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# **Congruity and Conflict in Perceptions of Adolescent Romantic Experience between Chinese Parents and Adolescents**

## **Abstract**

This qualitative research paper explored how adolescents and parents perceive adolescent romantic experience in China to provide insights into this topic from the Chinese socio-cultural perspective. One-to-one, in-depth interviews were conducted with thirty-eight adolescents (26 girls, 12 boys) and twenty-seven parents (16 mothers, 11 fathers) from the urban areas of a northern Chinese city. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis and interpreted using a social ecological approach. Four major themes were identified: opportunities and risks, acceptable versus unacceptable sexual intimacy, generational difference, and girls' vulnerability and 'self-respect'. In these themes, congruity and conflict of perceptions were found within the individual adolescents and parents, and between them. These perceptions were largely influenced by traditional cultural beliefs of education, sexuality, gender, and family as well as the current socio-cultural context of modernization and globalization in China. The findings provide implications regarding how to support both adolescents and parents in managing adolescent romantic experience for adolescent health-promoting romantic and sexual behaviors.

## **Keywords**

adolescence, romantic experience, sexuality, social construction, China

## **Congruity and Conflict in Perceptions of Adolescent Romantic Experience between Chinese Parents and Adolescents**

One of the tasks of adolescence relates to the exploration of sexuality, including the development of romantic experiences within the context of their socio-ecological system (Sawyer et al., 2012). The emergence of romantic interest is a major indicator of adolescent sexual, emotional, and social development (Seiffge-Krenke & Shulman, 2011). Romantic experience is an important source of socialization for adolescents and reflects their need for developing connections outside of the family as intimacy with peers and romantic partners increases while that with parents decreases (Collins, 2003).

### **Romantic Experience during Adolescence**

Romantic experience is one component of adolescent sexuality, and acts as the main context in which adolescents develop their understandings of sexuality and/or engage in sexual activities (Auslander, Rosenthal, & Blythe, 2006). Romantic experience includes varied behavioral, cognitive, and emotional phenomena with romantic content, such as fantasies, infatuations, conversations with friends about romance and potential partners, and relationships of short and long duration (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Romantic experience becomes significant in the lives of adolescents, manifested by the fact that the majority of adolescents have romantic involvement across the world **including China** (Z.H. Li, Connolly, Jiang, Pepler, & Craig, 2010).

**Romantic experience is linked with adolescent sexuality and psychological health.**

Depending on the quality and extent of involvement, adolescent romantic experience is accompanied by both positive and negative outcomes (Collins, 2003; Madsen & Collins, 2011). Healthy romantic experiences assist individuals to refine their sense of identity and

provide a source of emotional support (Furman & Collins, 2010). Romantic experience can also be associated with sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy (Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008), anxiety and depression (Soller, 2014), lower academic performance (Frisco, 2008), and substance use (Beckmeyer, 2015).

### **Bio-ecological Factors Influencing Adolescent Romantic Experience**

The bio-ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) suggests that adolescent romantic and sexual behaviors are jointly influenced by a wide range of factors from socio-ecological systems at multiple levels of social interaction in an adolescent's life. At a macro-system level, broad cultural messages, practices, and morals in society have an impact on adolescents' romantic views and behaviors including permissiveness or constraints, expected timing, and activities of romantic experience (Bouchey & Furman, 2006). Hence romantic experience is socially constructed. At an exo-system level, the mass media is an important influence on adolescent romantic and sexual development through shaping their beliefs in romance and sexuality as well as providing sexual related information (Bleakley, Hennessy, & Fishbein, 2011). At the micro-system level, school, peers, and family interact directly with adolescents and exert influence on their romantic behavior. School is an important socialization environment for adolescents interacting with peers, and is generally recognized as the natural setting for relationship and sex education (Markham et al., 2010). The effect of peers can be positive or negative, through providing supportive relationship advice and sexual information or alternatively encouraging risky behaviors (Suleiman & Deardorff 2015; Sullivan et al. 2012). Family represents an influential power through family structure and parenting styles (Turnbull, Werscha, & Schaik, 2011). The inter-relationships between the different parts of the micro-system constitute the meso-system such as the family-peer and family-school connections that influence adolescent romance and sexuality indirectly (Perrino, Gonzalez-Soldevilla, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2000).

## **Family as a Context Shaping Adolescent Romantic Experience**

The eco-developmental theory identifies family as the most proximal and fundamental system influencing adolescent development (Henrich, Brookmeyer, Shrier, & Shahar, 2006; Perrino et al., 2000). Parents are in a unique and powerful position to socialize adolescents to become sexually healthy adults through shaping their attitudes and behaviors (Kotchick, Shaffer, Forehand, & Miller, 2001). Family structure (such as parent-adolescent relationship) and family processes (such as communication) act as significant influences in adolescent romantic and sexual behaviors (Deptula, Henry, & Schoeny, 2010). Parent-based sexual health promotion strategies covering communication and monitoring have shown a positive impact on adolescent romantic and sexual decision-making (Commendador, 2010) and on adolescents' peer relations (Markham et al., 2010). Parents can also buffer the effect of the media through transmitting messages in line with family values (Fisher et al., 2009).

In China, research on adolescent romantic experience has tended to use survey tools to ask adolescents their romantic status and attitudes toward romantic relationships. Approximately 60-80% of Chinese adolescents are reported to have developed a special affection or expressed desire to interact with the opposite sex as a romantic experience (Z. H. Li et al., 2010). However, Chinese parents traditionally hold unfavorable views toward adolescent romantic experience. 67.4% parents of adolescent boys and 83.4% parents of girls reported opposition to their adolescent dating in China (Zhang et.al, 2013). In the rapidly globalising and modernising Chinese society, adolescents are now facing unprecedented changes to their lives that are transforming and influencing their social and sexual development (L. Li, King, & Winter, 2009). Chinese individuals especially young 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' (Y.Gao & Zhang, 2008). 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. While previous quantitative studies show the prevalence of adolescent romantic experience and parental attitudes; they lack a deep exploration about how adolescents and parents perceive adolescent romantic experience under the current Chinese socio-cultural context. Given the link of romantic experience to adolescent sexual and psychological health, a more thorough understanding of adolescent romantic experience from the perspectives of adolescents and parents is crucial to inform adolescent health promotion programs in China.

## **The Present Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deep understanding of adolescent romantic experience through the perceptual lens of adolescents and parents. This involved identifying the perceptual similarities and difference concerning adolescent romantic experience between adolescents and parents. As adolescent romantic experience is a socially-constructed phenomenon, social constructionism was used as the methodological framework in this study. It is premised by the position that knowledge is constructed through interaction between people and their worlds, and is historically and culturally relative (Burr, 2003). Given that both parents and adolescents are situated in, and interact with the ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), an ecological approach was used to make sense of the social constructions of adolescent romantic experience in this study.

## **Methods**

### **Participants and Procedures**

Ethics approval (No. 5917) was obtained from Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee at the University where the study was undertaken. Participant adolescents and

parents were recruited from two urban public high schools in a Northern city in China. The two schools offer three years of education from Grade 10 to 12, and are mixed-gender educational settings. In this study, only Grades 10 and 11 students were involved in the recruitment process, as the school principals had concerns about study disturbance to Grade 12 students who were concentrating on preparing for the national college entrance exam.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants through distributing advertisements in the selected schools. The interviewer (the first author) provided a presentation in the schools to introduce the study with an emphasis on the participation process and ethical principles. Students were asked to take the recruitment advertisement home to their parents. Interested students and parents were asked to contact the interviewer directly via telephone or email to indicate willingness to participate. Dyads of adolescents and parents were not actively sought due to ethical considerations of confidentiality and anonymity as some adolescents want to conceal their romantic experiences from their parents.

Thirty-eight adolescents and 27 parents participated. The adolescents were aged from 15 to 18 years with a mean of 16.1 years, and included 26 female students and 11 male students. The parent participants were aged from 42 to 50 years, with a mean of 47.1 years, and consisted of 16 mothers and 11 fathers. All the parent participants had one child. Thirty six adolescent participants were the only child in their family. Two adolescent girls had one sibling and were not subject to the Chinese one-child policy that was enforced in 1979 and ended in 2015 (Zhao & Gao, 2014). Most of the participants were from middle-class families with parents working as professionals and having a relatively high level of educational attainment. More information about adolescent and parent participants is listed in **Table 1** and **Table 2**, respectively.

## Data collection and analysis

A semi-structured interview guide including open-ended questions was used to enable participants to express their understandings about adolescent romantic experience. For instance, the adolescent participants were asked: Could you please tell me what romantic experience means for you? / Consider the words “romance”, “courtship”, and “love”, what images do these words convey to you? Parental consent and adolescent assent were obtained before participating in one-to-one interviews. The interviews were conducted at a participant-proposed venue and time, such as the counseling room at school or fast food outlets during their free time. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin (the native language of the participants and the interviewer), were audio recorded, and lasted between 40 and 100 minutes. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the confidentiality of participants.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then thematically analyzed, informed by the six-phase method of Braun and Clarke (2006) that include data transcribing, coding, sorting, categorizing, themes defining, and interpreting. A social constructionist lens combined with the Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model was drawn on to assist with classifying, sorting, and retrieving coded text during the analysis process. Accordingly, the multiple levels of bio-ecological systems such as social culture, peers, and mass media were taken into account when interpreting themes around participants’ perceptions of adolescent romantic experiences. NVivo version 10 was used to assist data analysis. Most of the data were analyzed in Chinese to maintain the quality of the original data (Smith, Chen, & Liu, 2008). To improve the study rigor and ensure other members of the research team informed of the raw data, four information-rich transcripts from two parent and two adolescent participants were translated into English by the interviewer and an independent bilingual translator separately. The research team compared the two English language versions of these transcripts and identified minor differences. The four transcripts were then analyzed in

English to develop a preliminary coding framework that was verified by the research team. The remaining transcripts were analyzed in Chinese to develop themes/subthemes that were later translated into English. Coding and analysis activities were discussed by the research team during meetings in which discrepancies in coding and interpretation were resolved.

## **Findings**

The qualitative analysis resulted in four primary themes regarding the perceptions of adolescent romantic experience: (a) opportunities and risks, (b) acceptable versus unacceptable sexual intimacy, (c) generational difference, and (d) girls' vulnerability and 'self-respect'. In these themes, adolescents and parents demonstrated congruity and conflict of perceptions that were associated with the socio-cultural contexts where they were living. The congruity of perceptions was displayed in both adolescents and parents recognizing the developmental significance and gender difference of romantic experience. The conflicts mainly lay in the differential acceptability of romantic experience and sexual intimacy perceived by adolescents and parents. There were also internal conflicts by individual adolescents and parents in perceptions of adolescent romantic experience. The conflicting perceptions influenced adolescents' related decisions and behaviors, and parents' attitudes toward and involvement in adolescent romantic experience.

### **Opportunities and Risks of Adolescent Romantic Experience**

From a developmental and educational perspective, parents and adolescents presented a range of views about adolescent romantic experience that were primarily manifested as opportunities or risks. Within this theme, three subthemes were identified: adolescent romantic experience was developmental normal; it was 'not real love' but shaped future relationships; and an incompatibility between romantic experience and academic attainment. The first two subthemes showed congruous perceptions between adolescents and parents

regarding the developmental significance of adolescent romantic experiences, which reflected the opportunities for adolescent development. The third subthemes indicated the risks of adolescent romantic experience, especially to adolescents' academic success and subsequent future prospects. In this subtheme, conflicts arose among adolescents themselves and between parents and adolescents. For example some adolescents could see both the benefits and risks of romantic experience to education while parents perceived romantic experience to be incompatible with successful education.

*Adolescent romantic experience was developmentally normal.* Adolescents and parents perceived that romantic experience was a typical and normative experience among high school students in the form of developing romantic interest and/or dyadic relationships. They both acknowledged the developmental significance of romantic experience and its symbolic meanings of maturity, identity, and recognition for adolescents.

Adolescents reported that they had romantic experience on their own, or witnessed the romantic involvement of their peers in school. Mai (female, aged 17) stated that romantic experience was “an integral physical and psychological experience during one’s growth process.” Symbolically, adolescents viewed romantic experience as an indicator of being grown-up, and thus justified it as being appropriate for their age. Luo (male, aged 16) claimed, “After all, we reach this age, to be an adult soon, so we have such experience”. Adolescents also constructed romantic experience as a sign of attractiveness that influenced their identity. Tian (female, aged 16) illustrated, “Somebody liking me is a proud thing because that means I have some attractive aspects and strengths that they have noticed.” By contrast, a lack of romantic involvement for some adolescents appeared to lead to low levels of confidence:

I just envy them [those engaging in a romantic relationship]. 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, female, aged 16)

Parents consistently recognized that their adolescents were facing romantic experience as a manifestation of adolescence, a sign of maturity and an important part of adolescent self-identity. Wei (female, aged 45, with an 18-year-old daughter) stated that romantic experience was “a sign of maturity, proving that she has developed to this stage ... Regardless of being a girl or a boy, being selected [as a romantic partner] at least means that he/she was recognized.”

***Adolescent romantic experience was ‘not real love’ but shaped future relationships.***

Despite recognizing the normality of adolescent romantic experience, both adolescents and parents characterized it as being short-lived, immature, ‘not real love’, and not marriage-oriented. However, some of the participants emphasized that romantic experience remained meaningful in shaping future relationships.

Adolescents illustrated that adolescent romantic experience could be ephemeral, ‘not real love’, and lack of marriage orientation:

It (adolescent romantic experience) 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)

Qian (female, aged 17) illustrated similar belief, and thus made a decision to be future-oriented and restrained 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.

While the transient nature and lack of marriage-oriented focus shaped some adolescents’ avoidance of romantic engagement, these features contributed to other adolescents

understanding it as being innocent and thus more appealing than adult romantic relationships:

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)

From a future perspective, some adolescents stated that adolescent romantic experience provided both context and opportunity for learning how to love, and thus it was meaningful and contributed to future relationships through accumulating experience and knowledge in aspects of future partner selection and sexual intimacy:

It 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. Also you have to connect with his friends and get along with them. Physically, intimate behaviors 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)

Consistent with adolescents, parents claimed that adolescent romantic experience was based on emotional attraction without consideration of marriage and thus could not be defined as 'real love'. Cui (female, aged 46, with a 17-year-old daughter) described:

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.

Some parents also recognized the value of adolescent romantic experiences for future relationship building. Song (male, aged 44, with a 17-year-old son) was an example who interpreted that romantic experience provided avenues for socializing with potential romantic partners and provided a basis for marital relationship development in the future:

I think it 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.

***An incompatibility between romantic experience and academic attainment.*** From an educational perspective, most parents and adolescents perceived romantic experience to be in

conflict with academic performance, and this then influenced adolescents' future prospects and their fulfillment of filial piety. Nonetheless, some adolescents conveyed an ambivalent attitude by considering the positive side of romantic experience in bringing rest and relief from academic pressure.

Most adolescents recognized the influence of romantic experience on their study, primarily viewing it as a distraction from academic goals:

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)

Other adolescents placed high value on their current studies due to the close connection with their future careers, as well as the fulfillment of filial piety to their parents. Some participants illustrated that higher education was the only route to pursuing a better life, especially given their non-wealthy backgrounds, indicating that social class is a part of romantic experience construction and related decision-making for adolescents:

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. Only by studying well, I can make the future life as I expect. So I don't dare to attempt [to engage in romantic experience], in case I will fall behind in study. (Sha, female, aged 16)

Some adolescents further stated that study was a means to fulfil filial duty to their parents, while romantic experience could be a threat to this:

My parents bear and rear me. I don't seek to bring great honor 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 (romantic experience) causes distractions and my study might be affected, then I cannot find a good job in the future. (Xi, female, aged 15)

Despite the perceived risks of adolescent romantic experience to education, some adolescents described romantic experience as a source of refreshment and relaxation from academic pressures. Hong (female, aged 17) described, "It makes our boring study more interesting. It likes a flavoring agent for us senior school students because now study is so

tense. The reason why we engage in love affairs is for a spice of schooling life and to relax.” Therefore, school influences adolescents’ constructions of romantic experience as an outlet for academic stress, which reinforced adolescents’ passion and desire for it. Tao (male, aged 16) believed that dating ‘the right person’ was important even his academic performance was declined:

My parents object to romantic experience 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.

Therefore, adolescents demonstrated incongruent perceptions regarding the influence of adolescent romantic experience on schooling.

In contrast to perceiving the benefits of romantic experience in schooling by some adolescents, parents believed that adolescent romantic experience was incompatible with academic attainment, and stressed that it jeopardized the education and future career opportunities of their adolescents. Parents constantly highlighted that education took precedence over other matters for high school adolescents, while romantic engagement interfered with academic success. Ping, aged 42, advised her 18-year-old daughter to refrain from romantic experience:

When 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.’

Furthermore, parents pinpointed the far-reaching influence of high school education from a filial piety perspective. Wei, aged 45, with a 17-year-old daughter, working as a high school teacher, 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.

In general, both adolescents and parents recognized the developmental significance of adolescent romantic experience and the potential risk to adolescent academic progress. However, some adolescents simultaneously constructed adolescent romantic experience more positively as a relieving part of their stressful schooling than other adolescents and parents, which reflected the conflict in perceptions among adolescents, and between adolescents and parents.

### **Acceptable versus Unacceptable Sexual Intimacy**

Apart from illustrating opportunities and risks, adolescents and parents recognized that romantic experiences provided the context for exploring sexual behaviors such as holding hands, cuddling, kissing, and sexual intercourse. Based on the types of sexual behaviors and the related social and health consequences, as well as the nature of the setting in which it occurred, adolescents classified these behaviors into two categories, i.e., acceptable and unacceptable. Light non-penetrative sexual behaviors (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. Parents were stricter about potential sexual intimacy in adolescent romantic experience. They considered adolescent sexual behaviors as inappropriate rather than classifying them into acceptable and unacceptable categories. Therefore, conflict arose between adolescents and parents in relation to the acceptable expressions of romantic experience.

Adolescents often mentioned that light sexual behaviors were more common than sexual intercourse in their networks. Jia (female, aged 15) stated that kissing and hugging were not harmful, whereas fondling and sexual intercourse were examples of extreme conduct:

I think behavior 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.

Rui (male, age 17) mentioned that while sexual intercourse occurred among his same-age peers, he considered this was irresponsible and ‘crossed the line’:

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.

Some adolescent girls framed sexual intercourse as being unacceptable because of the adverse consequences to health and marriage. Yu (female, aged 16) stated that sexual intercourse caused ‘horrible’ outcomes, “I know someone already had sex. Last year, three girls were found to be pregnant during health screening in a middle school. This can transmit diseases like AIDS, horrible.” Meng (female, aged 16) stated that premarital sexual intercourse would adversely influence future marital relationships, “The most wrong behavior is having sex. It should wait until marriage. Because your future husband would have a bad opinion of you and think you are too liberal.”

In addition, some adolescents defined the acceptability of adolescent sexual behaviour based on the setting where it occurred, i.e. private or public. Meng (female, aged 16) assumed that the public often related adolescent romantic experience to sexual activity, criticizing it as ‘bad’, and thus she had concerns about public judgment:

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.

Parents consistently recognized sexual involvement in adolescent romantic experience. Yuan (female, aged 47) stated, “I think it is natural that sexual activities happen among adolescents ... their bodies have developed maturely.” However, parents underlined the inappropriateness of adolescent sexual behavior through a belief about adolescents’ immaturity for sexual engagement from a socio-cultural and moral perspective. Cheng (male, aged 42) described adolescent sexual behavior as 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 behaviors (sex and pregnancy) occur among middle school students counter to the social mainstream moral principles.

In contrast to adolescents, parents appeared to be stricter regarding the acceptability of adolescent sexual behavior. Parents generally viewed any form of adolescent sexual behavior as being unacceptable and expressed disapproval. For instance, Cui, aged 46, told her 17-year-old daughter to “avoid physical contact, even touching hands [with the boy]”. For this reason, some parents embraced non-sexual romantic relationships and one-sided romantic interest, while disapproving of sexual relationships:

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, aged 47, with an 18-year-old daughter)

In line with adolescents’ description about the inappropriateness of sexual behaviour in public, parents thought that public places were safe for adolescents, as these environments would impose restrictions on adolescent sexual expression. Qing, aged 45, believed that her 18-year-old daughter was sexually-restrained because she limited her dating to public settings:

My daughter and her boyfriend usually just go to public places like the library, the cinema, or restaurants. They can travel with others but can’t go alone because [sexual] problems can happen.

Adolescents and parents demonstrated congruity and conflict regarding sexual intimacy. The congruity showed the perceived social and health consequences of adolescent sexual intercourse. The conflict was manifested in differing perceptions of acceptable adolescent sexual intimacy and reflected the generational difference stated by the participants below.

### **Generational Difference: a Modern and More Open Society**

Parents and adolescents reported a generational difference in the construction of adolescent romance and sexuality. Parents argued that current adolescent romantic experience was

distinct from what they had experienced in their adolescent years in terms of it being more clandestine and even shameful, as two mothers described:

When we were at school, there were some steps to prevent romantic experience. Boys and girls were not allowed to talk with each other and sit together. (Yan, aged 47)

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, aged 45)

In comparison, current adolescents are living in a more liberal social and cultural context.

Jiao (male, aged 50, with a 15-year-old son) illustrated the dramatic changes in sexual norms and practices between the two generations:

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.

Parents also stressed that external factors outside of the family including peer pressure and the media (e.g., the Internet) increasingly shaped adolescent sexual values and behaviors.

Jiao further pointed out the incrementally-increasing occurrence of adolescent sexual intercourse under peer influence through the media:

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

Observing the changing sexual values of an open and modern society, parents tended to hold a risk-based perspective toward adolescent romantic experience. Hu (female, aged 45) 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."

Adolescents acknowledged that they experienced more openness in romantic experience and related conversations than their parents. As Tian (female, aged 16) described:

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 (romantic experience) 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.

There were also recognition that the media influenced their construction of romantic experience and relevant practice:

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. (Hong, female, aged 17)

Adolescents interpreted their parents as being open or conservative based on the parental response to adolescent romantic experience, i.e., approval or disapproval. Lan, a 16-year-old female, challenged parents' consequence-focused perceptions and standpoint of delaying romantic experience until university as overly-conservative:

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.

With exposure to Western culture, Yu (female, aged 16) likewise stated that the West was more open in adolescent romantic and sexuality issues than China:

In China, it 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.

Through observing alternative approaches adopted by other parents in China and the West, some adolescents constructed adolescent romantic experience differently from their parents and this resulted in conflict. Tao (male, aged 16) complained about his mother's conservative reactions and thus kept her uninformed of his romantic issues:

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. 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.

Under the changing socio-cultural context along with Western influence in contemporary China, generational differences contributed to conflict of perceptions concerning adolescent romantic experiences. These differences resulted in adolescents' complaint about and rejection of the 'conservative' views of their parents. This situation generated adolescents' resistance against parental control in relation to romantic experience.

### **Girls' Vulnerability and 'Self-respect'**

Both adolescents and parents conveyed a gendered-perception of adolescent romantic experience in which girls were perceived to be more emotionally, sexually, and socially vulnerable than boys. This vulnerability was associated with the different ways of handling romantic issues between boys and girls, and the consequences for both, reflecting a socio-cultural construction of gender in sexual issues.

Adolescents commented that boys were more capable in dealing with romantic issues, including associated conflicts with study, and relationship failure, while girls were more emotionally vulnerable. Xiao (female, aged 16) labelled girls as being 'weaker' than boys:

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... 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.

Adolescent girls also perceived themselves as being sexually vulnerable, while boys 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 cited her friends' sexual behaviors, and highlighted the girls' suffering and boys' relative lack of susceptibility in premarital sexual behaviours:

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 the same reason, parents emphasized girls' vulnerability by talking about the detrimental consequences of sexual activity including pregnancy and abortion, as well as the subsequent lifelong physical and psychological influences. Ping, aged 42, used the social constructs of 'self-respect' and 'boundary' that were culturally-denoted as adolescent sexual abstinence to discuss reputation damage and physical harm with her 18-year-old daughter:

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.'

Given the perceived vulnerability of girls, parents demonstrated distinct attitudes toward their adolescent romantic and sexual involvement depending on the gender of the adolescent. Cui (female, aged 46) stated, "As a mother of a girl [age 17], I really worry. It is different to raise a boy. In sexual issues, girls suffer more than boys." Ma, aged 43, with a 17-year-old son, had different concerns that were about early sexual engagement leading to multiple sexual partners and the degradation of sexual value for 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.

Conversely, Jiao, aged 50, claimed that he would not worry about romantic and sexual behavior of his 15-year-old son:

When a boy reaches a certain age, if he needs some [romantic experience], 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.

With regards to girls' vulnerability, parents and adolescents showed overall consensus. This congruity reflected the deeply-rooted gender stereotype and double sexual standards in

contemporary China, which intensifies girls' vulnerability while granting boys sanctioned freedom in romantic exploration.

## **Discussion**

Adolescents and parents presented diverse understandings of adolescent romantic experience in terms of its characteristics, educational and health influences, and generational and gender differences. Both adolescents and parents recognized that romantic experience was normal and imbued with symbolic meanings of attractiveness and maturity, as well as shaped future relationships from a developmental perspective. The recognition of normality echoes with the views of adolescents in US who described that romantic relationship could promote personal growth and social enhancement (Royer, Keller, & Heidrich, 2009). The literature also supports the notion that adolescent romantic experience provides a training ground for developing interpersonal skills, including empathy, negotiation skills, and intimate relationship maintenance (Furman & Collins, 2010). The opportunities consistently perceived by adolescents and parents in this study tend to enable adolescents to engage in romantic experience. However, both parents and adolescents stated that it entailed a number of risks for academic achievement, sexual health, and future marriage and family, especially if sexual behaviors occurred. These risks indicate opposition to adolescent romantic experience, and are linked with the social construction of love and adolescent romance within the Chinese culture of Confucianism that stresses the importance of family, marriage, education, and women's premarital chastity (E. Gao et al., 2012; Huang & Gove, 2012).

## **Love or Not Real Love?**

The adolescents in this study were aged from 15 to 18 years and were in the middle/late adolescent period of their lives (Auslander et al., 2006). They witnessed romantic experience among their peers as being transitory, predominately consisting of passion, and lack of

commitment, which accords with the developmental-contextual theory of romantic stages during adolescence (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011). This characteristic contributes to some adolescents constructing adolescent romantic experience as being ‘not love’. In addition, parents and adolescents in this study defined love by linking it to marriage. In Chinese culture, love is a concept that is linked to an individual’s search for a mate for life, with other practical factors such as financial stability and family background are often considered for personal economic welfare and for bearing the filial obligation to one’s elderly parents (Xu & Ocker, 2013). The socio-cultural notions of love and marriage, and the traits of practicality and commitment, are attributed to adults, which explain both parents and adolescents constructing adolescent romantic experience as ‘not real love’. However, in Sternberg’s triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986), adolescent romantic relationship is one type of love, even typically manifests relatively high intimacy and passion with low levels of commitment (Williams & Hickle, 2010). This difference reflects the importance of cultural considerations in the construction of adolescent romantic experience.

### **Tensions between Parents and Adolescents**

Parents and adolescents displayed a generational difference in the construction of adolescent romantic experience, which corresponds with the socio-economic and cultural transitions over time in China (L. Li, King, & Winter, 2009). Parents in this study born in the 1970s or earlier went through their adolescence in a dramatically different time, where conservative sexual values were the mainstream and sex was a taboo subject (Y.Gao & Zhang, 2008), and thus experienced repression and sensitivity of romantic and sexual issues (Farrer, 2006). This social and historical context shaped parents in developing relatively conservative attitudes and behaviors in relation to adolescent romantic experience. The economic reforms and the open-door policy in China from 1978 onwards has brought dramatic socio-cultural changes and has prompted the process of modernization and worldwide globalization, that drives a

sexual culture shift from being traditional to more liberated (Xiao, 2011). Chinese adolescents now have greater access to a variety of media (e.g., the Internet, television, and books) and greater exposure to Westernization (Chang, Hayter, & Lin, 2014), which significantly contributes to their diverse beliefs and values about romance and sexuality that differed to their parents. This conflict thereby leads to tension between parents and adolescents.

The tension was mainly presented in different acceptable expressions of romantic experience that were associated with sexual intimacy. As reported by other researchers (Lau, Markham, Lin, Flores, & Chacko, 2009), participants in this study described the sexual components in adolescent romantic experience, and addressed romantic relationships as a precursor and contributing to the initiation of sexual activity among adolescents. The sexual components embedded in romantic experience contributed to participants (especially parents) constructing it as hazardous given the perceived socio-cultural risks of adolescent sexual behaviors. Consequently, some parents objected to explicit romantic relationships or defined a healthy adolescent romantic relationship as non-sexual involvement. In contrast, adolescents distinguished between acceptable and unacceptable sexual intimacy involved in romantic experience. In this situation, adolescents developed vigilance against their parents regarding romantic experience, despite the traditional values of filial piety that emphasizes the importance of respecting and not defying one's parents (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004). Adolescents in this study reported that exposure to Western culture reinforced their desire for more supportive rather than controlling parenting practice in relation to romantic experience, which aligns with the development of adolescents who increasingly seek freedom and independence from their parents (Arnett 2010). Therefore, the tension between adolescents

and parents was exacerbated by the joint influence of traditional culture and Westernization in China.

### **Ambivalence of Adolescents**

In comparison to parents, adolescents were more inclined to address the positive components of romantic experience. In the ecological systems, schools provide an avenue for boy-girl interactions and create opportunities for adolescents to develop romantic experience. Factors from other systems such as the mass media and peers constitute sources of adolescent romantic experience construction and drive adolescents to engage in romantic experiences. However, some adolescents had concerns and pressures from external limitations such as parental control and cultural filial piety that emphasizes obedience and loyalty toward family and supporting parents when they age (Deutsch, 2006). In the Chinese Confucian ideology, education is associated with one's social class through influencing employment, marriage, and relationships, and is linked with subsequent economic contribution to one's elderly parents (Huang & Gove, 2012). 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 (W. Li & Y. Li, 2010). As found in this study, other researchers have also found that parents in Mainland China consider academic success as one of the most important tasks for adolescents and prioritize it over other matters including the normality of adolescent romantic experience (Zhao & Gao, 2014). However, some adolescents in this study did not support this idea and viewed romantic experience as providing a form of relaxation from academic pressure. Therefore, conflict existed between parents and some adolescents regarding the link between education and adolescent romantic experience.

The cultural emphasis on education and filial piety places adolescents in a challenging and ambivalent situation in which they need to manage both romantic issues and study in the

schooling context. As a result, some adolescents waited until the completion of high school to start romantic engagement for future personal prospects and fulfilling filial piety, while others not setting education as a priority engaged in covert dating to circumvent parental knowledge. Therefore, some adolescents were confronted with discordance between their inner desires and the external limitations from parents and culture, which created a complicated romantic experience decision-making process for adolescents.

### **Gendered Perceptions Place Females in a Vulnerable Position**

In this study, parents and female adolescents constructed girls as being more vulnerable than boys in romantic and sexual issues, while rarely mentioning the vulnerability of boys. This gendered perception is associated with gender norms of masculinity and femininity in China that often define boys and girls as rationally-oriented and emotionally-oriented respectively, with characteristics of a power imbalance between females and males (Liu, 2013). In China, the long-lasting Confucian patriarchal values still remain (Xiao, Mehrotra, & Zimmerman, 2011), where males are dominant and are considered to be superior to, and more powerful than females. Therefore, the gender stereotypes are difficult to be transcended that continue to influence participants in this study including young people pertaining to the construction of adolescent romantic experience. The perceived vulnerability of girls also reflect that a double standard of sexual behavior characterized by the premarital chastity of girls applies to current boys and girls in contemporary China (Xiao et al., 2011).

The gender stereotype and double standard of sexuality places females in a vulnerable position. Such perceptions may prevent girls from romantic engagement and consider the unacceptability of adolescent sexual intercourse. Alternatively, girls might take for granted that they lack power and control over their own bodies and relationships, which further intensifies their vulnerability. However, the literature found that girls and boys were equally vulnerable to the negative influences of romantic relationships, with different manifestations

(Chen et al., 2009). For instance, girls manifested internal symptoms such as depression, while boys primarily displayed behavioral problems such as delinquency and earlier sexual involvement (Chen et al., 2009).

In addition, the gendered perception may generate gendered parental practice in terms of focusing on girls while neglecting the boys when addressing romantic and sexual issues. In this study, parents prioritized education over romantic involvement equally for boys and girls, while they expressed more concerns about their daughters' romantic activities considering the importance of sexual abstinence and demonstrated less concern about sexual risks for their sons. This gendered perception and practice can undermine the concerted efforts needed by both males and females for health-promoting romantic and sexual behaviours (Martin, McDaid, & Hilton, 2014).

Overall, the congruity of perceptions was manifested as recognition of the normality of adolescent romantic experience with gender difference. There were more congruities in the themes of developmental significance than in aspects of educational influence and sexual intimacy, which were shaped by globalization of youth culture via the internet, traditional Chinese cultural beliefs and Confucianism. The similarities support adolescent romantic experience as desired by adolescents. However, the conflict between parents and adolescents tend to outweigh the congruity by considering the educational and health influences of romantic experience on adolescents. This situation engenders a tension between adolescents and parents, and a complicated decision making process for adolescents regarding romantic experience in modern China.

## **Implications**

This study provides an in-depth understanding of adolescent romantic experience and provides implications for adolescent health promotion programs. Parental awareness needs to

be strengthened about their adolescents' tension in romantic experience in the context of rapid socio-cultural change while adolescents need support to deal with this tension. Health and other professionals could address the deeply-rooted stereotypical gender norm to adolescents and parents to assist their critical reflection.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are several limitations of this study. First, the participants may have provided socially desirable responses due to the relatively sensitive nature of the research topic. Second, the participants were predominantly females, and thus the voices of males were relatively absent. Third, the participants were from urban areas in two high school settings, which may limit the transferability of findings to other groups of parents and adolescents such as those from rural areas and non-typical high schools. Future research can make greater effort to recruit more adolescent boys and fathers, and involve adolescents and parents from other settings to compare the differences and similarities among different groups with respect to their understanding of adolescent romantic experience.

### **Conclusion**

This study has explored adolescents and parents' understandings of adolescent romantic experience within the Chinese context of rapid modernization and the coexistence of traditional cultural ideologies about education, sexuality, family and gender. The perceptions of adolescent romantic experience involve congruity and conflict within parents and adolescents and between them, reflecting generational and cultural change in romance and sexuality in China. The congruity mainly suggests that adolescents and parents supporting adolescent romantic experience as a normal part of development. The conflict within adolescents and parents, as well as between them imposes a tension for adolescents who struggle between their inner desire for romantic experience and external pressures including

parental disapproval, the priority of educational success and cultural filial piety. Therefore, the congruity and conflict of perceptions reflect a complicated construction of adolescent romantic experience within the Chinese socio-cultural context. The findings indicate that in rapidly changing urban environment of China, both adolescents and parents need support to manage adolescent romantic experience.

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**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%)
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%)
Mother's/Father's occupation	University bachelor degree or above	9/13 (24.3%/35.1%)
	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%)
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%)
Occupation	University bachelor degree or above	20 (74.1%)
	Unemployed	0
	Non-professional job	10 (37.0%)
	Professional job	17 (63.0%)

