Once recorded, the interview will be transcribed (typed-up) and stored as a password-protected computer file and then destroyed once the results have been finalised. Your participation is completely voluntary. Your identity will be kept confidential and anonymous in the thesis and any other publications.

What benefit will I gain from being involved in this study?
You will not receive any direct benefits from participating. The sharing of your experience might provide an opportunity to reflect on your past conversation and relationship with your parents.

The research is expected to benefit the wider community because your perceptions and experience will contribute to our understanding of parent-adolescent communication in terms of how to

promote adolescent healthy sexual development, and it will also have implications for potential intervention programs.

Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?
Participation is entirely confidential. We do not need your name and you will be anonymous. Before interview, you will be given a pseudonym and your name will not be asked during the recorded interview. Once the interview has been typed-up and saved as a file, the voice file will then be destroyed. Any identifying information will be removed and the typed-up file stored on a password-protected computer that only the researcher will have access to. None of the information you provide will be directly traceable to you. The publications that result from this research will not include any information by which you might be identified as a participant.

Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?
There are no significant risks associated with the research. However, it is possible that you feel emotionally distressed or worried by answering some questions about the topic. If you would like to discuss your concerns with someone, the following organisations can be contacted to seek help.

- **Consultation Room located in your school**
- **Qingdao Mental Health Centre**
  Website: http://www.qdjwzx.com/index.asp
  Tel: (+86) 0532-86669120 Email: info@qdjwzx.com

How do I agree to participate?
Participation is completely voluntary. You may answer 'no comment' or refuse to answer any questions and you are free to withdraw from interview at any time without effect or consequences. A parental consent form accompanies this information sheet. If you agree to participate and your parent(s) consent to your participation, please read and sign both your parents and your names on the form.

How will I receive feedback?
If you would like to review your interview transcript, please let me know the way you like me to contact you about this after the interview. I will then contact you after finishing transcribing to organise the most secure way of sending you a copy of the transcript. If there is anything you said in the transcript that you don't like, you can ask us to change it or to omit it. Similarly, results from the project can be offered to you on request.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and we hope that you will accept our invitation to be involved.

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number: 5917). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

Chinese Version of Information Sheet for Adolescents

杰弗里．富勒教授
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邮箱：jeffrey.fuller@flinders.edu.au

给青少年的研究说明书

题目：父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索研究

研究者
刘婷
护理与助产学院
弗林德斯大学
电话: +86 151 6542 6076

研究描述

此研究的主题是“父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索研究”。该研究将从父母和青少年两个视角，探讨其在青少年罗曼经历问题上的看法，以及父母与青少年在此问题上的沟通。此研究已获得澳大利亚弗林德斯大学护理与助产学院的支持。

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研究目的

从父母和青少年两个视角，描述其对青少年罗曼体验的主观理解和诠释，父母和青少年对青少年罗曼体验沟通所持有的信念和观点，从而促进健康专业人员理解青少年罗曼体验的社会建构，为发展相关健康促进项目提供依据。

参与研究涉及哪些内容？

您将受邀参加由研究者进行的一对一个体访谈，其中研究者会问你几个问题，关于您如何看待青少年罗曼体验／经历以及如何与父母就此主题进行沟通。访谈约持续一小时。为了协助研究者记录信息，访谈过程将录音，而后转录成文本资料，录音资料和文本资料都将储存研究者办公室中的加密电脑上。待研究完成后，这些资料将予以毁坏。整个研究过程中，您的参与都是自愿的，您的身份将在研究结果报告中采用匿名的形式，并完全保密。

参与研究涉及哪些利益？

或许，您不能从参与此研究中直接受益，分享您的经历可能提供了一个思考曾经您与您的父母对话和关系的一个机会。

然而，该研究预期使更大的群体受益，因为您的观点和经历将促进我们对于父母－青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验的理解，从而为今后发展青少年健康性发展促进项目提供依据。

参与研究我是否会被识别？

参与是完全保密的。我们不会问及您的姓名，而是采用匿名形式。在访谈前，你会被给予一个假名，在访谈过程中，我们也不会问到您的名字。一旦访谈完成转录，音频文件将予以毁坏。任何可识别的信息都将删除，访谈后的转录文本资料将存储在加密电脑中，其中，只有研究者有权限接近。您所提供的任何信息都不会直接追踪到你个人，本研究的相关出版物都不会包含任何可以识别您身份的信息。

参与研究是否有风险或不适？

参与本研究，不会导致明显的风险。然而，在回答问题的过程中，您有可能会产生情绪上的困扰或忧虑。如果您希望与其他人讨论您的这种担忧，您可以与下面的机构联系以获得相应的帮助。

- ***学校心理咨询室***
- ***青岛市精神卫生中心***
  Website: http://www.qdjwzx.com/index.asp
  Tel: (+86) 0532-86669120 Email: info@qdjwzx.com

如何参与研究？

参与研究是完全自愿的，您可以拒绝回答任何问题，或在访谈过程中随时中途退出研究，而没有任何负面后果或影响。在此说明书后附有一份父母知情同意书，若您同意参与本研究，需要首先获得父母的许可，因此也需要父母阅读此知情同意书，没有异议后再上面签上他们的名字以及您的名字。

我如何收到有关研究的反馈

如果你想阅读您的访谈转录文本，请在访谈后告知我您希望使用的联系方式。而后，我会在完成转录后与您联系，商谈最为安全的传递转录文本的方式。如果您对访谈中所说的话不满意，您可以告诉我们予以修正或者丢弃。同样地，若您需要，研究结果也可以反馈给您。

非常感谢您花时间阅读此说明书，我们诚恳地希望您能够接受参与本研究的邀请！

该研究项目已获得了弗林德斯大学社会与行为研究伦理委员会的批准（项目号：5917），有关伦理的详细信息，可以与委员会执行官通过以下方式取得联系，电话：+61 8 8201 3116,传真：+61 8 8201 2035，邮箱 human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

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Appendix 4B Information Sheet for Parents

Professor Jeffrey Fuller

Associate Dean Research
School of Nursing & Midwifery
Faculty of Health Science
Flinders University

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jeffery.fuller@flinders.edu.au
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CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS

Title: ***An exploration of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent romantic experience in Shandong Province of China***

Investigators:
Ting Liu
School of Nursing & Midwifery
Flinders University
Ph: +86 151 6542 6076

Description of the study:
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What benefit will I gain from being involved in this study?
You will not receive any direct benefits from participating. The sharing of your experience might provide an opportunity to reflect on your past conversation and relationship with your child.

The research is expected to benefit the wider community because your perceptions and experience will contribute to our understanding of parent-adolescent communication in terms of how to

promote adolescent healthy sexual development, and it will also have implications for potential intervention programs.

Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?
Participation is entirely confidential. We do not need your name and you will be anonymous. Before interview, you will be given a pseudonym and your name will not be asked during the recorded interview. Once the interview has been typed-up and saved as a file, the voice file will then be destroyed. Any identifying information will be removed and the typed-up file stored on a password-protected computer that only the researcher will have access to. None of the information you provide will be directly traceable to you. The publications that result from this research will not include any information by which you might be identified as a participant.

Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?
There are no significant risks associated with the research. However, it is possible that you feel emotionally distressed or worried by answering some questions about the topic. If you would like to discuss your concerns with someone, the following organisations can be contacted to seek help.

- **Consultation Room located in the school**
- **Qingdao Mental Health Centre**
  Website: http://www.qdjwzx.com/index.asp
  Tel: (+86) 0532-86669120 Email: info@qdjwzx.com

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Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and we hope that you will accept our invitation to be involved.

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number: 5917). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

Chinese Version of Information Sheet for Parents

杰弗里．富勒教授
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给父母的研究说明书

题目：父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索研究

研究者
刘婷
护理与助产学院
弗林德斯大学
电话: +86 151 6542 6076

研究描述

此研究的主题是“父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索研究”。该研究将从父母和青少年两个视角，探讨其在青少年罗曼经历问题上的看法，以及父母与青少年在此问题上的沟通。此研究已获得澳大利亚弗林德斯大学护理与助产学院的支持。

.

研究目的

从父母和青少年两个视角，描述其对青少年罗曼体验的主观理解和诠释，父母和青少年对青少年罗曼体验沟通所持有的信念和观点，从而促进健康专业人员理解青少年罗曼体验的社会建构，为发展相关健康促进项目提供依据。

参与研究涉及哪些内容？

您将受邀参加由研究者进行的一对一个体访谈，其中研究者会问你几个问题，关于您如何看待青少年罗曼体验／经历以及如何与青少年就此主题进行沟通。访谈约持续一小时。为了协助研究者记录信息，访谈过程将录音，而后转录成文本资料，录音资料和文本资料都将储存研究者办公室中的加密电脑上。待研究完成后，这些资料将予以毁坏。整个研究过程中，您的参与都是自愿的，您的身份将在研究结果报告中采用匿名的形式，并完全保密。

参与研究涉及哪些收益？

或许，您不能从参与此研究中直接受益，分享您的经历可能提供了一个思考曾经您与您的孩子对话和关系的一个机会。

然而，该研究预期使更大的群体受益，因为您的观点和经历将促进我们对于父母－青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验的理解，从而为今后发展青少年健康性发展促进项目提供依据。

参与研究我是否会被识别？

参与是完全保密的。我们不会问及您的姓名，而是采用匿名形式。在访谈前，你会被给予一个假名，在访谈过程中，我们也不会问到您的名字。一旦访谈完成转录，音频文件将予以毁坏。任何可识别的信息都将删除，访谈后的转录文本资料将存储在加密电脑中，其中，只有研究者有权限接近。您所提供的任何信息都不会直接追踪到你个人，本研究的相关出版物都不会包含任何可以识别您身份的信息。

参与研究是否有风险或不适？

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- ***学校心理咨询室***
- ***青岛市精神卫生中心***
  Website: http://www.qdjwzx.com/index.asp
  Tel: (+86) 0532-86669120 Email: info@qdjwzx.com

如何参与研究？

参与研究是完全自愿的，您可以拒绝回答任何问题，或在访谈过程中随时中途退出研究，而没有任何负面后果或影响。在此说明书后附有一份知情同意书，若您同意参与本研究，则请阅读知情同意书，没有异议后再上面签上您的名字。

我如何收到有关研究的反馈

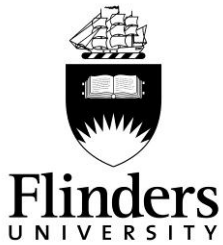
如果你想阅读您的访谈转录文本，请在访谈后告知我您希望使用的联系方式。而后，我会在完成转录后与您联系，商谈最为安全的传递转录文本的方式。如果您对访谈中所说的话不满意，您可以告诉我们予以修正或者丢弃。同样地，若您需要，研究结果也可以反馈给您。

非常感谢您花时间阅读此说明书，我们诚恳地希望您能够接受参与本研究的邀请！

该研究项目已获得了弗林德斯大学社会与行为研究伦理委员会的批准（项目号：5917），有关伦理的详细信息，可以与委员会执行官通过以下方式取得联系，电话：+61 8 8201 3116,传真：+61 8 8201 2035，邮箱 human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

inspiring achievement

Appendix 5 Consent Form for Participation in Research (by interview)



An exploration of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent romantic experience in Shandong Province of China

I ……..

being over the age of 18 years hereby consent to participate as requested in the Letter of Introduction for the research project on *An exploration of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent romantic experience in Shandong Province of China*.

1. I have read the information provided.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.
3. I agree to audio/video recording of my information and participation.
4. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference.
5. I understand that:
    - I may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.
    - I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and am free to decline to answer particular questions.
    - While the information gained in this study will be published as explained, I will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential.
    - Whether I participate or not, or withdraw after participating, will have no effect on any treatment or service that is being provided to me.
    - Whether I participate or not, or withdraw after participating, will have no effect on my progress in my course of study, or results gained.
    - I may ask that the recording/observation be stopped at any time, and that I may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage.
6. I have had the opportunity to discuss taking part in this research with a family member or friend.

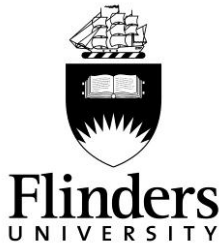
Participant's signature……Date……...

I certify that I have explained the study to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

Researcher's name…….…….....

Researcher's signature……..Date……

Chinese version of Consent Form for Participation in Research (by interview)



参与访谈的知情同意书

我本人同意参加介绍信中所阐述的澳大利亚弗林德斯大学护理学博士刘婷的博士研究课题：*父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索*。

1．我已阅读了有关该研究的信息。

2．我满意研究过程细节及可能的不利因素的解释。

3．我同意访谈内容被录音以作为研究资料使用。

4．我知道我应该保存一份同意书和介绍信以便将来参考。

5．我明白如果我同意参与此研究：

- 我或许不会直接受益。
- 我有权利在任何时间退出此研究，我也有权利拒绝回答任何我不想回答的问题。
- 如果此研究所获得的信息用于今后发表，我的身份不会被识别，所有个人信息都将保密。
- 在访谈中，我有权力在任何时候提出停止录音的要求，我也有权利在任何时候退出此研究，我提出的这些要求均不会对我产生任何不利后果。

6. 我已被给予了机会和我的家人/朋友讨论有关参与此项研究课题的事宜。

参与者签名：…… 日期：……..

我确认已向参与者解释了此研究，并考虑到参与者理解研究所涉及的内容、自主同意参与该研究。

研究者姓名：…….....

研究者签名：…… 日期：……..

Appendix 6 Parental Consent Form for Child Participation in Research (by interview)

An exploration of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent romantic experience in Shandong Province of China

I ….....……..

being over the age of 18 years hereby consent to my child.....

participating, as requested in the Letter of Introduction, for the research project on *An exploration of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent romantic experience in Shandong Province of China*.

1. I have read the information provided.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.
3. I agree to audio recording of my child's information and participation.
4. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference.
5. I understand that:
    - My child may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.
    - My child is free to withdraw from the project at any time and is free to decline to answer particular questions.
    - While the information gained in this study will be published as explained, my child will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential.
    - Whether my child participates or not, or withdraws after participating, will have no effect on his/her progress in his/her course of study, or results gained.
    - My child may ask that the recording be stopped at any time, and he/she may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage.
6. I have had the opportunity to discuss taking part in this research with a family member or friend.

Parent's signature……Date……...

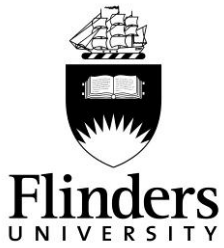
Adolescent's signature……Date……...

I certify that I have explained the study to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

Researcher's name…….…….....

Researcher's signature……..Date……

Chinese Version of Parental Consent Form for Child Participation in Research (by interview)



同意孩子参与访谈的父母知情同意书

我本人同意我的孩子参加介绍信中所阐述的澳大利亚弗林德斯大学护理学博士刘婷的博士研究课题：*父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索*。

1．我已阅读了有关该研究的信息。

2．我满意研究过程细节及可能的不利因素的解释。

3．我同意我孩子的访谈内容被录音以作为研究资料使用。

4．我知道我应该保存一份同意书和介绍信以便将来参考。

5．我明白如果我同意我的孩子参与此研究：

- 我的孩子或许不会直接受益。
- 我的孩子有权利在任何时间退出此研究，她/他也有权利拒绝回答任何她/他不想回答的问题。
- 如果此研究所获得的信息用于今后发表，我的孩子的身份不会被识别，所有个人信息都将保密。
- 无论我的孩子是否参与，或者参与后退出，都不会对我的孩子的学习过程或者学习成绩带来任何影响。
- 在访谈中，我的孩子有权力在任何时候提出停止录音的要求，我的孩子也有权利在任何时候退出此研究，她/他提出的这些要求均不会对她/他产生任何不利后果。

6. 我已被给予了机会和我的家人/朋友讨论有关参与此项研究课题的事宜。

父/母签名：…… 日期：……..

青少年签名：…… 日期：……..

我确认已向参与者解释了此研究，并考虑到参与者理解研究所涉及的内容、自主同意参与该研究。

研究者姓名：…….....

研究者签名：…… 日期：……..

Appendix 7 Ethics Approval to Conduct Research

FINAL APPROVAL NOTICE

Project No.:	**5917**
Project Title:	An exploration of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent romantic experience in Shandong Province of China
Principal Researcher:	Ms Ting Liu
Email:	liu0537@flinders.edu.au
Address:	40 Francis Street Bedford Park SA 5042
Approval Date:	25 January 2013
Ethics Approval Expiry Date:	**30 September 2015**

The above proposed project has been **approved** on the basis of the information contained in the application, its attachments and the information subsequently provided.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF RESEARCHERS AND SUPERVISORS

1. Participant Documentation

Please note that it is the responsibility of researchers and supervisors, in the case of student projects, to ensure that:

- all participant documents are checked for spelling, grammatical, numbering and formatting errors. The Committee does not accept any responsibility for the above mentioned errors.
- the Flinders University logo is included on all participant documentation (e.g., letters of Introduction, information Sheets, consent forms, debriefing information and questionnaires – with the exception of purchased research tools) and the current Flinders University letterhead is included in the header of all letters of introduction. The Flinders University international logo/letterhead should be used and documentation should contain international dialling codes for all telephone and fax numbers listed for all research to be conducted overseas.
- the SBREC contact details, listed below, are included in the footer of all letters of introduction and information sheets.

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project Number 'INSERT PROJECT No. here following approval'). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.

2. Annual Progress / Final Reports

In order to comply with the monitoring requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (March 2007)* an annual progress report must be submitted each year on the **25 January** (approval anniversary date) for the duration of the ethics approval using the annual progress / final report pro forma. *Please retain this notice for reference when completing annual progress or final reports.*

If the project is completed *before* ethics approval has expired please ensure a final report is submitted immediately. If ethics approval for your project expires please submit either (1) a final report; or (2) an extension of time request and an annual report.

Your first report is due on **25 January 2014** or on completion of the project, whichever is the earliest.

3. Modifications to Project

Modifications to the project must not proceed until approval has been obtained from the Ethics Committee. Such matters include:

- proposed changes to the research protocol;
- proposed changes to participant recruitment methods;
- amendments to participant documentation and/or research tools;
- extension of ethics approval expiry date; and
- changes to the research team (addition, removals, supervisor changes).

To notify the Committee of any proposed modifications to the project please submit a Modification Request Form to the Executive Officer. Please note that extension of time requests should be submitted prior to the Ethics Approval Expiry Date listed on this notice.

Change of Contact Details

Please ensure that you notify the Committee if either your mailing or email address changes to ensure that correspondence relating to this project can be sent to you. A modification request is not required to change your contact details.

4. Adverse Events and/or Complaints

Researchers should advise the Executive Officer of the Ethics Committee on 08 8201-3116 or human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au immediately if:

- any complaints regarding the research are received;
- a serious or unexpected adverse event occurs that effects participants;
- an unforseen event occurs that may affect the ethical acceptability of the project.

MODIFICATION (No.1) APPROVAL NOTICE

Project No.:	**5917**
Project Title:	Adolescent romantic experience: tensions regarding parent-adolescent communication and perceptions in the Chinese sociocultural context
Principal Researcher:	Ms Ting Liu
Email:	liu0537@flinders.edu.au

Modification Approval Date:	17 September 2015	Ethics Approval Expiry Date:	**30 June 2016**

I am pleased to inform you that the modification request submitted for project 5917 on the 28 August 2015 has been reviewed and approved by the SBREC Chairperson. Please see below for a list of the approved modifications. Any additional information that may be required from you will be listed in the second table shown below called 'Additional Information Required'.

Approved Modifications	
Extension of ethics approval expiry date	X
Project title change	X
Personnel change	X
Research objectives change	
Research method change	
Participants – addition +/- change	
Consent process change	
Recruitment process change	
Research tools change	
Document / Information Changes	
Other (if yes, please specify)	

Additional Information Required
None.

Appendix 8A Letter of Granting Permission from School A

(Original Chinese version)

山东省青岛[redacted]中学

回 复 函

刘婷：

你好，我校已经阅读你的博士研究课题“父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索研究”计划书。经学校研究同意协助开展你的课题项目，准许你进入学校接触部分高中生和家长，并提供必要帮助。

特此回复

山东省青岛[redacted]中学

2012. 11. 14

教育科研科科长：

地址：[redacted] 电话：[redacted] 网址：[redacted] 邮编：[redacted]

English Translation of Letter of Granting Permission from School A

14 November 2012

LETTER OF GRANTING PERMISSION

Dear Ms Ting Liu,

Our school has reviewed your research proposal on the subject of "An Exploration of Parent-Adolescent Communication on Adolescent Romantic Experience". After discussion among the school authorities, we grant you permission to conduct this research in our school and you are able to approach some of our students and their parents. We will provide some assistance if necessary.

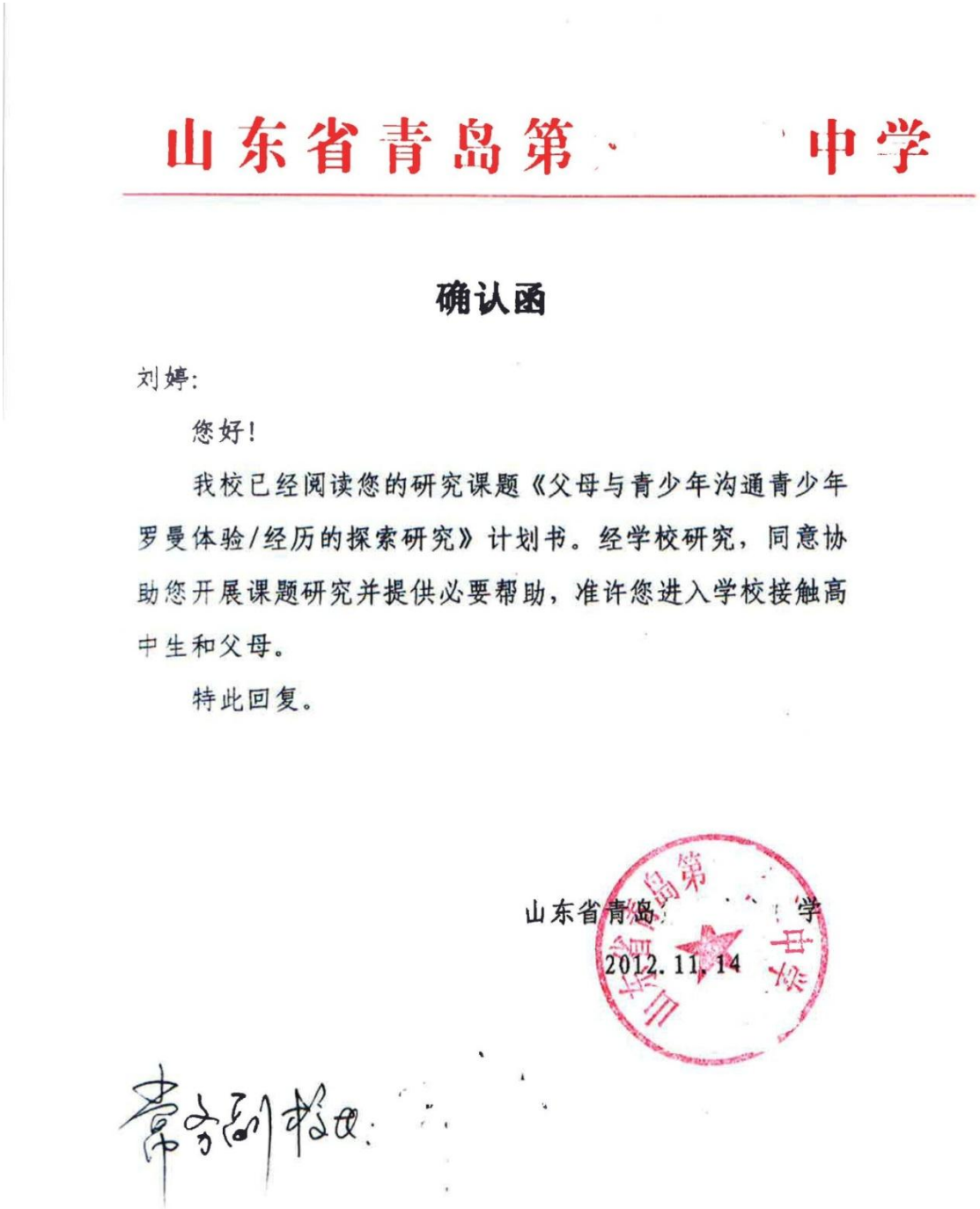
Kind regards

XXX

Principal (Teaching & Research)

Appendix 8B Letter of Granting Permission from School B

(Original Chinese version)



山东省青岛第　　中学

确认函

刘婷:

您好!

我校已经阅读您的研究课题《父母与青少年沟通青少年罗曼体验/经历的探索研究》计划书。经学校研究，同意协助您开展课题研究并提供必要帮助，准许您进入学校接触高中生和父母。

特此回复。

山东省青岛　　学

2012.11.14

常务副校长:

电话传真:　　邮编:

English Translation of Letter of Granting Permission from School B

14 November 2012

LETTER GRANTING PERMISSION

Dear Ms Ting Liu,

Our school has reviewed your research proposal on the subject of "An Exploration of Parent-Adolescent Communication on Adolescent Romantic Experience". After discussion among the school authorities, we grant you permission to conduct this research in our school and we will provide necessary assistance. We permit you to approach some of our students and their parents.

Kind regards

XXX

Executive Vice principal

Appendix 9A Demographic Information of Adolescents

The following questions about your information. Please complete it. All your responses will remain confidential; nobody else could access it except the researcher.

1. How old are you?

☐15 ☐16
☐17 ☐18 or older

2. What grade are you in at school?

☐10 ☐11 ☐12

3. Are you male or female?

☐Male ☐Female

4. Do you have siblings?

☐No
☐Yes, ☐Sister ☐Brother
Is he or she younger or older than you? ☐Younger ☐Older
If you have more than one sibling, please indicate separately.

5. Mostly, who looks after your life in your family?

☐Parents ☐Grandparents ☐Others, please specify _____

6. Are your parents?

☐Living together
☐Separated or divorced
☐One or both died

7. What is your mother's occupation? _____

8. What is your father's occupation? _____

9. What is your mother's highest level of education?

☐Did not complete high school
☐Complete high school or equivalent
☐College or equivalent
☐University degree or above
☐ I don't know

10. What is your father's highest level of education?

☐Did not complete high school
☐Complete high school or equivalent
☐College or equivalent
☐University degree or above
☐I don't know

11. If you would like to receive feedback about the study from the researcher, please provide your email address or other contact information below.

_____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your help in this research project is much appreciated.

Chinese version of Demographic Information of Adolescents

基本信息表（青少年）

以下问题是有关您的基本人口学信息，请根据您的实际情况进行填写。您所提供的信息都将严格保密，除了研究者本人外，其他任何人不会接触到这些信息。

1.您多大了？

☐15 岁　　☐16 岁

☐17 岁　　☐18 岁或大于 18 岁

2. 您现在上几年级？

☐10　　☐11　　☐12

3. 您的性别？

☐男性　　☐女性

4. 您是否有兄弟姐妹？

☐没有
☐有，　☐姐姐或妹妹 ☐哥哥或弟弟
他或她比您大还是比您小？☐比我小　☐比我大

如果您有一个以上兄弟姐妹，请单独注明

5. 大部分时间，是谁照顾您?

☐父母　　☐祖父母　☐其他，请注明_____

6. 您的爸爸和妈妈？

☐生活在一起
☐分开或者离婚
☐ 一方或双方去世

7. 您妈妈的职业是 _____

8. 您爸爸的职业是 _____

9. 您妈妈所接受的最高教育是?
☐未完成高中
☐高中或中专
☐大专
☐大学及以上
☐我不清楚

10. 您爸爸所接受的最高教育是?
☐未完成高中
☐高中或中专
☐大专
☐大学及以上
☐我不清楚

11. 如果您希望获得有关本研究的反馈，请提供您的邮箱地址或其他联系方式

_____

非常感谢您花时间完成此表的填写，您对本研究的帮助我将不胜感激。

Appendix 9B Demographic Information of Parents

The following questions are about your basic information. Please complete. All your responses will remain confidential; nobody else could access it except the researcher.

1. What is your age? _____

2. What is your gender?

☐Male ☐Female

3. What is your marital status?

☐Married ☐Separated or Divorced ☐Widowed

4. What is your occupation? _____

5. What is your highest level of education?

☐Did not complete high school
☐Complete high school or equivalent
☐College or equivalent
☐University degree or above

6. How many children do you have?
☐One ☐Two ☐Three or more

7. How old is your adolescent child? *(If you have more than one child, please indicate separately)*
☐15 ☐16 ☐17 ☐18 or older

8. What grade is your adolescent child in at school? *(If you have more than one child, please indicate separately)*

☐10 ☐11 ☐12

9. Is your adolescent child male or female? *(If you have more than one child, please indicate separately)*

☐Male ☐Female

10. Mostly, who looks after your child(ren) in your family?

☐You and/or your partner ☐Your parents ☐Others, please specify _____

11. If you would like to receive feedback about the study from the researcher, please provide your email address or other contact information below.
_____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your help in this research project is much appreciated.

Chinese version of Demographic Information of Parents

基本信息表（父母）

以下问题是有关您的基本人口学信息，请根据您的实际情况进行填写。您所提供的信息都将严格保密，除了研究者本人外，其他任何人不会接触到这些信息。

1. 您的年龄 _____

2. 您的性别

☐男 ☐女

3. 您的婚姻状态

☐已婚 ☐分居或离异 ☐寡居

4. 您的职业 _____

5. 您的最高学历

☐高中以下
☐高中或中专
☐大专
☐大学及以上

6. 您有几个子女？
☐1 个 ☐2 个 ☐ 3 个及以上

7. 您的处于青少年阶段的孩子多大？（若您拥有不只一个青少年孩子，请分别注明）

☐15 岁 ☐16 岁

☐17 岁 ☐18 岁或大于 18 岁

8. 您的处于青少年阶段的孩子上几年级？（若您拥有不只一个青少年孩子，请分别注明）

☐10 ☐11 ☐12

9. 您的处于青少年阶段的孩子的性别？（若您拥有不只一个青少年孩子，请分别注明）

☐男性 ☐女性

10. 大部分时间，由谁来照顾您的孩子？

☐ 您和/或您的配偶 ☐您的父母 ☐其他，请注明_____

11. 如果您希望获得有关本研究的反馈，请提供您的邮箱地址或其他联系方式

_____

非常感谢您花时间完成此表的填写，您对本研究的帮助我将不胜感激。

Appendix 10 Conference presentations arising from this study

1. “2015 Primary Health Care Research Conference”, July 2015, Adelaide, Australia, (poster presentation: Factors driving and inhibiting communication about sexuality between Chinese parents and adolescents: a qualitative exploration)

2. “Population Health Congress 2015”, September 2015, Hobart, Australia, (Oral presentation: Congruity and conflict in perception and practice of sexuality communication between Chinese adolescents and parents)

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