

**Poetics and politics of purpose: Understanding dating app users in Shanghai**

by

**Wei Mei Wong**

Bachelor of Business Administration, Central China Normal University, 2015

Master of Science, University of Oxford, 2016

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2022

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

**Wei Mei Wong**

It was defended on

March 4, 2022

and approved by

Dr. Melanie Hughes, Professor, Department of Sociology

Dr. Gabriella Lukács, Professor, Department of Anthropology

Dr. Emily Wanderer, Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology

Dissertation Director: Dr. Nicole Constable, Professor, Department of Anthropology

Copyright © by Wei Mei Wong

2022

# **Poetics and politics of purpose: Understanding dating app users in Shanghai**

Wei Mei Wong, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2022

Dating apps burst into the courtship market in China around 2011 with the launch of Momo. Dating apps differed from their predecessors - marriage websites, matchmaking reality shows, online matchmakers - by branding themselves as sex apps. Riddled with controversy and condemnation by the central government, dating apps moved to rebrand themselves as love apps or social media. Through researching young Chinese's experience from dating apps, this dissertation studies how young Chinese navigate dating relationships through exploring their romantic expectations, desires, and behaviors. In other words, the research looks at how young Chinese construct gender, sexuality, and a new dating culture — one that is influenced by the affordances of mobile technology like dating apps. By centering on the theme of “purpose,” I asked the following questions: What are young Chinese' purposes for using dating apps? Are these purposes homogenous among dating apps users? What happens when the dating app's purpose (facilitating meet-ups between potential lovers) is rendered obsolete during a pandemic quarantine? Based on 18-months of multi-sited fieldwork online and in Shanghai, I argue that appearing “anti-purposeful” or ambiguous on dating apps is part of the dating script within the dating app ecosystem. Secondly, I posit that dating app users searching for foreign partners are less concerned about appearing “purposeful” on dating apps. The search for a foreign partner is also heavily gendered within international dating dynamics. Finally, I argue that the pandemic quarantine has led to dating app users developing novel ways to still extract value from dating

apps, even if it is not the dating apps' intended use. More broadly, this dissertation interrogates the adaptiveness of digital artifact users, the tension between tradition and modernity, the non-homogenous nature of dating app users across geographical regions, and the importance of anthropological approaches to be considered beyond academia when trying to understand digital artifacts' users.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	viii
1.0 Introduction: Studying Dating Apps in China.....	1
1.1 Dating in China.....	8
1.2 The Rise of Dating Apps .....	11
1.3 Researching Online and Offline .....	16
1.3.1 During the Pandemic .....	16
1.3.2 Before the Pandemic .....	19
1.4 Research Identity Online and Offline .....	21
1.5 Organization of the Chapters .....	24
2.0 Anti-purposefulness: Understanding Dating App Users' Motivations .....	27
2.1 Part One: Exploring the Main Ambiguous Motivations.....	31
2.1.1 Form of Release: Tree-holes and Strangers.....	31
2.1.1.1 How Tree-holing Manifest through Strangership .....	32
2.1.1.2 Why are Dating Apps for Strangers? .....	35
2.1.2 Boredom and Play .....	41
2.2 Part Two: The Mechanisms Behind Motivations .....	45
2.2.1 To Combat the Stigma of Desperation .....	46
2.2.2 Coping Mechanism for the Time Intensive Process.....	50
2.3 Conclusion .....	53
3.0 Purposefully Matching with Foreigners: Nationalism and Female Hypergamy .....	56
3.1 Sex, Masculinity, and the Male Appendage .....	58

3.1.1 “The Penis is the Site of Attraction” .....	59
3.1.2 Nationalistic Domination through the Body of Women .....	65
3.2 Hypergamy: “Women from China are out of Chinese Men’s Leagues” .....	71
3.2.1 The White Junk: “We are out of Foreign Men’s League” .....	82
3.3 A Brief Note on Purposefulness.....	90
3.4 Conclusion .....	92
4.0 Double Liminality: Dating App Space During the COVID-19 Quarantine Period.....	95
4.1 Combatting a Period of Quarantine Liminality .....	99
4.1.1 Temporary Balm .....	99
4.1.2 Differently Temporarily .....	104
4.1.3 Revelations, Introspections, and Awakenings .....	112
4.2 Using Dating Apps to Combat a Period of Post-liminality .....	119
4.3 Conclusion .....	122
5.0 Conclusion .....	125
5.1 Purposeful Anti-purposefulness .....	126
5.2 Adaptive Users of a Digital Artifact.....	129
5.3 The Tension Between Tradition and Modernity .....	133
5.4 Application of Anthropology to Industry User Research .....	142
Bibliography .....	147

## **Preface**

To my life partner, my advisor, my committee members, my friends, family members, and my informants, this dissertation would not be here without you. Thank you.

## 1.0 Introduction: Studying Dating Apps in China

*“Women had very little in the way of property rights, they were supposed to subordinate themselves to men all of their lives, they had limited economic and social roles outside the home, they received little education, and they were sometimes subjected to child marriages, concubinage, infanticide, and miserable marriages - conditions from which women had few escapes.” — (Parish & Whyte, 1978, p. 235)*

This dissertation builds upon works from anthropological and social studies of gender in China. It is therefore prudent to discuss how gender has been discussed and imagined in the field to better situate the dissertation.

Early studies like Parish and Whyte’s tended to base their social definition of women on the Confucian model of social hierarchy that held precedent in late imperial Chinese societies (Baker, 1979; Freedman, 1963). The quote above reflects the “traditional” model of Chinese family relations characterized by a gendered division of authority and action, one that placed women below men. Writing about both men and women, Parish and Whyte explain how womanhood was dictated by women’s relationships to others; they were mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. Women were positioned hierarchically under their fathers, husbands, and their adult sons.

Such scholars tended to believe in Chinese women’s absolute subordination, particularly before the Cultural Revolution (from 1966 to 1976) (Parish & Whyte, 1978; Watson, 1991). One of the earliest anthropological works on gender — Margery Wolf’s “Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan” — challenged the more static and traditional view of Chinese women as

categorically subordinated within their family structure. Instead, she illustrates the complexity of the gender system within a Chinese family, where women's power and authority could potentially shift over time. Based on her fieldwork in the late 1960s in a northern Taiwanese village, Wolf argues that women interpreted and experienced the Chinese family's patriarchal culture very differently from the fixed roles identified by previous researchers. Exploring the concept of Chinese family from the woman's point of view, Wolf found that the uterine family (centered upon the mother and her children) was the one that was most meaningful to women. Despite the uterine family not having a formal foundation, ideology, or public existence, the sentiments and loyalties developed between mother and child, particularly with her sons, were able to challenge men's position of power. Even within an extended patriarchal household, several distinct and competing uterine families might have existed. Not all the women within one household shared the same agenda. Different household women were affected by class stratification and their relationships to each other/ co-resident male (Watson, 1991). Women fostered alliances with other women outside the home as well. This collective power of women subverted the patrilineal system to a certain extent, something that had been overlooked in previous research on Chinese family due to researchers' propensity to focus on men. According to the women members, the Chinese family structure was a transitory unit that changes according to the women's needs throughout their lives (Wolf, 1968).<sup>1</sup>

After the Mao era, anthropologists studying gender expanded their scope of inquiry beyond the Chinese family structure. This was also when they were able to enter Mainland China to

---

<sup>1</sup> This representation of “traditional China” was conducted in Taiwan at time when foreigners were not allowed entry into Mainland China.

conduct research. Their research revealed a more varied picture of different kinds of gendering in various aspects of life and social groups. Scholars focusing on urban China explored varied social groups and aspects of life. For example, anthropologist Brownell found that sports were not as gendered in China as in the West, considering how sports were not crucial to the formation of masculinity within the Confucian tradition (Brownell, 1995). In the same book, Brownell also looks at the disco dancing phenomenon among mostly female elderly women. They were often dressed in colorful outfits as they flagrantly and unabashedly danced in public parks. Through this activity, she argues, older Chinese women found a way to exercise resistance against the government and tradition in a less politically charged manner, one that challenges gender and age taboos rooted in the Confucian tradition. Rofel demonstrated how three generations of female workers in a Hangzhou silk factory reflect different gender concepts. The grandmothers believed in socialist equality; the mothers believed in gendered engagement with state power, while the daughters believed in new paradigms that were informed by post-socialist discussions of nature, feminine bodies, and sexuality (Rofel, 1999). However, there were still instances of men and women who modeled their relationships after the social expectations of modesty for women, and assertiveness and manipulation for men (M. M.-h. Yang, 1999). While in no way exhaustive, these works represent some of the scholarship based in the early reform era.

Similar to their predecessors in gender studies during the early reform era, contemporary Chinese gender research looked to social change within China to understand changing gender values and roles. Hu and Scott (2016)) did a comprehensive study to look at how social change influenced family and gender values and how they differed across generations, regions, and gender in China. The scholars argue that attitudes toward patrilineal beliefs, as well as gender roles that adhere to a more traditional gender division of labor, both found significantly less support over

time.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars look at Chinese women's elevated status in the public domain, such as education or career (Gittings, 2005; Doug Guthrie, 2009). Chinese women's improvement in educational levels and better occupations have given Chinese women more bargaining and decision-making power within personal relationships (Salaff 1995). This led to women negotiating for better qualities in their mate choice. Compared to men, women expressed a higher preference for pragmatic (e.g., well educated, wealthy, successful, ambitious) and caring (e.g., affectionate, loving, considerate, kind) characteristics (Blair & Madigan, 2016). Blair and Madigan also argue that the imbalanced sex ratio in China ironically created an environment that greatly benefitted women's position in their dating life. This is in line with Sprecher's (1998) dyadic power thesis in which the relative scarcity of women increases their power within their dyadic relationships. The imbalanced sex ratio is a result of the one-child policy; there are more males than females due to a preference for boys (Fong, 2004; Greenhalgh, 2008). The imbalanced sex ratio (2:1) provides an interesting context for the discussion of masculinity.

Many works published in the last 15 years on Chinese masculinities reveal a dominant, desired form of manhood. Across the studies we see an overwhelming masculine standard that is symbolized by wealth (Kim, 2015; Osburg, 2013; X. Zhang, 2011). Song and Hird (2013), 12) argue that "masculinity is increasingly being defined in terms of money, bearing remarkable similarities with the discourse of "hegemonic masculinity" in the West." Studying commercial property ownership in Yunnan, Li L. Zhang (2010), 185) argues that masculinity in post-socialist

---

<sup>2</sup> It is, however, essential to note that Hu & Scott (2016) also argued that the eradication of traditional views in one dimension of family and gender values does not necessarily imply a similar questioning of conventional values in other dimensions.

China is increasingly being defined by one's entrepreneurial ability and the power to provide and consume with Chinese men's social and self-worth being associated to their financial capabilities, possession of goods, and political power. This sentiment is reflected in Osburg's study.

Osburg (2013)) studies the rise of elite networks composed of nouveau-riche male entrepreneurs, state enterprise managers, and government officials in the 1990s. He was particularly interested in the ways relationships were formed between elite men through shared experiences of leisure, how they facilitated business ventures, and the performance of their social status. His study demonstrated an increasingly normative masculinity linked to taking entrepreneurial risks and achieving success in the market economy. This form of elite masculinity had become so institutionalized that all urban men's practices are measured and oriented according to those standards. Failure to enter this new class-inflected world is experienced as emasculation and exclusion. Other studies found similar forms of masculinity.

Farrer's (2002) examination of young people's romantic lives in Shanghai similarly indicated that masculinity is closely associated with income and professional triumph. Zheng Tiantian (2009) studied the lives of karaoke hostesses—a career whose name disguised their roles as sex workers and power brokers. Through this anthropological account of sex workers, the author observed that men were evaluated not by birth status or education; they were instead judged by their entrepreneurial abilities. Similarly, Hinsch (2013)) finds that money represented the essence of masculinity. An abundance of money meant superior masculinity. As such, businessmen became the new standard for heroic Chinese masculinity. Louie (2012)) would agree as he found globe-trotting Chinese entrepreneurs to be symbolic of the ideal masculinity. The studies on Chinese men, as demonstrated above, show that in reform-era China, masculinity is strongly associated with finances.

In short, the radical economic growth accompanied by numerous policies of liberalization since the early 1980s had led to an emphasis on individualization within Chinese society (J. Yang, 2010). Marketization and consumerism further fuelled the necessity to partake in ostentatious consumption to build and maintain the types of networks through which power and status could be expressed (Osburg, 2013). The disparity in wealth grew over the reform era. Under this context, personal wealth became the benchmark for desirable and respected men.

Despite the prevalence of coverage on the matter, material wealth is not necessarily linked to masculinity for all Chinese. Some scholars have found that there is a shift towards a more ethics-driven masculinity. The effeminate male image is increasingly being popularized in contemporary China (Louie, 2012). Song and Hird (2013)) finds a new type of man, referred to as the "twenty-first century new men," that is more emotionally expressive and open about his communication with his spouse/children. This kind of image of husband and father comes to represent the urban-middle class model of masculinity (Yoo, 2019). Furthermore, there have been studies focusing on young male migrant workers that do not fit the ideal masculine ideals due to their lower socioeconomic status (Sun, 2020). Young male migrants themselves or external sources (e.g., Government or media) responded by renegotiating what it meant to be masculine.

Sun (2020)) describes how the government responded to young, single male migrants who were experiencing widespread difficulty in finding a marriage partner due to their perceived emasculation — lower socioeconomic status and inability to buy a home. In response to this, China Central Television (CCTV) launched a series of love stories featuring young rural migrant couples and their romantic relationships. Life was hard for all these couples at the time of the report, but their stories ended with an optimistic message — with love and hard work towards a future as the foundation of the relationship, things will work out. It should be noted that CCTV is the

mouthpiece of the CCP's propaganda machine. As such, CCTV's content is reliable evidence of the government's position and policies on different issues. According to Sun, these CCTV stories were structured to push a new message regarding love — love exists and could be enjoyed now, despite not having the material wealth you crave for, e.g., a good job, money, property. Love is not something you feel after securing material wealth; love is what happens when the couple works towards it together. In short, the government wanted rural migrants who were unhappy about their present life to adjust their mindset about love. To secure love and marriage, migrant males were encouraged to give a "promise" and not necessarily material wealth. We see here that the government attempted to change young Chinese migrants' understanding of masculinity to dissuade them from staying unmarried. On the other hand, some turned to religion to renegotiate their understanding of masculinity.

For example, male Chinese often converted to Christianity after experiencing failure in their careers. According to Yoo (2019)), young Chinese Christians in Beijing often condemned the single-minded pursuit of economic success after their conversion to Christianity. They saw materialistic and success-seeking lifestyles as a threat to their Christian beliefs. The church's collective view on money meant that Chinese Christian men were able to eschew socially imposed gender roles. This led them to cultivate a more relationship-centered and emotion-oriented masculinity. "Male weakness" is also seen as a virtue and a strength from a Christian perspective (Yoo, 2019). Yoo termed this form of masculinity "soft Christian masculinity" (214). This form of masculinity seemingly departs from the wealth and power-driven masculinity first described in this section.

To better understand the duality of the masculinity discussed here, I refer to Louie (2002)), who used *wen-wu* as an analytical dyad to examine the general paradigm of the Chinese masculine

ideals. *Wen* was related to civility and literacy, whereas *wu* was related to physical strength and martial prowess. The relative weight of *wen* and *wu* were moulded by political and social circumstances. Louie explained that while Chinese men are supposed to have both in harmony, Confucian ideology prioritized *wen* over *wu*. Social elites that had *wen* attributes were not viewed as feminized or neutered. The industrializing process of the Maoist period emphasized more on the *wu* type of masculinity. While soldiers and peasants were valorized in the Maoist period, we see a more dynamic fluidity between *wen* and *wu* in the ideal Chinese masculinity, as demonstrated by the literature covered above.

To conclude this section, I would like to emphasize the notions of development and recovery within the genderscape entangled in this whole discourse. The scholarship discussed here demonstrated an ephemeral and ever-changing understanding of gender in Chinese society, one where progress towards modernity also involved the recovery and celebration of gender differences. This dissertation is situated within this body of work in anthropology.

## **1.1 Dating in China**

When the topic of heterosexual relationships come up in China, a commonly used term is *xiangqin* which generally translates to “the meeting between potential marital partners.” In its traditional sense, it refers to the meeting between the two families involved that is typically arranged by a matchmaker or a relative. When it comes to marital matchmaking in China, until recent times, parents were always present, and there was no private time for the young couple (Croll, 1981; Jordan, 1997). However, established traditional patterns of courtships changed from the early twentieth century when the “May 4th generation” harshly criticized the patriarchal

Chinese feudal family and blamed it for forming the social ills that had caused China's supposed backwardness in the nation's competition with Western's superpowers. This led to early twentieth century Chinese intellectuals promoting personal autonomy, marriage freedom, and love as heralds of modernity (Lee, 2006).

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ascended to power in 1949, polygyny, concubinage, arranged marriages, child-adoption marriages, and prostitution were illegalized through the Marriage Law of 1950 (Diamant, 2000). Although the law's implementation faced many challenges in real life, the marriage law is credited for significantly transforming the Chinese marriage ideal from arranged marriage to free-choice marriage (Osburg, 2013). As a result of the promotion of free choice, parents' control over young people's marital choices gradually decreased over time, especially as young people migrated out of extended household units. Nevertheless, marital introductions have remained common, but were undertaken not just by familial units but also by work units and local party secretaries (C. Chen, 2017). The main change was that, at least in theory, young couples could disagree to such matches.

Contemporarily, *xiangqin* differs from traditional forms, but is still unlike “modern blind dating” that is untethered by social connections. *Xiangqin* still emphasizes conjugality, matrimony, and kinship (Chen, 2017). While it resembles the word “matchmaking” in English, I agree with Chen (2017) that *xiangqin* should not be translated as such to avoid an association with the Orientalist narrative of Chinese patriarchal arranged marriage of *zuomei* – formal matchmaking that is usually arranged by parents or professional matchmakers.

*Xiangqin* is a cultural practice that still carries the explicit aim of family formation. Dating, by contrast, is more ambiguous in China. My Chinese friend, Lucy (aged 24), once described it this way:

“*Xiangqin* is the dependable sibling; “dating” [she used the English word] is the rebellious experimental sibling. If I wanted a guarantee, I would go for *xiangqin*. I know I will get a good man. I have someone’s seal of approval. But, of course, the man has to be on his best behavior because if he acts up, the person that recommends him will lose face. So, there is something to lose. But with dating, I can let loose. I can experiment more too. With that, I may be able to experience something different, and who knows, find an unexpected kind of love, but I may also have to kiss a whole lot more of frogs.”

“Dating” is a Western concept with no corresponding term in Chinese. However, one term is regularly used to represent it - *yuehui* - which loosely translates to asking someone out and participating in a joint activity. In the context of this research, dating refers to the formation of intimate relationships that involve joint activities. This may include social activities such as movie watching, confiding in each other, etc. (online and offline). Sometimes, they include emotional or physical forms of intimacy. The interaction can be casual, such as a one-off hook-up date or it can be a more serious one such as cohabitating. Some young people relate dating with engagement and marriage, while others see dating as a rite of passage that is a way to develop their identities, seek companionship, and practice sexual intimacy — none of which may be expected to necessarily lead to marriage. Dating has thus become complex and diverse in China, especially with different dating practices becoming more popular in urban areas such as Shanghai. They include, for example, triangular relationships, extra-marital affairs, and multiple or non-monogamous relationships (Farrer, 2002; Osburg, 2013; X. Wang, 2017).

In the context of dating apps, I define online dating very much in the same vein as I defined dating above, but in a digital context. Online dating is the formation of intimate relationships originating from online environments like dating apps that revolve around a shared activity or

experience — this is typically through the sharing of intimate thoughts, ideas, and emotions via the features offered by the digital medium that carry the potential to lead to offline interactions. Thus, even if such contacts eventually lead to casual flings, individuals often (but not necessarily) share intimate or sexual thoughts and desires before taking the “relationship” offline.

During my research I have been very careful not to conflate dating with *xiangqin*. However, this conflation was a source of confusion at certain junctures of the research because of the strong foothold that *xiangqin* has in courtship culture in China. For example, while *xiangqin* is relatively systematic and traditional compared to dating, professional matchmakers intentionally utilize the terms “*xiangqin*,” “dating,” and “matchmaking (*zuomei*)” interchangeably as part of their marketing campaign. Public *xiangqin* events blast love songs in all directions. Their venues are decorated with Valentine hearts, chubby Cupids, and balloons so participants feel like the commercialized and transactional environment is less artificial and more “naturally” romantic (C. Chen, 2017). Another source of confusion is the difference between matchmaking websites and dating apps in China. The proverbial “dating websites” are more *xiangqin*-based, while dating apps are more dating-based. This difference is important to note because the user ecologies are very different. In the next section, I explore this important difference further. I also elucidate on the rise of dating apps in China to provide more contextual background for the rest of the dissertation.

## **1.2 The Rise of Dating Apps**

Before the advent of modern mass media (like newspapers, TV broadcasts, or the Internet), Chinese had to rely on social units or professional matchmakers to arrange for marital alliances. In the 1930s, marriage advertisements had begun appearing in Chinese newspapers, especially in

Shanghai. In the early 1990s, even CCP-controlled newspapers and television programming began publishing marriage advertisements again (C. Chen, 2017). The emergence of the internet age bequeathed ample opportunities for new forms of sociality online and thus new technologies for online matchmaking. In recent years, scholars have demonstrated how new forms of intimate relations and subjectivities have emerged in relation to new technology (Lukács, 2020; X. Zhang, 2015). In China, the ubiquity of quality Internet technologies now affords the country's Internet consumers historically unprecedented access to information and entertainment (Luo, Zhang, & Marquis, 2016).

Scholars studying the intersection of intimacy and media in China have found that the range of intimacies in the dating market are simultaneously restricted and made possible by continually changing technological mass-consumed products (T. Liu, 2019; C. Yang, 2017). Different technologically based products can be creatively appropriated through pathways carved by users' pragmatic and situated practices such as affective needs and desires apart from their intended use. For example, rural migrant laborers in Shen Zhen and Guangdong would repurpose computer games like QQ Dazzling Dance into an online dating platform and became an environment in which romantic encounters were digitally played out (T. Liu, 2019). Here, migrant workers were able to use the platform to arrange hookups or form romantic relationships. Despite being in an in-game relationship, male users were still expected to shoulder specific gender roles, such as arranging for in-game marriage and financially supporting their female partners' in-game expenses.

We also see the relationship between media and intimacy when we look at how dating in contemporary China can be de-privatized through trendy TV dating programs. C. Yang (2017)) studies the nationwide popular dating program, *If You Are the One*, and suggests that dating in contemporary China might have evolved into a much less private practice. The show that is mainly

streamed online is seen as a relationship-establishing platform that was more legitimate than dating agencies. Since it has a good reputation and a wide circulation, the youths interviewed by C. Yang (2017)) found the medium to be a reliable source to find a partner. Some interviewees even said that searching for a partner in a mediated public setting could increase the guests' chances of finding a partner, both inside and outside the program. With the circulation sphere wider than dating websites, it is a significant advertisement for guests. Often, guests have members of the program's audiences reaching out to them as potential partners. As such, TV dating facilitated a dating market without regional boundaries and help guests enlarge their social networks to increase their chances of finding a potential partner. The speeded-up program setting seemingly enhanced the efficiency of the partner-selecting process, albeit one with a low success rate (C. Yang, 2017). TV dating shows are often sponsored and affiliated with online dating websites as well.

Before the rise of dating apps, marriage-matching online services and online dating websites dominated the online dating landscape. Similar to the TV dating program mentioned above, the first generation of online dating are more *xiangqin*-based because they promote their services under the premise of helping users find lifelong partners (Fiore & Donath, 2004; Wen, 2015). Online dating websites are mainly structured like a “marketplace” where individuals can upload profiles and “advertise” themselves to potential marital partners. When the Internet entered the Web 2.0 era, new algorithms are able to take personal preferences into consideration and suggest matches for users based on those preferences.

The dating website companies, like many other Internet companies, are relatively young. The industry giant, Jiayuan, was founded in 2003 by a graduate student from Fudan University. Baihe and Zhenai, the other two largest Chinese online dating websites, were founded in 2005 (Chin, 2015; Fu, 2015; Wen, 2015). In the early 2010s, their presence was noticeable in

mainstream media, and they were huge sponsors for national advertisements. They also collaborated with dating reality shows that are still televised nationally, which also enhanced their popularity among the masses in China (C. Yang, 2017). Dating website companies at that time targeted younger generations and parents of singles, prompting parents to create accounts on behalf of their children. Those dating websites are called *hunlian wangzhan*, which directly translates to “marriage websites.” Without mincing words, their primary purpose is to help users find heterosexual marriage partners. The activity engaged on these websites is called online *xiangqin* (C. Chen, 2017). All three of these prominent online dating websites positioned themselves as serious avenues for marital relationship making.

Dating apps, by contrast, were launched relatively later than dating websites (Chan, 2021). Momo, one of the pioneers, was launched in 2011. Tantan was launched in 2014, and SOUL in 2015. They positioned themselves differently from dating websites in their initial campaigns. In August 2011, Momo released an advertising video titled “the most popular mobile dating application: a hotel story.” The advertisement is set at night. It shows a young man in a business suit who has just finished work for the day. We also see a young woman wearing soft make-up with a semi-see-through orange dress in a classy hotel lobby. The man leers at the woman for a while, takes out his smartphone, and sneaks a picture of the woman from a distance. In the next scene, we see the man hanging out in his hotel room. From the window of his room, he catches a glimpse of the woman again. He takes out his smartphone and pulls out the application - Momo. Using the feature “Searching Other Users in the Area,” he finds the same woman.

“Orange suits you,” he messages her flirtatiously, along with the picture he took earlier. The woman seems pleased, and the two flirt. The advertisement ends with the slogan, “Turning strangers into non-strangers. Momo, a Location-Based application Service.”

The erotic overtone of the video is obvious — the hotel, the dim lighting, the woman’s seductive clothing, the message sent by the man, it is not difficult for viewers to imagine that the young couple would end up spending the night together (T. Liu, 2016).

Dating apps like Momo gained a reputation as a “genius tool for getting laid” (*yuepao shenqi*) — the complete opposite of the serious and legitimate image that dating websites have cultivated in the courtship market. The “immoral” reputation of dating apps appears to be widespread amongst popular discourse (X. Chen, 2020; Solis & Wong, 2019; Xu & Wu, 2019) and had led to condemnation by the Chinese Communist Party’s Propaganda and Ideological Work Directorate. The increase in erotic photos and pornographic content on dating apps had also gradually drawn the attention of the National Office Against Pornographic and Illegal Publications and finally attracted a heavy administrative penalty with orders to remove chats with explicit sexual discussions (T. Liu, 2016). Dating apps were also periodically taken down for months due to their “pornographic content.” Rela, a dating app for gay and queer women, was temporarily taken off the shelves in 2017, allegedly because of its involvement in an organized protest calling for marriage equality in Shanghai as well (Chan, 2021). In short, the Chinese government has attempted to “sanitize” mobile dating apps in response to “lewd values” that go against the Chinese code of conduct in, for example, what it means to be a spouse, a filial son or daughter, and a responsible member of society.

Since then, dating apps have launched a series of advertising and rebranding campaigns to clean up their names and rebuild their “integrity” so as to avoid the “wrath” of the Chinese government. For example, SOUL’s (a popular dating app) new tagline is now the “SOULcial metaverse for young generation” ([soulapp.cn](http://soulapp.cn)) and it tries to brand itself as a social media app even though it still largely operates like a dating app. All the informants I spoke to from the SOUL app

were aware of the rebranding and still treated it like the pre-rebrand dating app they knew. The shifting facets of dating websites and dating apps I have pointed to are the result of the complicated relationship between Chinese dating apps, Chinese dating websites, and the Chinese state. Together they have created a unique background for Chinese dating app culture.

### **1.3 Researching Online and Offline**

Most of the data, materials, and evidence cited in this dissertation come from interviews that I conducted between 2018 and 2021 with eighty individuals aged 17 to 38, the vast majority of whom are Chinese. In total, I talked to 42 men and 38 women, in varying degrees of depth. Some gave me a one-off interview that lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to 4 hours, while others became key informants that I found myself relying upon throughout this research and communicated with on and offline on multiple occasions.

#### **1.3.1 During the Pandemic**

The bulk of the conversations and interviews that make up the majority of this research happened between 2019 and 2020 while the coronavirus-19 pandemic was ongoing. Even at the time of writing in 2021, China's border is still closed to international visitors. After gaining my IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval to conduct both online research and fieldwork, I planned on doing my year-long fieldwork in China in early 2020 when the news of the pandemic hit. This meant that I had to change how I framed my project significantly. I was reluctant to do so. I was convinced that I would be allowed to resume fieldwork eventually, maybe in a few

months. Unconfirmed news that China would reopen its borders to international travelers was released every few weeks. I wrote excited emails to my advisor about the prospect of resuming fieldwork soon. I did not renew the apartment lease I had rented near the university, and opted to live in a friend's apartment temporarily, in anticipation of going to China soon. I sold most of my belongings and lived out of my suitcase. Every time I argued with my newfound roommate due to the stress of an unexpectedly long-term living arrangement, I was afraid that I would be thrown out during a time where we were supposed to be quarantined.

“Surely, this would all be temporary,” I told myself, “Much like a dream.”

In the meantime, I continued to conduct online fieldwork, which to my surprise, wove extremely rich tapestries of narratives and images — especially during the pandemic. I found online users to be much more willing to talk to me about their life experiences than before. They graciously shared the minutiae of their everyday lives without the distractions and heavy time-demands of their pre-quarantine lives. The online research progress cheered me up considerably.

I started online research by creating dating app profiles (male and female) on Tantan, SOUL, Momo, and Tinder. I submitted both "male" and "female" profiles to access both male and female users. In most dating apps, only “male” users can see female users and vice versa, hence the necessity for me to create a “male” profile despite identifying as a woman. Depending on the specific topic I was researching at the time, I uploaded posters detailing my interest. I explained that I was “a Ph.D. candidate in an anthropology program from an American university looking to research XX topic in relation to online dating” and that I “would love to talk to you about said topic.” This accompanied my main profile picture to recruit participants. I used bright colors in my poster, to be as eye-catching as possible, so as to stand out in a sea of profiles and encourage users to pause to read the poster and my profile.

Both of my profiles clearly stated my research and gender identity. Since this ethnographic research is based on my involvement on dating apps as a “research user” and not abstracted observation devoid of my presence, my online identity represented my actual-world embodiment. Falsifying or misrepresenting my identity as a female anthropologist would otherwise have prevented me from taking our interactions from the 2D dating app space to the 2.5D space of video interview calls. As such, transparency was crucial for the acquisition of ethnographic knowledge (Boellstorff, 2015). Engagement with my own identity also allowed me to produce reflexive scholarship (Abu-Lughod, 2008; Adjepong, 2019; Kondo, 1986; Lincoln, González y González, & Aroztegui Massera, 2016).

To further prepare for online ethnography, I paid for premium subscriptions on each dating app. These were all location-based applications and would have indicated that I was in the United States and showed profiles near me. However, by paying for premium subscriptions, I could set my location to Shanghai (my field site). Dating apps were otherwise free for use. I was able to filter prospective contacts based on the available presets for the age range of people I was interested in meeting.

While some conversations occurred over dating apps, many people felt more comfortable chatting over WeChat. WeChat is the most popular social media app and messaging platform used in China. It is the equivalent of Facebook but a more powerful mobile version that Chinese use on a daily basis to transfer payments, call for rideshares, make reservations at restaurants, etc. Using WeChat, my participants and I communicated through video call, chat, or voice messages. WeChat also has a very useful function — it helps translate messages with a simple click and at no expense. Whenever one of my interlocutors wanted to introduce me to a new Chinese colloquialism, the app was able to translate it for me very quickly and vice-versa. This made the chatting process

more seamless than it otherwise would have been, despite my advanced speaking and reading ability in Chinese.

Depending on the interlocutor's comfort level, we would communicate through chat, send each other voice messages, do voice calls, or video calls. I learned that interlocutors often preferred to send multiple voice messages, when communicating difficult concepts or to relay emotional experiences. WeChat also has an auto-transcription function for voice messages as part of its accessibility features which I used for transcribing these voice messages.

### **1.3.2 Before the Pandemic**

In the summers of 2018 and 2019 I conducted pre-dissertation fieldwork in Shanghai. Even before my pre-dissertation fieldwork and prior to pursuing my PhD at the University of Pittsburgh, I had conducted related research on the “leftover women” phenomenon and parental matchmaking (in People's Park) in Shanghai while obtaining my MSc at Oxford University and my BBA at Hua Zhong Normal University in Wuhan. Given my previous research experience in Shanghai, it was the ideal site to study dating apps as well. Shanghai is a global and transnational city that attracts both Chinese and international migrants (Arkaraprasertkul, 2018; Farrer, 2011). Many of Shanghai's urbanites are displaced from other regions of China and have had more exposure to foreign technological influences and cultural imports. Shanghai is also a technological hub and highly reliant on mobile technology; for example, subways and other transportation systems are completely mobile-based (in terms of tickets and payments). Restaurant tables typically have QR codes where patrons can order and pay without interacting with servers in person, and mobile payment-only vending machines are common. The reliance on mobile technology and mobile payment yields phenomena like beggars soliciting donations using their QR codes. The unique

saturation of mobile technology in Shanghai people's daily lives thus reinforces Shanghai urbanites' effective use of mobile networking concerning various types of social connections, including dating apps.

In the sweltering summers of 2018 and 2019, I took up residence in a cramped Airbnb in Central Shanghai. Living space is premium in Shanghai, and I wanted to be located centrally, to match with users as centrally as possible. That way, I could also meet as many interlocutors as possible in my short time there. I often met participants at coffee shops, restaurants, or sometimes bars. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese or sometimes in English. I am a native Chinese speaker but struggled with local dialect that constantly changes and is largely informal. Whenever I encountered an expression I was unfamiliar with; I asked them to explain it or to write it down so I could look up later, especially if the interlocutor was deeply engaged in the conversation and I did not want to interrupt the conversation.

These “face to face” real life conversations ranged from informal chats over lunch/dinner to semi-structured interviews over a non-alcoholic beverage. I took notes and recorded interviews for semi-structured interviews; in fact, I was largely expected to do so by my interviewees to lend it an air of authority. I remember a participant looking over at my phone, waiting for me to press record so that we could start. However, due to the nature of the research topic, which is extremely intimate and emotional, semi-structured interviews in public did not always allow participants to relax sufficiently for them to “let loose.” Over dinner or in a more casual setting, I found that interlocutors enjoyed the process a lot more. They came to see me as a “future love doctor” because I was going to earn my Ph.D. on a topic related to intimacy. They treated me as a person they could vent to, what is known as a “tree-hole” (see also chapter 2). They thought of me as a place to deposit their secrets; they were promised anonymity so they could confide in me about their dating

app troubles and adventures, they wanted opinions on their latest beau, and were curious about my dating app experience in the United States. In these cases, I relied on memory and took down notes promptly upon my return to my apartment.

#### **1.4 Research Identity Online and Offline**

In the writing and conceiving of this dissertation, I was, of course, not entirely a stranger - not to China, nor dating apps. Nevertheless, I have chosen a few elements of myself to present here, that are perhaps consequential to both the how and the what of my data collection. As my name might suggest, I look and am Chinese. I also spent four years in Wuhan during my undergraduate education. I “pass” as being local in China, although perhaps not as Shanghainese, because of my more Southern Chinese accent. I belong to the Malaysian Chinese ethnic group, a minority in Malaysia that are mostly descendants of Southern Chinese immigrants who arrived in Malaysia between the early nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth centuries. However, in certain conversations with certain people, my foreignness is revealed, over time, as I used Malaysian Mandarin slang and colloquial expressions instead of current local ones — the equivalent of saying “loo” instead of “restroom” in the United States (people understand what I mean, but also know that I am not a local). At the same time, I was a foreigner who had studied in the UK and the US. Both appearing Chinese, and at the same time marking myself through my accent and jovial speech as foreign, opened up opportunities to meet people and for people to open up to me (Jacobs-Huey, 2002; Kondo, 1986; Narayan, 1993).

However, my presentation of self as a young female anthropologist studying dating apps affected how I was treated, in both negative and positive ways. As a young woman researcher

studying dating apps, I was aware of the threat of being exposed to sexual violence. A study-based in the US has shown that 88.8% out of all study participants that reported current or past use of dating apps experienced at least one incident of technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV), which includes unwanted sexual advances, sexual harassment, gender/sexuality-based abuse, sexual coercion, and rape experienced due to technology that connected the victim to the perpetrator (Echevarria, 2021). Women also reported experiencing significantly more sexual violence than men on heterosexual dating apps and outside dating apps.<sup>3</sup> Anticipating unwanted advances, I had taken the precaution that many female anthropologists before me have done when going into the field — flaunting a relationship/marriage (fictitious or not) on my dating app profile and on my WeChat. I had peppered my WeChat page with photographs that indicated that I was in a romantic relationship and I updated it regularly to indicate that the relationship was “fresh” and ongoing. Despite the precautions, the research findings cited above aligned with my experience. Even though it was easier for me to initiate conversations with men, I was also most anxious about talking to new potential male participants. I experienced digital sexual harassment and received unwanted sexually explicit images, comments, and messages on dating apps on many occasions. Some dating apps had filters, so they waited to take the conversation to WeChat before sending me explicit images. I also experienced several counts of sexual aggression and coercion from dating apps where potential male participants sent me pictures of their private body parts without consent. I responded that I was in a happy relationship and was only interested in research.

---

<sup>3</sup> However, it is important to note that LGBTQ+ members experienced significantly more TFSV than heterosexual participants.

That would deter some, but others nonetheless sent gender-based offensive and/or degrading messages. Very quickly, I learned to be more skittish, and I blocked users at the smallest hint of threat or harassment.

As a young woman anthropology PhD student, the legitimacy of my research was often questioned. I noticed that this repeatedly happened among the men in the dating apps I studied. They asked, “Why would someone in academia study something as frivolous as dating apps?” Their curiosity was often the reason why they matched with my research profile and started conversing with me in the first place. It led to a few invaluable informants. However, this dismissiveness was not universal among all male dating app users I encountered. Several expressed sincere interest and saw the potential in the study; they waxed lyrical about the gendered power dynamics that they observed during their time on dating apps. Female dating app users matched with the research profile were similarly extremely interested in the subject and often were the ones who volunteered the most time talking to me, sometimes spending months texting back and forth with me about their thoughts on dating apps.

However, what surprised me most was the question of legitimacy posed by my fellow male academics. I recall an interaction where a former male-colleague commented derisively that I should bed Chinese men during my research, and that I must have a fetish for Chinese men to study them. In the fall of 2021, a male sociologist who heard that I was studying dating apps commented, “You call that research? I wonder how many people watch porn and call it research too?” Over the years, I have discussed this issue with other academics who studied dating apps. Consistently, male dating app researchers have not experienced the same question of legitimacy that female researchers like me have experienced. However, I also took comfort in and benefited from my identity as a young woman. Furthermore, my intersectional identity — as an ethnic

Chinese from Malaysia who has been educated in China and the West — helped me gain access to stories from my female informants that they might not have otherwise shared with someone who was more “like” them. They often assumed I had progressive “foreign” views but could still relate to Chinese women since I shared similar experiences.

In short, every story is told, framed, and interpreted from a particular position (Haraway 1988). The informants’ recounting of their experiences was necessarily influenced by my presence and probing, and I, as a researcher, actively participated in the co-construction of their narratives. Throughout the dissertation, I highlight both the limitations, but also the kind of stories that could be shared with me because of my personal identity, as I have already begun to do above.

## **1.5 Organization of the Chapters**

The chapters of this dissertation build an ethnographic account of the dating app experience in Shanghai. The dissertation has five chapters in total including this Introduction, which has presented the background, key terms, and the main objectives of this study. Chapter 2 “The coolness of anti-purposefulness: Understanding the what and the why of dating app users’ motivations” begins by interrogating the motivations of Chinese dating app users. During my research, I quickly noticed that I received mostly non-committal and ambiguous or mostly “anti-purposeful” answers when I asked directly about people’s motivations. I therefore explore what I call the coolness of being “anti-purposeful” on dating apps in the Chinese context. I argue that being anti-purposeful is part of the dating script within the dating app ecosystem. This is grounded in the desire to avoid being labelled desperate and as a way to manage disappointment when the process of partner-searching prove tiresome and lengthy.

Chapter 3 “Purposefully matching with foreigners: nationalism, penis obsession, female hypergamy, and navigating ‘white junk’” provides an online ethnographic account of dating app users who are interested in “purposefully” using dating apps for dating. In these cases, they are specifically trying to forge Chinese-foreigner relationships. Based on interviews, I discuss the commonly invoked topics of sex, masculinity, and the trope of penis differences between men of different nationalities. This is tied, I argue, to the nationalistic discourse of domination of women’s bodies within international dating dynamics. The chapter also discusses another salient topic from my interviews — the maintenance of female hypergamy and the strategies used by Chinese women to uphold female hypergamy by seeking men they deem “better” when they are not able to find suitable ones locally.

Chapter 4 “Double liminality: Dating app space during the COVID- 19 quarantine period in China” looks at dating apps through the frame of “purpose” during the pandemic. I ask what happens when dating apps’ primary purpose - to help people meet offline - is rendered impossible because of mandatory quarantine when dating app users could not meet in real life. Using the concept of liminality, I examine how and why Chinese use dating apps to combat a period of quarantine liminality and post-quarantine liminality. I argue that in an ambiguous space [dating apps] and period [quarantine], dating app users find new ways to derive meaning from apps that were originally designed to facilitate in-person meetings.

In chapter 5, the Conclusion, discusses the four core themes that emerged during fieldwork: (1) how purpose can be both purposeful and anti-purposeful in the pursuit of intimacy (2) the adaptiveness of digital artifact users (3) the tension between tradition and modernity, and (4) how it is important for the field of anthropology to be incorporated into user experience research within

industry. This is largely because the dating app experience is not uniform but localized – something the user experience research industry would benefit from focusing on.

## 2.0 Anti-purposefulness: Understanding Dating App Users' Motivations

*"As carnal knowledge works its way into cultural patterns, it supplies endless material for thought, especially when it appears in narratives - dirty jokes, male braggadocio, female gossip, bawdy songs, and erotic novels. In all these forms, sex is not simply a subject but also a tool used to pry the top off things and explore their inner works. It does for ordinary people what logic does for philosophers: it helps make sense of things" — Robert Darnton (2002, p. 203)*

If one is familiar with dating app motivation studies, be it in the context of China or other parts of the world, then one quickly notices that respondents often express ambiguous or ambivalent motivations for their participation in dating apps. Even if one is not familiar with the scholarly work on the subject, by simply asking a dating app user about their motivations, they will usually attribute their dating app usage to noncommittal or non-purpose driven motivations, such as boredom or “just checking it out.” For clarity, I define ambiguous motivations as motivations that lack *mudixing* (purposefulness). As described in the previous chapter, in the Chinese dating context, the notion of *mudixing* describes a direct and overt relationship-seeking practice more prevalent on marriage websites, parental matchmaking, or among the more tactless dating app users (Chan, 2020).

The ambiguous answers that users often express do not prevent Chinese dating app researchers from continuing to ask what motivates heterosexual users to use dating apps (Chan, 2020, 2021; Chin, 2015; De Seta & Zhang, 2015; Solis & Wong, 2019; Xu & Wu, 2019). Unfortunately, however, there is no consensus among Chinese dating app researchers about what in fact motivates heterosexual users to use dating apps. This could be due to the relatively narrow

timeframes during which their studies were conducted, as dating app behavior and motivation might shift over time. The differences might also be due to the method of inquiry. Given the nature of this topic, it can be sensitive and personal. The researcher's relationship with informants can also vary. For example, some researchers might have a more trusting and intimate relationship with their informants, whereas other researchers may not have established the same sense of rapport. In this research, as with most long-term anthropological fieldwork, I found that users opened up to me more over time, just as they did with one another. This could be one of the key reasons why dating app users often seem to provide ambiguous or less "personal" answers to surveys regarding their motivations (at least initially), such as the desire to find an emotional or sexual partner. During my study of dating apps in China, I conducted longitudinal ethnographic research between 2017 and 2021. I sought to understand the range of factors that contributed to users' stated motivations for using such apps.

At the nascent stage of the research, I posted an open-ended survey questionnaire on an active community page on SOUL, a popular Chinese dating app whose name refers to finding one's "soulmate." My post asked users to tell me why they think people use dating apps. Two hundred and sixty-nine users responded with their motivation for using dating apps. The four most common comments were (in descending order): (1) For emotional and mental release; (2) to relieve boredom; (3) to date (for sex or relationships); and (4) to find a marital partner. Although 'searching for sex' was ranked lower, I found that some respondents who stated that their motivation for using dating apps was to find an emotional/mental release or to relieve themselves of boredom had indeed engaged in occasional casual sex with people they met through the app, when the opportunity presented itself. All responses were anonymous. This exploratory quantitative data aligns with the qualitative data. A majority of interviewees similarly mentioned

using dating apps for non-dating purposes, such as seeking a "release" and to relieve "boredom" during initial interactions. Drawing on my interviews with dating app users and my analysis of the digital infrastructure that evolved around them, I argue that their motivations are complex and changing. Users may also have placeholders or stand ins for their ultimate goal of finding a partner worth uninstalling the app for. Here, I refer to "partner" in a more open-ended nature. It refers to monogamous sex partners, friends with benefits, potential marital partners, people with whom one may be more emotionally invested with, or even just friends. The end goal and measure of "success" is usually the deletion of the app. This is not uncommon in the dating app world. Hinge, one of the most successful dating apps in the U.S., markets itself as the app that is "designed to be deleted" (Nieuwenhuis, 2020).

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part dives deep into the motivations for using the app as "a form of release" and as a response to "boredom" — the two most cited ambiguous motivations found in interviews and the open-ended survey question posted on SOUL, the second part focuses on the more macro mechanism behind the general production of ambiguity of motivations.

In the "form of release" subsection (what Chinese dating app users call "tree-holing"), I explore the mechanism of "strangership" behind tree-holing. I look at how strangership facilitates the exchange of intimate details over dating apps among strangers as a stepping stone to searching for a partner. In the "boredom" subsection, I explore the mechanism of play behind this motivation. Play can be defined as an attempt by Chinese dating app users to subvert purposefulness, instead, users can focus on the process that evokes pleasurable sensations (Chin, 2011). In a summary of Huizinga's (1955) work on play, Henricks (2006: 185) argues: "To play is to take on the world, to take it apart, and frequently to build it anew. So understood, play for Huizinga is a protest against

determinism, a claim that humans need not merely endure existential conditions but can reform these according to their own desires and insights.” I examine how through using dating apps, users were able to capitalize on the app’s affordances to simultaneously seek a long-term partner while exploring different modes of intimacy as a form of play. Furthermore, dating apps used as tools for play minimizes the appearances of purposefulness—to oneself and to others. This is a useful strategy that contributes to one’s success in finding a partner in dating apps.

Part one also serves as an in-depth exploration into the development of these particular variants of ambiguous motivations framed in a Chinese context. This is not intended to be an exhaustive documentation of all the ambiguous motivations found in the Chinese dating context. However, it helps to “dis-ambiguate” seemingly ambiguous motivations. The theoretical mechanisms or analytical concepts of “strangership” and “play” also serve to lend weight to what might otherwise be dismissed as just frivolous responses (because of how ambiguous they are).

In the second section, I explain how the production of ambiguity is ultimately rooted in the fear of appearing desperate or driven by purposefulness. I argue that the production of ambiguity is a coping mechanism for the time-intensive process that is required to search for a partner on dating apps. While finding a partner is the primary goal, most users’ time on the app is in fact spent on extraneous activities that they consider nonetheless emotionally and sexually beneficial.

## 2.1 Part One: Exploring the Main Ambiguous Motivations

### 2.1.1 Form of Release: Tree-holes and Strangers

*“Dating apps are a place to unload my garbage into. It is an emotional garbage trash can. After chucking all the trash here, I will be happier tomorrow. The unhappiness I feel for that day will be resolved before I go to bed.” — Gentle Ruby Rider, a male dating app user.<sup>4</sup>*

One of the most mentioned key motivations for using dating apps in China is to utilize them as a source to find confidants to vent to, or as they call it — a tree-hole (树洞). A tree-hole refers to a "place" where users unload their real-life frustrations onto a stranger by venting (or unloading their “garbage”) as a form of self-care.

While Gentle Ruby Rider saw dating apps as a place for him to release negative emotions accumulated throughout the day, other users see matches on dating apps as a source to recall the day's events.

Sandwich Sweetheart, a female user, said:

"I use dating apps to find a person to tell them what happened in my day. Through this, I have made a few friends." This is not uncommon, as a few other users communicated that matches on dating apps are vessels for them to talk about their daily lives.

---

<sup>4</sup> Some informants preferred to use their online pseudonyms. Some dating apps also hide users' age. Therefore, some informants are only represented by their pseudonym and gender, without other discernible information about themselves.

Why do Chinese internet users use dating apps as a platform to find reciprocal venting targets? This question is especially important because the Chinese app market provides several alternative apps such as forums, micro-blogging platforms, WeChat, and other social media platforms for general communication. My argument is that dating apps are designed to bring *strangers* together. Furthermore, it also makes the subsequent cutting or breaking of ties with strangers easier. This creates a broader understanding of what a “stranger” is and can mean. A stranger is someone that you can be intimate with, physically and emotionally, without the tethers of familiarity or kinship connection - this is counter to the previous Chinese understanding of what a stranger is (Yang, 1994; Fei, 1992). Unlike the more “traditional” family and community networks described in the previous chapter, these intimate strangers are from different and separate social contexts. In other words, tree-holing with strangers has become part of dating repertoire in modern Chinese courtship rituals. By entering the voices of dating app users, this section provides examples of how new social network technologies beg the revaluation of how we envision strangership in China.

#### **2.1.1.1 How Tree-holing Manifest through Strangership**

How do dating apps uniquely facilitate or encourage users to see them as an avenue to vent? Many respondents highlighted the “stranger” aspect as the key component. I argue that dating apps’ affordance for anonymity is the key factor behind them being used as a source to find a person to vent to. This anonymity goes both ways. They are comforted by their anonymity. They are also comforted by the prospect that the person they are venting to is also anonymous. This creates a less intimidating environment for them to confide in one another on topics otherwise perceived to be too sensitive to divulge to individuals they know in real life.

In some instances, dating apps also provide an avenue for those who are more anxious in social settings to engage with other strangers in a safe and relaxed environment. Yan Xiaoliu echoes this particular sentiment. She said,

“This is a place for me to relax and de-stress. I am afraid to talk to people in real life, but I am very loquacious. The internet is a great way for me to talk in a relaxed state, without having to think about who is behind the screen.”

This fear of talking to people in real life was noted by Xu and Wu (2019)). One of the researchers' participants pointed out to them that the Chinese were unlike Americans. He said that Americans could strike up a conversation with strangers seemingly effortlessly but that this sort of openness does not come as easily to the Chinese. Therefore, dating apps help them to initiate conversations with strangers in a less intimidating manner.

The less intimidating environment, where it is expected that they will communicate with strangers, and where the connection is easy to break off if it becomes uncomfortable, is driven by dating app users' perceptions of online relationships formed on dating apps. They are relatively low-risk interactions where they can share more personal thoughts without fear of repercussions to their existing social network. Users tend to make a clear demarcation between “real-life” relationships and the strangers they meet online. I posit that the differentiation is as such: friends/family are perceived as a high-risk group, while strangers belong to a low-risk group. Users view dating apps as an avenue primarily filled with single strangers, instead of their friends and family.

Little Pig that Refuses to Lose, a male user, explained,

“Dating apps are like a bigger version of WeChat [The most popular social media messaging app in China]. A dating app is an entity that is removed from my real social life. If you

hit on someone or talk about personal things on a dating app, the cost is low, and you don't have to hold as much responsibility for the things you say."

Prophetic Angelo explained why these groups are being separated in this manner. He said, "I use dating apps to express my frustrations and feelings to strangers. This way, it doesn't affect my social circle."

Ling Yi, a female fashion buyer, said, "I can tell my matches the most ridiculous and vile things, and they won't be able to tell my employers, family members or friends. This is because my pictures are not on the dating app. I only put up an avatar. My name is a pseudonym too. So, what can they do but listen and maybe tell their friends about it? I don't care if they do!"

Chin (2015) similarly argues that online dating users demarcate the relationships online with the relationships offline to limit the potentially negative impact the online relationships could have on their offline ones. For example, in Simmel's influential essay "The Stranger," a stranger is viewed as unanchored from group ideals, can see society objectively, and receives surprising openness (Simmel, 1971).

Romantic Poor Cat, a female user, said, "It [dating app] is a place for me to talk openly, especially about things that I can't post or discuss in my regular social media accounts that my friends and family members follow [...] We are all strangers here. And because of that, we have nothing to lose when we are open with each other." I asked Romantic Poor Cat if the strangers she vents to on dating apps become *shuren* (熟人). *Shuren* could be loosely translated to a "cooked" person. Metaphorically, it means a person who is described as a stranger (raw) in contrast to a close friend/acquaintance with family-like attachments who is referred to as "cooked."

She replied, "I don't see them as *shuren*, even though I tell them things I wouldn't even tell my family members and friends. I guess I see them more as non-strangers."

This interesting dynamic is not lost on dating app companies. Momo, one of China's most popular dating apps, centers the transition between stranger to non-stranger (instead of *shuren*) in their promotional videos. In 2011, they made an advertisement video with the slogan — “turning strangers into non-strangers: Momo, a location-based application” (T. Liu, 2016). According to Liu, this relationship dynamic within social media was revolutionary during the time. This is because most prevalent social media platforms before Momo — such as QQ, WeChat, and Renren — facilitated interactions through *shuren*-networking. *Shuren*-networking is networking through a web of “cooked” family members or friendships. Scholars argue that social relations in traditional Chinese society are all centered upon the *shuren* principle (Fei, Han, & Wang, 2012). After China's market transformation in the 1980s, *shuren*-networks have been criticized for promulgating bribery and corruption. *Shuren*-networks have also been seen as a major deterrent of a healthy market economy (Douglas Guthrie, 1998; Hom & Xiao, 2011; L. Li, 2011). As such, T. Liu (2016)) insightfully argues that Chinese dating apps' focus on stranger-networking that crystallizes a point in time, where socially interacting with strangers is encouraged by the emerging entrepreneurial ethos of post-socialist China.

#### **2.1.1.2 Why are Dating Apps for Strangers?**

Since dating apps utilize location-based service technology as their foundation, they highlight their primary function — locating *nearby* strangers (not just any strangers). As a result of the apps' designs and emphasis on reaching out to strangers in close proximity, a cultural discourse of stranger communication is encouraged. One's distance from another user is emphasized as one of the potential match's personal details. It also serves as the basic information to facilitate stranger communication and relationship formation between dating app users. Other social network platforms typically connect through an existing shared network (Xu & Wu, 2019).

For example, when an Instagram user taps into a new profile, the profile will list a small preview of the user's mutual "friends."

The Romantic Poor Cat said, "Dating apps are unique because they are a place where people have absolutely no connection to each other beyond some form of relative distance and a desire to find another person with whom to form a connection. Other sites usually have a theme or specific element that brings people together; a commonality, so to speak. For example, food-related forums would bring together food lovers. Sports-related social media will bring sports lovers together. But dating apps? You get everyone. Nothing is tying us together beyond just a need for human connection."

Hence, the concept of strangership offers a useful starting point for thinking through this relationship dynamic. Discussions between strangers are often made in opposition to the more established categories of relations such as kinship or a person with whom one is familiar (*shuren*). Within the anthropology of China, we see Fei et al. (2012)) emphasizing and centering on social interactions based on the concept of familiarity. This familiarity is based primarily on kinship — a mechanism that cannot be used with strangers. In Yang's (2016) study of early reform-era Beijing relationships or "connections" that involve forms of favors and reciprocity referred to as *guanxi*, she offers an alternative mechanism for *guanxi* formation that does not require the foundation of a kinship — but rather relies on mutual similarity. *Guanxi* can be defined as relationships of social connections that are built on pre-established ties and are maintained through the skillful mobilization of social obligation and reciprocity for social or calculated instrumental ends (Smart,

1993; M. M.-h. Yang, 1988).<sup>5</sup> M. M.-h. Yang (2016)) notices that mutual strangers begin their *guanxi* (reciprocal relations) by establishing whether or not they share any commonalities around the following: schooling, geography, or employers. This is done to reshape the relationship from one of stranger into one of *shuren*, based on a common link (M. M.-h. Yang, 2016). In fact, some scholars argue that *guanxi* literally means establishing a relationship “after passing the gate” by invoking a connection between the two (D. Y. Lee & Dawes, 2005; Y. Li, 2020). This sets up a familiar script for mutual strangers to transition each other into their *guanxi* network. *Guanxi*, to some extent, can be imagined as a source of intangible resource or capital – much like social capital (Y. Li, 2020). This is because social capital similarly refers to the sum of abstract but tangible resources that services units who own a durable network of mutual acquaintances, recognitions, and relationships (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). While not in its entirety, Li argues that there are important connections between *guanxi* and the concept of social capital. This is in line with arguments made by other scholars studying *guanxi* in China (Kipnis, 1997; Smart, 1993; M. M.-h. Yang, 2016).

Dating apps in China provide an interesting case study that propels me to expand on the theory of strangership. Some dating app users intentionally seek out online stranger relations with people with whom they have nothing in common. Nevertheless, they still desire to convert these

---

<sup>5</sup> Cultivation of *guanxi* can be facilitated by exchange of favors, gifts, and meals, it is however not key to the formation of one beyond shared network. Due to material exchange, *guanxi* can be viewed as a form of bribery. However, the dynamic is nuanced between transactors – if a relationship only involves material interest and is characterized by immediate payment and a one-time occurrence without a continuing relationship, the exchange is then framed as bribery (Smart 1993; Yang 1988).

strangers into more intimate relationships as lovers, friends (with or without benefits), romantic partners, marital partners, or tree holes. In this case study, it is possible for strangers with no commonalities to form a connection wherein they feel comfortable enough to share intimate thoughts—all while remaining “strangers” to each other, without the explicit desire of deriving social capital from them.

In this case, strangership is anchored within an environment (the virtual space) that encourages ambiguous stranger relations. By default, profiles highlight pictures, nicknames, and distances within dating apps such as Momo, Tantan, and SOUL. Due to the nature of a platform’s design and emphasis on distance, it drives stranger relations without mutual connections. This status of strangership is difficult to eradicate. Even after sharing or venting their personal thoughts, users still see their matches from these dating apps as “strangers.”

Shelley, a 27-year-old female graduate student, often talked about how intimacy does not necessarily break down the barrier of strangership if the relationship forms through dating apps. I first met Shelley through the dating app Tantan. She expressed interest in my research, and we subsequently stayed in contact for three years. We often exchanged stories about our dating app experiences. Sitting in a trendy cafe in the French Concession near The Bund in Shanghai, Shelley pointed to a couple sitting across from us who looked like they were on their first date. The man was wearing a suit and tie and looked noticeably nervous. The woman had her arms rigidly pinned to her side, and their conversation was peppered with silence.

About the couple, Shelley said,

Perhaps they met on a dating app. The funny thing is that these are probably people who have never met before and are super awkward with each other in real life. But before the meeting, they probably had a lot of deeply personal

conversations. They are probably each other's tree-holes. They have probably shared stories about their childhood, struggles at work, and concerns about their families. And yet, here they are, sitting across from each other, awkward as if they are still strangers. The truth of the matter is, they are indeed strangers. They have nothing connecting them, no commonalities, no family or friend connections. They could tell each other all sorts of things, things they wouldn't tell people they are close with, things you supposedly tell your true friends.

As the couple stood up to leave together and walked off in the same direction, Shelley added, "Perhaps they are going to a hotel to have sex now. I have certainly done that. Tell my match my secrets, share an awkward night of intercourse, realize that I have somehow scratched at that precarious wall that may end the stranger status. Then I just erase them from my life."

I asked: "Can these people still be strangers? After physical intimacy?"

She reflected on that and said,

"Sometimes, I feel even more like a stranger after sleeping with my matches. I lay there, next to the person I have spilled my guts to for the past few months online, never quite imagining his physical self. I should want to sleep with someone and share my body after sharing so much of myself, in soul and spirit, right? But it just feels empty. It just feels even more alienating. The good thing is, after that, I can simply stop talking to them. It is so easy to delete the app and disappear. No mutual friends, no real-world connection, whatsoever."

I asked, "What about all that you have shared with him? Would you not want to remain friends with him?"

She said, "Not when it is so easy to cut ties and simply try again. The person is a stranger. After all, I don't owe a stranger anything. That is what the app is designed for, after all, to meet strangers, lots of them."

Shelley saw the platform's design and affordances as the guardrail that facilitates and drives stranger relations without mutual connections. Even after sharing or venting their personal problems, some users still see them remaining in stranger status. This does not mean that they will continue to remain strangers. While it is possible that the couple remains as "strangers," it is possible for it to develop beyond strangership. Shelley has had matches develop into boyfriends, some of which resulted in amicable breakups. These matches are now her close friends. I was introduced to one of them - Sheng. Sheng also expressed that he did not fully break the stranger barrier with Shelley until they were introduced to each other's social networks.

According to Sheng: "It was a big step. It was an official step to sever the dating app tie, the tie of two strangers. We stopped becoming strangers that day."

The app is designed bring strangers together. Combined with the ease of cutting ties with strangers, it also creates a broader allowance for what a stranger can mean. A stranger could be someone you can be intimate with physically. A stranger could also know intimate details about your life. This is counter to how the Chinese previously defined a stranger: a person who does not share any kinship or familiarity connection (Yang, 1994; Fei, 1992). This demonstrates that the ascent of new social network technologies begs the reevaluation of how we envision strangership, and how scholarly ideas about it can be used to understand contemporary dating behaviors in China.

### 2.1.2 Boredom and Play

Extended interviews with users who first said that they use dating apps “to cure boredom” can be seen as using dating apps as a form of “play.” The theme of boredom permeates the dating app community as the normal mode of conduct; this causes users to be uncomfortable with prospective matches that are too forward about their purpose. This defeats the more casual playful atmosphere that the community has fostered. It may be the reason users see people who depart from the script of casualness by being too forward as being uncool. Considering that users who approach dating apps (in general) seriously are labeled uncool (as it reeks of desperation), users are deterred from expressing “looking for a partner” as their true motivation. This mechanism leads to users labeling more ambiguous motivations (e.g., boredom) as their primary reason for using dating apps, despite not being the key reason for them being active on them. Over time and after repeated failures, some users become less motivated to look for a partner. This prompts them to engage in play to pass the time while hedging their bets that a suitable match will eventually turn up.

In agreement with De Seta and Zhang (2015)), I find the recurrence of the terms 暧昧 *aimei* or 玩 (play) 暧昧 *wan aimei* (loosely translated to the warm feeling that one experiences at the “crush stage”) among dating app users when describing low stake interactions. These superficial, playful, and flirtatious conversations remain in the digital space. De Seta and Zhang argue that users engage in *aimei* to pass the time and “fight the boring spells of everyday life and transit” (2015: 179). I expand on that idea and argue that many users' key motivations are still, nonetheless, to find themselves a partner (whatever form that may take). Thus, they engage in mindless

flirtations or occasional sexual liaisons to cure the boredom of the slow process of the search compounded by the boredom they face in their everyday lives.

I categorize these activities as "play." According to Huizinga (1955)), as noted above, play means to step out of "real life" and into a liminal realm to engage in activities that are "not serious", but can still be intense. According to Huizinga, "play" has the paradoxical status of being not serious, but a highly important part of the culture. The father of ludology — Caillois (2001)) — is also a protagonist for a more dichotomous definition. He sets play apart from regular societal activities. This is in spite of his criticism of Huizinga's exclusion of gambling as play. This non-seriousness does not mean that the activity is always treated as lackadaisical. The non-serious nature of play could be characterized by the experience of "human sovereignty" (Fink, Saine, & Saine, 1968).

"Man enjoys an almost limitless creativity; he is productive and uninhibited because he is not creating within the sphere of reality" (Fink et al., 1968, p. 24).

For such reasons, V. Turner (1974a)) designates modern play as a liminal activity. Activities of this type are marked off in many of the same ways as earlier symbolic events. Still, they encourage individual development, the novelty of the experience, and "subversion" of social authority, more than they do themes of communal participation and societal continuity.

Jessica, a 25-year-old woman working in a fashion supply chain, found the opportunity to kill her boredom by "playing," experimenting, and exposing herself to new experiences that are not "productive" in relation to the goal of looking for a partner at the time. Instead, she prioritized individual development and the novelty of the experience. Jessica phrased it as follows:

"No, I am not looking for a relationship. I am looking for nothing but everything. It is unconventional, for sure. I am looking for a fresh mindset, meaningful conversations, good sex,

chilled dates, or anything that brings me a feeling of ‘newness’ and triggers my inspiration and enthusiasm for life.”

While Jessica told me that she was not looking for a relationship and was “playing around,” this does not mean that it is not in some way productive to her efforts of finding a partner. She was also using this playful period to discover what she wanted in a future romantic relationship. She said,

“I am not looking for a relationship for now, as I don’t want to settle down, despite the abundance of choices on the app. I don’t want to entangle myself in a mess before I clearly figure out who I am, [what] my private boundary lines [are], and what kind of counterpart I would need in a relationship.”

Jessica was able to see her time on dating apps as a way to think about the different possibilities of living, being in contact with new perspectives and behaviors, all while being in a protected environment. All of these interactions were conducted in a flirtatious and playful tone. She said,

"It's a great way to make some friends. I also get to know people from different cultures, experiences, and occupational backgrounds. In general, it broadens my horizon when I get to know people's cool and advanced lifestyles, such as open relationships, bisexual or pansexual relationships, or even polygamy! Sometimes, I learn about awesome values I can adopt in my own life."

Jessica did not cite looking for a partner as her motivation. She explicitly said she was using dating apps *not to* look for a relationship. However, as our conversation continued, she revealed that she had been getting into several exclusive relationships in the past few months. The latest relationship had ended a month before our conversation.

This is a casual and noncommittal game of playing with romantic relationships with people who could become potential partners or individuals they have deemed as unsuitable for more serious emotional investment. Matches worthy of emotional investment are no longer part of the “not serious” realm. Instead, they are categorized by participants into the "real life" realm, because these relationships can potentially impact real life and can also carry material considerations.

This is in line with Donny's statement:

I divide the girls I match with into two categories. One is the playful category, the ones I flirt with shamelessly without having to consider the nitty-gritty of whether or not she comes from the right family, has the right background, or has similar financial capabilities. These are the girls I say the most depraved things to too, and I can unleash the beast in me. But I can have fun with these girls. Then there is the other kind of girls. These are the girls I would put in the serious category. I am on my best behavior, and I try to learn more about them in detail, such as their background, because this is the girl that I am potentially taking home to meet my folks. That doesn't mean I don't have sex with the ones I am serious about. It just means I am more patient when it happens.

His statement shows that his motivations are complex. He had a main motivation — to find a partner who he could potentially take home to his parents for their approval for marriage. However, this does not preclude him from "having some fun" and playing the role of a "beast." Otherwise, he would not be able to experience this in his real-life or with potential matches that might transition into the real-life realm. In "Deep Play," anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that cockfighting in Bali is a way for Balinese to express aspects of human experience that are suppressed by the officially approved culture, such as aggression, death, and rebellious disorder

(Geertz, 1972). Donny describes his online dating experience with girls who are part of the "not serious" realm as women that he can be a "beast" with and do or say depraved things. Donny is aware that the way he treats women whom he "plays" around with is counter to officially approved culture (akin to cockfighting in Bali), but he finds it to be a freeing experience— an experience where he is free to not be in "serious" mode, where he has to be on his best behavior because the stakes are higher.

In short, I sought to draw attention to the motivation of “boredom” to demonstrate that it is a lot more complex than it first appears. This response hides a cornucopia of reasons as to why these individuals use dating apps — including reasons that are beyond the scope of this section. However, it also shows that when users respond to the question of why they use dating apps that they are motivated by “boredom”, researchers need to probe deeper into what that means below the surface. In part two, I take the first step into looking from a more theoretical or macro-level at the actions behind the curtain - the production of ambiguity in motivation.

## **2.2 Part Two: The Mechanisms Behind Motivations**

*"Perhaps the ambiguity is a way we all hide our true vulnerable intentions. But, at the end of the day, we are humans, and we need love and companionship." — The Laughing Pig, male dating app user.*

In the course of this research, ambiguous motivations were often expressed when I asked dating app users why they were on dating apps. However, a pattern has also emerged through this longitudinal study. Informants who I maintained a relationship with over time often discussed less

ambiguous motivations (e.g., looking for a partner). I argue that ambiguous motivations serve as a coping mechanism. In this section, I discuss two rationales that prompted informants to cite ambiguous reasons as their motivations when first asked: One is to combat the stigma of desperation; and the second is as a coping mechanism for the time laborious process of looking for a partner. These two rationales are by no means the only ones. Yet, they serve as a starting point to consider how ambiguous motivations cited by dating app users within dating app studies are not primary, but secondary motivations.

### **2.2.1 To Combat the Stigma of Desperation**

When I first approached Donny, he said his motivation for using dating apps was to alleviate boredom. But after Donny was more comfortable confiding in me, he revealed that his motivation wasn't as simple as "to cure boredom." In later interviews, I asked Donny why he said he was using dating apps to "cure boredom" in the first place. He answered:

I guess it is because boredom is a very ambiguous word that encompasses a lot of how I feel. One of the main reasons I am bored is because I don't have a girlfriend to do things with. There are a lot of things that you can only do with a partner. So, dating apps can help me reduce boredom by helping me find a girlfriend. I am also bored because the search for a girlfriend in itself is a boring act. So, I get to have fun with some inconsequential girls. Coincidentally, that also helps to relieve the boredom I get from not having female companionship. Additionally, I didn't want to appear like I carry too much *mudixing* [single-minded purposefulness] when people ask me why I am on dating apps.

I argue that users reject matches who show strong *mudixing* because they may come across as desperate or socially ill-informed, particularly in what is expected to be a fun and casual online environment — someone that a potential match wouldn't be interested in. Users are also careful not to appear too pushy or desperate, as they recognize that this would make a bad impression. The fear of appearing "desperate" on dating apps is common, especially since there may already be a perceived stigma attached to dating app usage. For example, some researchers have found that online dating practices are associated with desperate people (Anderson, 2005; Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Duguay, 2017; Stephure, Boon, MacKinnon, & Deveau, 2009). The perceived image of “desperate dating app users” is a possible deterrent for users to express their explicit goal for being on dating apps, such as looking for a partner. I found that most users who said they use dating apps “to relieve boredom” during the initial interview stage often discussed “looking for a partner” as their main activity in the later course of the interview.

Tom was one of these informants. He worked as a nurse in Central Shanghai, and when we first started talking, he said that he used dating apps because he was bored. When pushed on why he couldn't just use a different app for that purpose, he waved me off. After a few more interactions and discussions about his dating app "shenanigans," I pointed out the contradiction between what he said he used dating apps for, and his actions. Tom was actively looking for a girlfriend. However, he would not turn down the opportunity for a hook-up if the opportunity presented itself. These are girls that he wouldn't pursue as girlfriends or for an ongoing relationship. However, it was clear that he was trying to meet a girlfriend through dating apps. Tom showed me different women's profiles and asked me if I thought they were "girlfriend material." These girls tended to be dressed more conservatively and did not have pictures Tom would deem as 骚 (racy). Tom had also previously found a girlfriend on a dating app. However, that relationship did not pan out. I

asked Tom why and he told me that he used dating apps for boredom when he clearly had other goals in mind.

He said,

"I suppose it is sort of a noncommittal placeholder answer. Because it is sort of true, using dating apps does help me relieve boredom. But relieving boredom is an effect of using dating apps rather than motivation. We weren't very close, and it wasn't easy to talk about emotional stuff. I don't want to come across like I cannot get a girl and resort to dating apps. I wanted to look cool in front of you."

Here, we see that Tom was careful not to reveal his desire to find a partner through dating apps for fear of being labeled uncool or seen as unattractive to the opposite sex. A scholar similarly found that American college students engage in participatory reluctance on the dating app Tinder (J. Lee, 2019). Restrictive emotionality and visual presentation work together in the performance of coolness. The greater the lack of emotionality in performance, the cooler the visible presentation. Lee compares this to card games; players should never show all their cards on the table to win. Similarly, even though a match already establishes both parties' interests in each other, the interest should be kept private to let the conversation flow. This is to avoid sounding "desperate."

This applies to female users as well. For example, Suqi, a marketing undergraduate student at a local university, said that women should avoid looking desperate because it affects how people perceive their attractiveness.

She said,

"In Chinese culture, women are supposed to be chased, and not the other round. Women are supposed to act coy and project a cooler image - someone that would give the people pursuing

her the cold shoulder. We even have a name for this kind of desirable woman - ice queen. When a woman is on a dating app, it already shows a level of 'caring,' and that sort of destroys the image of the ice queen. So, we try to deny even being on it. For my girlfriends and I, we would never say we are looking for a boyfriend. We would usually say we are bored or just having fun."

Later on, after more follow-up interactions, Suqi revealed to me that she was indeed trying to look for a boyfriend through dating apps.

Another study also found that American university students say that they downloaded the apps as a "fun" activity or as a joke (Hanson, 2021). By framing it this way, students could convince themselves and others that it was not how they wanted to meet romantic partners at first, but was simply a fun or frivolous activity. One of the scholar's informants, Amanda, felt that she did not want to appear desperate to find someone, especially people she knows. Due to Tinder's geo-locational function, users like Amanda would often see people she knows to appear on her selection, and vice versa. Users are thus digitally outed to each other as dating app users. Students used humor as a strategy to diffuse the situation. By couching the apps as something fun to do that could help relieve boredom, these students could avoid uncomfortable conversations that would occur from eventual matching with friends. As such, they framed their experience as a joke and an act of play instead of as a serious form of matchmaking. The scholar also noted that most of these students eventually met someone from the app in person. In line with Hanson (2021)), I argue that users are likely to give a "cool" answer like "for fun" or "to alleviate boredom" when queried about why they used dating apps. This is partly due to the lack of emotional depth and coolness attached to the answer, allowing users to avoid appearing desperate.

### 2.2.2 Coping Mechanism for the Time Intensive Process

Some informants claim they were using dating apps for more ambiguous reasons to subvert the image of being desperate to find a partner. However, some attributed the answer to a dilution of purpose over time, due to the slow-burning nature of looking for a partner on dating apps.

Li Shen, a male English language teacher, explained,

One ends up giving an ambiguous answer like 'because I am bored' or 'it is for tree-hole purpose' because these are goals that are more attainable in the short run. Most people download dating apps to look for a sex partner or long-term relationship partner for cheating... But looking for a suitable partner takes a very long time. You end up disappointed because you get hopeful when you find someone you think you might potentially have a future with, and then they end up not panning out. Eventually, you become jaded and just emotionally tired. So that purpose gets diluted, but it is still the main driver. It is the reason why we don't jump over to a non-dating app. Some who can't take it will uninstall it. The ones that remain have to adapt to survive. We need to convince ourselves that we are here for more attainable reasons to avoid getting broken down. In actuality, we want to find the one.

LiShen had initially told me that he used dating apps because he was bored. Over time, he opened up to me. He often lamented about how he felt discouraged while he was on dating apps. He did not get many matches. When he did get matches, they would eventually stop replying to his messages. His statement above showed that he was trying to convince himself that he was using dating apps for reasons other than his explicit goal of looking for a partner. In doing so, he was able to continue being on dating apps without feeling too discouraged. By claiming that he isn't

taking it very seriously, he minimized the negative feelings that dating apps caused him to feel through the lack of matches and fruitful interactions. It was also a way for LiShen to reclaim his sense of masculinity.

In real life, when you don't get females' interest, you can wave it off and say that we haven't had the 缘分 (fate) to meet yet, or that you don't get to meet many new people. On dating apps, you have no excuse. A limitless number of women are at your fingertips. So, if I still don't get any female interest, what is my excuse? What kind of a man am I that I cannot command much female attention? How unattractive must I be, I wonder. So, I try less because when I fail, I can say it is because I didn't give it my all, not because I am a failure. So instead of being emotionally vulnerable and saying that I am using dating apps to find the one, I tell myself and others that I am using it as a plaything... and the women on there as a tool to cure my boredom. I feel more manly when I think that way.

Despite getting more matches than men on dating apps, this insecurity is shared by the women I have talked to. In the summer of 2020, I was introduced to Bebe, who was working at one of Shanghai's largest insurance companies. Bebe was an avid user of dating apps. Upon introduction, she declared that she was using dating apps because she enjoys venting to strangers as tree holes. As we talked more, she was always steering our conversations towards how I have found romantic partners through dating apps in the past. She wanted to get advice on finding a boyfriend on dating apps because her relationships repeatedly fell through. It was more time-consuming to find a potential boyfriend than she initially imagined.

She said, "It is starting to affect my confidence. Am I so undesirable as a romantic partner that I keep failing to get a man to commit to me on these apps? There are plenty of men looking

for sex. I feel like they just want me for my body and not for me. I am in my early 30s now, and I feel somewhat pressured to get married. The speed of it all is very discouraging. Now, I tell myself that I am just using dating apps for fun. Suppose a romantic relationship comes out of it, great. If not, it is not a big deal. It is a mind trick I have developed."

My key informant, Shelley, thinks the interaction between technology and intimacy challenged one's expectations about the instant nature of most technological platforms that are meant to bring ease and speed to most transactions and interactions. She said,

"With most technology, things come pretty instantaneously. You can order anything, and it can be in front of your doorstep within two days. Appointments, flight ticket purchases, and even plastic surgery — these things can be set up online relatively quickly, just on your mobile phone. But dating apps, one assumes that you can find a relationship quickly, but that is not the reality. Instead, it inevitably breeds disappointment or insecurity. Perhaps that is why I lowered my expectations over time and settled for cruising it, in the hopes that just perhaps, a chance encounter will occur."

In sum, Chinese dating app users present the activities they engage in with dating apps as playful. This affects how they negatively view users who are more forward and too direct about their intentions (people with *mudixing*). Due to the negative connotation of "uncoolness" being attached to "seriousness" of seeking a partner, I argue that users are less inclined to reveal their true motivations to researchers or other app users for fear of being seen as uncool or too desperate. This mechanism facilitates the phenomenon of respondents providing ambiguous answers when dating app researchers query users about their motivations. Some users also find their motivation to look for a partner becoming diluted over time after repeated failures. This prompts them to engage in other activities within the apps to pass the time and cure boredom while hedging their

bets that a suitable match will eventually turn up. While partner searching is the primary goal, most users' time is spent on extraneous activities that are still beneficial to them in their own rights, such as sexual exchange, venting and letting off steam, or casual companionships, all of which might have mental health or stress relief benefits.

## **2.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has evaluated the more ambiguous, early, and easy answers users provide about their primary motivation for using dating apps when queried by their matches, social networks, and researchers. These include to tree-hole and to cure boredom. Many dating app researchers argue that "to pass the time" or "to relieve boredom" are key purposes, and they stop there or take it as the full answer (Chan, 2017; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). However, these answers deserve to be explored further through anthropological and ethnographic qualitative research over a longer period of time. As my extended longer-term interviews reveal, users tend to cite more ambiguous reasons like "to relieve boredom" or "to use as a tree-hole" as a convenient catch-all answer. These catch-all answers, which are most likely to be given when in surveys or one-time interviews with researchers they hardly know, aim to avoid revealing their more private and emotional motivations. Nevertheless, this does not discount the apps' affordance for providing the said functions (to cure boredom and as a tree-hole) to users.

For example, Chinese dating app users were able to capitalize on dating apps' user base that comprises strangers. They are able to unload their daily stresses by confiding with strangers or simply recounting their days. While dating app users spent most of their time on these activities, and often cited them, users who I got to know better over extended interactions that spanned weeks,

months or years, have said that these activities are "a placeholder" until a potential partner comes along (either online or in real life). Some Chinese dating app users also use this activity to determine whether the person who they “play” with will make a good potential partner. After repeated failures of finding a suitable match, some Chinese dating app users find their motivation to look for a partner diminished over time.

As the interviews and conversations cited above suggest, Chinese dating app users are more ambiguous about their motivations when first queried. Ambiguous motivations become a strategy for users to reclaim their "coolness," keep themselves motivated to search for a partner, not appear desperate, reduce the appearance of *mudixing*, or adhere to the more casual environment the dating app environment engenders. The nature of the topic is also very intimate. This often requires the researcher to have a closer, long-term relationship with the informants. This gives the research subject time to develop a trusting and more intimate relationship with the researcher. In this research, as is the case with most long-term anthropological fieldwork, I found that users opened up over time, just as they do with one another. This could be one of the key reasons dating app users often initially provide ambiguous answers regarding their motivations. It also echoes the process of gradually meeting and getting to know prospective partners online, similar to findings of earlier studies of couples who met through correspondence via emails or letters where individuals felt less pressure than if they were matched by family and friends (Constable, 2003).

I do not claim that all dating app users with ambiguous motivations have hidden and more complex agendas. However, within the scope of my research in China, I found that most of my informants had very complex feelings and analyses about their time using dating apps. They also have theories for the strategies they developed to cope with the mundanity of the search for potential partners. Using dating apps to cure boredom and as a tree-hole also serves as a strategy

users employ to continuously be active on dating apps to search for a partner. Even when users haven't achieved their true goal — looking for a partner — they can derive value or pleasure from the apps, such as access to a large source of emotional solace/sexual release, or to find a "placeholder partner" while waiting for the "real thing" to come along. In some instances, we can even see users capitalize on this strategy for the dual purpose of evaluating whether their matches would make adequate long-term partners. The strategy helps them decide to take the relationship into the realm of romantic affection. Acknowledging that users often engage in sexual activities with other users, my informants within this research see sex as a fringe benefit, but not as the primary goal of their usage.

### 3.0 Purposefully Matching with Foreigners: Nationalism and Female Hypergamy

As I was wrapping up interviews and reviewing my earliest notes about ambiguous motivations and anti-purposefulness among dating app users, I was struck by how this is not necessarily the case among *all* Chinese dating app users. There are some much more outwardly purposeful dating app users, although they are in the minority. I define the purposeful app users here as those who are much clearer in expressing and admitting their intentions, and who broadcast those intentions in subtle or not-so-subtle ways to potential matches on dating apps. During the course of my research, I have seen dating app users who were insurance agents looking for customers, gym trainers fat-shaming women and trying to convince them to become clients, café owners looking for investments, and micro-influencers using their profiles (plastered with their social media handles) to attract more followers (Y. Wang, 2021). However, what struck me as particularly interesting were the profiles that were in English, or in other foreign languages, among a sea of profiles that were in Chinese. The profiles' owners were Chinese and included both male and female app users who were expressly looking for foreign partners based in China, not for potential upward migration or geographic mobility purposes, but for ideological ones — which I describe and analyze in this chapter. Early interviews showed me that these users were vastly different from other seemingly purposeless online daters I had spoken to who were shyer about their intentions on dating apps. The boldness of these app users, they claimed, was symbolic of the Western ideologies with which they aligned themselves. Indeed, this attitude was partly why they believed they were more suited dating a foreigner, especially one who had traveled all the way across the world to carve a life out in China.

There are some works that found economic positives as a primary factor leading people to develop relationships with individuals from economically advanced countries (P. A. Fischer, Martin, & Straubhaar, 1997; Glodava & Onizuka, 1994). However, more recent studies identify ideological aspirations — such as a desire to escape the local dominant culture or the desire for passion and romance — as part of their more nuanced motivations to seek out foreign partners. My work in this chapter builds on this literature (Constable, 2003; M. Liu, 2019b; Schaeffer, 2012; Thai, 2008; Zurndorfer, 2018), and provides a more complex portrayal of Chinese dating app users who are eschewing the more “anti-purpose” script to seek relationships with foreigners on dating apps. I also look at foreigners on the same dating apps who actively avoid dating other foreigners as they focus their attention on dating Chinese locals. More importantly, this chapter seeks to examine how Chinese men and women dating app users construct idealized images of Western masculinity. Through examining how foreigners describe themselves, and how Chinese men and women make comparisons between locals versus foreigners, I explore the gendered social imaginary. In this context, the gendered social imaginary refers to how Chinese dating app users imagine the nature of gender relations between themselves and a potential foreign match. Such imaginaries have a significant impact on people’s actual decisions on the purposeful partner searching strategies they employ on dating apps.

Here I focus on the international relationships that users seek to forge or have forged through dating apps while both parties remain in China. Centering on my informants' stories, these sketches offer an overarching introduction to the gendered dynamics of Chinese-foreigner relationships. First, the chapter explores how sex, masculinity, and penis sizes are often invoked in conversations about dating between foreigners and Chinese who meet through dating apps. I also discuss the nationalist discourses about the domination of women’s bodies in relation to

international dating. Next, the chapter turns to how the ideal of female hypergamy relates to the gendered dating dynamics between Chinese and foreigners. Finally, I briefly look at Chinese women's strategies to maintain the pattern of female hypergamy in relation to the perceived attractiveness of foreign men's traits.

The chapter is grounded in materials from interviews and conversations with dating app users in China between the summer of 2020 and the fall of 2021. Depending on the informants' comfort level, the conversations happened on [one of?] three different mediums: chat, voice call, or video call. The conversations with the seven men and seven women in this chapter are presented here mainly in the form of monologues. The "speakers" are generally identified by their age, location, and occupation. Additional information is presented when deemed important to understanding the conversation. I have not met any of these fourteen interlocutors in person.

The following sections of interview materials are organized as follows: First, I present the monologues relevant to the section; second, I discuss the interviews and the conclusions derived from them; and third, I draw out the theoretical or historical context and the analysis. This format aims to center the voice of the research participants and to provide them uninterrupted space in which their feelings and thoughts can be expressed. For readers, I hope to allow the participants' voices, concerns, and desires to stand on their own as much as possible, before I analyze them and showcase the broader implications and my interpretations of their words.

### **3.1 Sex, Masculinity, and the Male Appendage**

This section introduces the subject of foreign-Chinese relationships in a way that is analogous to the way the interviews went with my male respondents. The topic of male genitalia

was brought up early, unprompted, and frequently as the catch-all reason for the different dynamics and permutations of foreign-Chinese relationships. By first presenting the words of dating app users on their own, this section explores how male users (both foreign and Chinese) talked about male genitalia as the key site of attraction for Chinese women. I also describe how male app users described sex or relationships with women of different nationalities as forms of symbolic domination of the foreign country. The act of sexual penetration as a form of appropriation or ownership is spoken of as a means to bolster masculinity by bringing pride to one's country. In short, this section discusses the link (that is made visible by dating apps) between both foreign men and Chinese men's discursive obsession with male genitalia when it comes to discussions of relationships with women of another nationality within the Chinese context.

### **3.1.1 "The Penis is the Site of Attraction"**

Here, I discuss how both foreign and Chinese male dating app users express how Chinese women prefer to date foreign men because they claim that women (in general) have a preference for larger male genitalia that foreign men, regardless of nationality as long as they are not from China, are supposedly blessed with. The singular focus on the male genitalia can be seen as a way that both foreign and Chinese male dating app users primarily frame relationships with women of a different nationality.

#### **Iggy**

Iggy is a Chinese man, aged 21 who is studying at university. When he was first approached after we matched on a dating app, Iggy was reluctant to share any personal details. His profile bio was in English and French. His pictures on his profile had his face hidden, and he refused to

communicate in any medium other than on the dating platform itself. At first, he mentioned that he was going to France to further his studies and had used dating apps for 2 years. His purpose for using dating apps was multifold. Initially, he said he wanted to use dating apps to facilitate sex with foreign women. However, over time, he revealed that he has a girlfriend. He thinks the relationship has gotten stale and he was looking for a foreign girlfriend. This way, according to Iggy, it can help normalize the experience of dating a foreigner in preparation for his time in France. When asked his thoughts on the dynamics between foreign women and Chinese men, he said:

I am having trouble finding foreign women who are willing to give me a chance. I think it is because men from China do not have a big penis. No, I have not heard any foreign women say this to me. But this is just my suspicion. After all, the pornography from the West feature men with really large dicks. So, foreign women may not be satisfied by Chinese men's abilities. This is something I am worried about, that I will be looked down upon when it comes to that area, that I will not be able to satisfy a foreign woman.

### **Sharon**

Sharon is a 36-year-old Chinese woman who is a pastry chef. She used to work in accounting, but had a change of heart around the age of 27 when she decided to pursue pastry making. So, she learned French and went to France for pastry school. She was in Europe for a few years before returning to China. Sharon repeatedly pointed out her age throughout our conversations and marked milestones of her dating app life and mindset with age. However, Sharon is also cognizant that she is very attractive, and she laments profusely about the quality of

the Chinese men her parents attempt to match her with, due to her advanced age (by Chinese standards). Beyond more generous age acceptance by her foreign matches, she also finds foreign men less misogynistic. She said that they take time to know her as an individual. As a result, she generally enjoys the experience of dating foreigners more.

I don't think the reason I prefer foreign men is sex-based at all. I really enjoy flirting and banter, and that isn't something I can get with Chinese men. Chinese men are really boring. All they do is ask, 'Are you there, what are you doing, have you eaten yet?' Foreign men are way more interesting; they will actually try to find a common topic of interest. I don't think dick size is as important, but there is indeed a big difference in sex. But mostly because there is reciprocity. For example, Western men often give me oral sex and care more about whether or not I orgasm. It is rare to find a Chinese man that will give me oral sex. It is always one-sided. They care more about their own pleasure. I have slept with about 8 Asian men, only 2 of them gave me oral sex. That is also probably because I insist on them. Another example: after sex, a Western man would not just turn over and go to bed; they will still cuddle, kiss, and compliment me.

### **Timon**

Timon is a 25-year-old white German man. He moved to Hangzhou in January 2020 to teach in a small language school. He did not plan to stay in China for long, only for a 6-month stint. However, due to the pandemic, he decided that it was best to stay in China, and in June 2021 he was still there. When asked why he thought that Chinese women date foreign men, he replied:

Hmm, I think that a foreign woman dating a Chinese man is way more uncommon than the other way around. [WW: Why do you think so?] [He laughs.] Come on, you know what I mean. It is because Asian men aren't as blessed down there as western guys like myself. I actually got asked about my size quite a few times on dating apps. Chinese women tend to ask me if it is true that Germans are big down there. I mean, I don't have a problem talking about it or being asked about it. It probably helped me land some women too. But I was quite surprised because I thought that Chinese women were very traditional and reserved.

### **Ankit**

Ankit is originally from India. He is a 27-year-old man. He had been working in Shanghai for 3 years at the time of the interview. He described himself as a dynamic and ambitious person who likes to make lots of money and lead a luxurious life. He is a yoga instructor and he plans to open his own school to teach people who aspire to become yoga teachers. However, due to the pandemic, he could not bring in instructors from India to get the school going. When asked about his perception of the dynamics between Chinese women and foreign men, he stated:

I think foreign men like myself are very popular in Southeast Asia and East Asia. Because in Southeast Asia, or countries like Japan, Korea, China, Vietnam, Malaysia, men in these countries are not so good at sex. Based on my experience, every time I fucked a Chinese girl, I have had good comments. Their past experiences with these Southeast Asian and East Asian men aren't as great because they don't have a good size. I think that's probably the reason. It could be one of

the reasons why foreign women don't go for Chinese men. As a woman, would dick size be important to you?

---

Male informants consistently refer to the size of the Chinese penis versus the foreign penis in the discourse of masculine attractiveness. They seemingly perceived their ability to attract women as primarily based on the phallus. A distinction was being made between self and “others” through the size of the male appendage. According to the male interviewees, a woman's satisfaction in the sexual arena is an integral part of their attractiveness, and this attractiveness is perceived by men to depend solely or primarily on the man's penis size, when explaining the dynamics of inter-country dating that relies on dating apps. Academic studies have shown that men display masculinity through their desire for and performance of heterosexual sexual relations (Courtenay, 2000; Kong, 2015; Masters, Casey, Wells, & Morrison, 2013; Murray, 2018; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Wiederman, 2005). For example, Szasz (1998)) finds that Mexican men from lower wealth and social status brackets often attempt to display their masculinity through sexual relations with women. To these Mexican men, sexual relations with women represent a way to prove themselves as men, with the male genitalia representing the pride, arrogance, and well-being of these Mexican men.

The case described by Szasz' in relation to Mexican men, also applies to my Chinese interviewees. Chinese men I interviewed believed that the perception of them having smaller appendages implied that they had a lesser ability to satisfy women sexually. They referenced the size difference of Chinese porn actors versus Western porn actors, often expressing intimidation

and begrudging respect for their foreign counterparts. Chinese male informants perceived that foreign men can sexually satisfy women better due to their larger appendages. As such, once a woman (no matter foreign or Chinese) have sexual relations with a foreigner, the Chinese man would pale in comparison in performance due to his smaller male appendage. Foreign males included in this section were eager to reinforce or perpetuate that flattering image of themselves and subsequently continued to promote that discourse with the “other” (Chinese lover or the curious Chinese man).

Female informants are often amused by men’s singular obsession with penis size in the discourse of attractiveness between the races. One female informant said between chuckles, “Perhaps these Chinese women are just telling the foreign men they sleep with what they want to hear. I do that all the time even though I don’t think so myself [that foreign men are better in bed because of their larger penis size]. It seems that they [the foreign men] really latch on to it!”

Some female Chinese informants did note that sex is better with foreign men, but not because of the size of their appendages. Instead, they have expressed that sex tends to be more reciprocal with foreign men. As Sharon said (above), “Western men often give me oral sex and care more about whether or not I orgasm. It is rare to find a Chinese man that will give me oral sex. It is always one-sided.” More research would need to be done to understand the lack of reciprocity in Chinese men’s intercourse repertoire. I suspect that servicing women for women’s pleasure does not fit into the script of masculinity within China. Despite so, pleasuring a woman through penetrative sex is still part of that script. If this is found to be true, we see Sharon viewing dating and sexual experiences with foreign men to be more pleasurable because their masculinity script aligns with what she finds attractive, rather than her particular preference for the body of a foreigner let alone appendage size.

In the discourse on masculine sexuality (Kong, 2015; Masters et al., 2013; Murray, 2018; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Smart, 1993; Wiederman, 2005), men see hegemonic masculinity as being threatened if women are not satisfied sexually. A man's ego is bolstered when he is told that he can pleasure women to completion (Mankayi & Shefer, 2005). Based on Western pornography, male Chinese informants assume that foreigners in China similarly have "monstrously large" penises. This perspective fails to consider how Western pornography often exaggerates the size of the actor's penis.

What is interesting here, beyond nationalistic stereotypes of the penis size, is the male obsession and the centrality of the penis in relation to the construction of masculinity and attractiveness. Both foreign and Chinese men in my interviews eschewed focusing on changeable elements of attractiveness, like body physique, intelligence, personality, generosity, manners, or mindset. Instead, foreign and Chinese men both focus on the immutable - the penis - an appendage famously perceived as being difficult (almost impossible) to alter. Conversely, women are not as concerned by the immutable as they are with modifiable elements of attractiveness, yet still tend to feed the stereotypes that mend the male mindset, thus solidifying the belief of the importance of the penis to sexual pleasure.

### **3.1.2 Nationalistic Domination through the Body of Women**

Next, I demonstrate how male dating app users frame their relationships with women of another nationality. Narratives of their relationships (sexual or romantic) are often laced with descriptions that utilize war-like or nationalistic images or terminology. The "ability to procure and dominate" a woman of another country symbolically represents the strength of the nation represented by the man's nationality.

### **Lee**

Lee is a 25-year-old heterosexual Chinese man. He went to university in the United Kingdom. He pursued a bachelor's degree in media and a master's degree in film studies. When I met him, he was working in the video production industry in Shanghai. When asked his opinion on why Chinese women would date foreign men, Lee said:

Well, if a Chinese guy date a foreign woman, Chinese men will admire him. Because he has managed to conquer a foreign woman, it's something to brag about for some Chinese men. This somehow connects to patriotism. If you have a foreign girlfriend, it is as if your country wins or is better than her country. When a girl from China dates foreign men, we call these women 'easy-women.' This type of girl thinks white or black people are superior to Chinese men. Similarly, I think this connects to patriotism - it's as if Chinese men lost to foreign men. It is a race and nationalism thing. Men will think: Chinese men are great; why would you go for a guy from another race or country? There is a biological explanation. Chinese believe they have better genes than other races and ethnicities. Culturally, this is affected by patriarchy. Men have the more dominant status over women; they can 'conquer' other blood. Still, women would be downgraded if they get in touch with other races or ethnicities.

### **Sonny**

Sonny is a 24-year-old Chinese man from Zhejiang. When asked about his hobbies, his answer was succinct. He said, "women." He is currently residing in Shanghai. However, he did not mention his occupation and appeared to fancy himself quite the ladies' man.

I love chatting with foreign women on dating apps. So far, I have chatted with 8 foreign women! I don't speak English, so I use translation apps to translate each message I send and the women's responses. With foreign women, I feel like I can be more unfiltered and less well-behaved. I think foreign women are more outgoing and have a more 'open' personality type. However, I have not managed to convince one to meet me in person for a date. It is not easy for a Chinese man to get a foreign girl. But I am ready for the challenge of possessing a foreign girlfriend. I will be brimming with pride if I have a foreign girlfriend because it is not easy to acquire a foreign girlfriend. But if it is the other way around (foreign man-Chinese girl couple), I would think the Chinese girl doesn't take care of herself, nor love and protect her body the way she should. Maybe this is because I have a more 落后 'luohou' (backward, directly translates to left behind) frame of mind.

### **Sharon**

Sharon has experienced living in Europe and has a strong preference for foreign men. She hopes to retire in France in her old age, but for now, she is looking for companionship with foreign men through dating apps.

At first, these foreign men might not have the intention to find a sex partner or a one-night stand. They will also feel a lot of discomfort in the beginning. However, due to their popularity with Chinese women, they realize that even beautiful Chinese women are often easy to get. That's why we call Chinese women that are with foreign men - 'easy women.' The easy girl reputation comes from the

idea that people think a foreign man would not be okay dating a woman that isn't willing to have sex with them. There is still a negative stigma about women having sex. My parents have told me that the moment sex occurs for a woman, the woman is always at a loss, her body being taken advantage of.

---

As seen in the excerpts above, Lee and Sonny both view foreign women as more difficult to attain. Both see themselves as less likely to be attractive to foreign women. Interviews reveal several reasons or stereotypes that cause these Chinese men to put foreign women on a pedestal. For example, foreign women tend to be taller, "come from a more powerful country," are more experienced in sex, more educated, have better financial wealth, etc. In a hypergamous society like China, where men tend to date down, and women date up, Chinese men like those who agreed to be interviewed felt intimidated by foreign women and were apprehensive towards foreign women as a potential match.

Conversely, however, they also thought that sexually "conquering" a foreign woman would be a source of nationalistic pride. Sonny used the word "possess" when describing dating a foreign girlfriend. It cements the idea that their sexual prowess is better or at least on par with that of foreign men. The domination of a foreign woman's body also signifies that the Chinese man is better than the men from the foreign country where the woman is from, which is a source of nationalistic pride which they expressed as 为国争光 *weiguozhengguang* (directly translates to help my nation gain light or good reputation).

In a more extreme example, conquering armies that rape members of the enemy populations are theorized as doing so partly for symbolic reasons; they picture themselves invading and “penetrating” the conquered nation (Brownmiller, 1993). Victims of wartime rape tend to be women, as the rape of women is often conceptualized as the symbolic rape of the nation. Women’s bodies are associated with discourses of ethnic origin, national growth, eugenics, and population control (Yuval-Davis, 1996). The women’s bodies are therefore seen as a way to protect national sovereignty and racial purity.

International relations become a competition of masculinities (Hooper, 2001; Zalewski & Parpart, 1998). In all the interviews laid out above, we see foreign men such as Timon and Ankit expressed their masculine, national pride and sense of superiority over Chinese men, asserting that they are better able to sexually satisfy Chinese women due to their larger penis. This is not dissimilar to the phenomenon described by Cheng (2021)) in Korea where she describes the penis as a site of national obsession — with Koreans believing themselves to have their nation’s stake in the world at issue due to their penis size. The Korean expression of “planting the Korean flag-pole” does not refer to the moon landing, it is instead about a Korean man’s accomplishment at having sex with a foreign woman, especially a White woman. The flagpole symbolizes a Korean man’s erect penis, while the woman’s body represent foreign territory, with penetrative sex epitomized as national conquest. This obsession takes such a stranglehold that the cosmetic surgery industry offers various procedures to address the perceived problem with the Korean penis, such as penis enlargement surgery, and yet the industry is unable to meet growing demand. Further, Cheng writes that violence directed against women succumbs to men’s obsessions, ultimately reinforcing the male mindset that the penis is the ultimate symbol for “masculine power, men’s relationship to women, the Korean nation, and the world at large.” (pg. S79)

In the Chinese context, the Chinese men I interviewed viewed sex or a relationship with foreign women as an act of patriotism. Women, both Chinese and foreign, were employed as a receptacle to be defined by a male identity and national pride, denying women's subjectivity and imagining the female body as a tool (Weiss, 2016).

Lee's reference to blood should be highlighted in this context. He said, "There is a biological explanation. Chinese believe they have better genes than other races and ethnicities. Culturally, this is affected by patriarchy. Men have the more dominant status over women; they can 'conquer' other blood. Still, women would be downgraded if they get in touch with other races or ethnicities."

Blood (the biological agent) in this context is understood as a gendered active agent responsible for catalyzing the national-cultural identity. This is similar to Jennifer Robertson's (2012) study of hemato-nationalism in Japan. She describes how a journalist in a leading 19<sup>th</sup> century newspaper advocated for arranging marriages between Japanese males and white females because white American females were taller and stronger than Japanese women and would thus make superior birth mothers, creating a new generation of taller, heavier, and supposedly superior breed of Japanese. However, like Lee and Sonny's explanations above, blood is only strengthened if Chinese males "invade" and "conquer" foreign female bodies. It does not apply the other way round. While my interviews were not about "breeding" but just sex, the one-directional patriarchal nature still applies.

Sharon, Lee, and Sonny were all aware that Chinese women who dated foreigners were called "easy women" and were often looked down on by Chinese men and women. The "Easy Girl" is seen as a betrayer of the nation; they let their bodies be used and penetrated by a foreign power. Chinese men simultaneously shame women whom they depict as deviant and sexually

promiscuous with the hyper-sexualized foreigner, while Chinese men in my interviews simultaneously justified the need for sex in a relationship.<sup>6</sup> This is ironic because of the importance placed on sex by Iggy and Lee. It highlights the animosity Chinese men hold for Chinese women who engage in sexual intercourse with a foreigner, under the belief that another Chinese person had been conquered. I acknowledge that this dynamic is not limited to the dating app world, however, it helps explain the patterns of matches in dating apps. Chinese male dating app users repeatedly mentioned how they had great difficulty being matched with foreign women, while foreign men (even older and conventionally unattractive ones) are able to be matched with Chinese women very easily.

### **3.2 Hypergamy: “Women from China are out of Chinese Men’s Leagues”**

In this section, I explore the concept of female hypergamy – or the cultural expectation that women should marry “up” — and how this is tied to Chinese female participants’ explanations of the dynamics and desirability of foreign-Chinese relationships.

#### **Maggie**

Maggie is a 33-year-old Chinese woman who lived in Shanghai and worked in the Korean retail industry when I met her. Maggie studied in Korea. She is looking for a long-term boyfriend

---

<sup>6</sup> This is however another complicated subject. Some of the Chinese male respondents introduced in Chapter 2 discussed the importance of sex in a relationship, however, they also said that they would prefer to marry sexually inexperienced woman. In reality, this may not necessarily come into fruition.

and is uninterested in foreigners other than Koreans because of her lack of familiarity with Western culture. She said,

I would prefer having a Korean as a boyfriend. They are clean-looking; they are more likely to work out; it gives me a sense of comfort. Mainland Chinese men, especially the ones born after the 80s, they don't take care of their cleanliness, their image, or how they dress. It gives me this greasy feeling. Image management is down in the dumps. In China, there is a saying, 'Women from China are out of Chinese men's league.' The quality of women in China far surpasses Chinese men. You often see a beautiful, highly educated, and polished woman with men who look like they don't put in similar amounts of effort. The other gripe I have with Chinese men compared to Korean men: Chinese men have such terrible manners. They are not inclined to help women or older generations in public. You see them fighting for seats in the subway with women! My co-worker was body-slammed last week by a Chinese man trying to get to a seat on the subway even though there are two available seats. This summer, I was waiting for a bus at the bus stop; a few guys shoved me to the side and caused me to step into a puddle. My sneakers were soaked! I had to go to the supermarket near the gym to buy a new pair of socks before I worked out. I am not sure what went wrong, but there is a severe lack of gentlemen in China. But that doesn't mean there aren't good Chinese men. It is just that the good ones are often snatched up pretty quickly. That's why I am resorting to dating apps, to look for people who aren't in my existing network. Looking for a foreigner is a strategy to still find a decent man and not settle for a less than ideal Chinese man. But ultimately, it is not about foreign vs. Chinese. It is about the

tendencies of a particular culture. I think that almost 70% of eligible Chinese bachelors would fit into the negative stereotype I mentioned. So, I avoid them to make the vetting process easier. In essence, nationality isn't all that important. Heck, I would date an alien if the alien had the right values, and you can quote me on that!

### **Sharon**

Sharon, the 36-year-old pastry chef who was introduced above, said,

In China, we treat women's bodies like goods, especially in the context of matchmaking. You are given a value based on age. 25-28 are considered gold, 29-30 would be criticized over every detail and subject to a more stringent vetting process, 30-35 are basically only good for second marriages or significantly older men. I am definitely more Westernized. So, the way I live can be freer; I feel like being Westernized is more aligned with my inner soul. Western boys also don't care about my age, so interactions are comfortable. The only one who asked me if I minded his age was my ex-boyfriend who I met from Tinder. It's probably because his father has been doing business in China since he was 12. So, he and his brother have been interested in Chinese culture from a young age, so they probably know more about Chinese culture. Before we officially dated, he asked me if I could accept a boyfriend 5 years my junior. I don't like dating foreigners who have been in China too long; they will start exuding this greasy feeling that Chinese men have by largely mirroring how locals would act. It makes me want to gag. I like foreigners because of the difference in mindset and background; seeing a foreigner

act like a Chinese is difficult for me to accept. The moment a foreign man spouts Chinese idioms at me, I am out.

### **Mary and Zed (foreign woman, Chinese man couple)**

Mary is a white American woman who is a 33-year-old Ph.D. candidate. I was introduced to her by an old friend from Wuhan. At the time of the interview, she was in a relationship with Zed, a 26-year-old Chinese man residing in Sichuan. Zed worked in a company that organizes summer camps. He dropped out of college because he found it too restrictive, and instead he focused on traveling and forging friendships with people from around the world. They met on Tinder while she was doing her fieldwork in Sichuan. At the time of the interview, they had had a long-distance relationship for two months.

When I first met them online, I found Zed a youthful, outgoing, and cheerful man. He spoke with a British-American accent. This is partly because his long-time best friend is British. He also spent significant time watching American TV shows and mimicking words and intonation to make sure he had a more Americanized inflection. Apart from his co-workers and family members, his friend groups were all foreigners. Zed was very popular with the foreign women he interacted with. All his ex-girlfriends had initiated relationships with him. He recalled with a chuckle how they were all taller than him. Two of them were French, and one was Canadian.

Mary, on the other hand, is a more reserved, quiet woman. She talked about feeling lonely during her fieldwork and not having many friends. Mary exclusively swiped right (signaling interest) on Chinese men, not foreigners. She said it was probably because she thought foreign men would rather date Chinese women in China. Mary has a few Chinese exes. Despite her

preference for Chinese men, she noted that she had to negotiate the dynamics of the relationship with them.

As Mary explained,

Something that I had to learn to be okay with is to be the more powerful one in the couple. I am older, more well-educated, more experienced in relationships, and to top it off, I am also taller. I am currently a teaching assistant at a biological anthropology class. The professor asked students whether or not they would prefer to date someone taller or shorter than them. Almost unanimously, the female students said they preferred someone taller. The male students preferred someone shorter or at least the same height. This reminded me of my situation. When I was in high school, I would make fun of prom pictures where the couple had a taller girl and a shorter guy. I can't help but feel like that is somewhat comical. Of course, I am used to it now. But I thought about this a lot when I first started dating Chinese men because they almost all usually end up shorter than I am. I am 5'7, by the way. I know it is ridiculous, but I suppose it is ingrained culturally.

Zed said,

I get very angry when people point out that I have friends or girlfriends that are foreign is something to be in awe of. I remember walking around this tourist trap with Mary, and the seller looked at Mary and told me in Chinese, 'Respect!' That makes me a little angry. It is as if Chinese people are saying that they are superior to us. They are just people. My co-workers used to ask me about that too. I always say, 'They are no different than us Chinese; they are just people. I also don't care about being shorter or having different educational background. I think

having personalities that match together is the most important part. I understand that I am a little different from my Chinese peers. Most Chinese parents would not be okay with their only son dropping out of college, for example. Most Chinese people also have this huge emphasis on 门当户对 (couples should match in terms of family background, this usually extends to include similar education level, wealth level, hukou status, etc.).

---

Walking around in big cities like Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, it is unmistakable that there are more foreign man-Chinese woman couples compared to Chinese man-foreign woman couples. In cities like Shanghai, a sighting of the latter still attracts quite significant attention. In fact, researchers have noted Western women's somewhat anomalous marginal position in China's "sexual field" especially in the context of international romance born of globalization and more open ethnic boundaries (Enguix & Roca, 2015; Farrer & Dale, 2014). Even as the ethnosexual contact zones of China widen, it is white men and Chinese women who gain in these areas, and not western women (Zurndorfer, 2018).

China is a hypergamous society. Romantic relationships typically assume that women should "marry up," choosing a partner from a family of higher social status or with more wealth. In contemporary China, women generally prefer finding a partner who is older than they are, financially more capable, romantic, and more highly educated. On the other hand, men prefer someone who is younger and has equal or less education than they do (Davin, 2007; Gaetano, 2014; Y. Liu, 2017; Yuan, Xuehui, & Dagsvik, 2011). Considering the gender asymmetrical criteria for partner selection, women who have the "three highs" (highly educated, high income, a high number in age) are not desirable in the dating market (Ji, 2015).

I argue that this ideal applies to the foreign woman-Chinese man couple dynamic as well. Mary, the American woman described above, said, “I had to learn to be okay...be[ing] the more powerful one in the couple.” Female hypergamy among some foreign women is salient as well. It was particularly difficult to recruit foreign women who dated Chinese men through dating apps. I think it reflects the reality in which this dynamic is less prevalent than the foreign man-Chinese woman dynamic. Not only do foreign women have to accept their perceived more powerful position compared to their male Chinese partners, but they also have to find avenues within the relationship to feel feminine. On the other hand, Chinese men (while prone to fantasizing about it) are also less likely to pursue foreign women earnestly due to insecurities about their position in relation to the more powerful foreign woman figure (as shown in the interviews in the previous section).

This aligns with my own experience in China. During one period of summer fieldwork in Shanghai, I rode in many taxis and often engaged in small talk about my research with the taxi drivers. They were often interested in introducing me to their single sons. Since I am ethnically Chinese and am fairly fluent in Mandarin, they often thought I was Chinese. However, after further questioning, upon learning that I am a foreigner pursuing her Ph.D. in the US, all of them said something along the line of, “You are too good for my son. It is not a good match.”

Conversely, my Chinese male informants thought that it would be a source of pride to have “managed to conquer” a foreign woman. Their perception of “conquering” foreign women was brought up by several Chinese men and reiterated in Zed’s interaction with the seller. The perception was that Chinese men who had foreign women partners were perceived to be more powerful. In such cases, Chinese men and local observers thought it was only natural that they would be “above” (and thus supersede) the female. Therefore, they must be more powerful since

they had managed to subdue or “conquer” the powerful foreign woman. This is, however, usually wishful thinking and fantasy that they half-heartedly pursued. While this observation was brought up in previous sections, it is worth mentioning again here that Zed did not feel the same way as other men I interviewed. This may be because Zed had a slightly different background than the rest of my Chinese male informants.

Zed’s parents had divorced when he was younger, and he was an only child, like most urban men of his generation in Mainland China. As a result of his parents’ divorce, he had a rather unconventional life compared to his peers. He dropped out of college (a rather serious offense to most Chinese parents) and his parents supported the decision. Subsequently, he spent most of his adult life actively pursuing friendships with foreigners. He was, however, conscious that his experience and mindset was not common among his Chinese peers. For example, he noted instances where his Chinese male colleagues made fun of him for pursuing a foreign woman, claiming that he was not good enough for one. But when he began a relationship with a foreign woman, the same colleagues congratulated him and regarded him with awe and respect.

The relative lack of relationships between foreign women and Chinese men in China might be largely attributed to the female hypergamy ideal, not just within China but also among many foreign women. This cultural belief that marriage should be hypergamous (upwards for women or between equals) prevails despite changes in gender roles and marriage patterns globally. Coupled with perceptions of relative geographical power between Western countries and China may have reinforced the notion that foreign male-Chinese woman couplings were more socially appropriate compared to Chinese male-foreign women, although such a pattern may be changing with China’s economic and political ascent (Constable, 2004). Similarly, in Yamaura’s study of cross-border marriage agencies that facilitate marriages between Japanese men and Chinese women in Xinghai,

she finds that these marriage agencies were less in demand when China's economic power improved since the early 2000s (Yamaura, 2020).

It could also be rooted in the popular and historical US (arguably international) media-based images of Asian women versus Asian men (Besana, Katsiaficas, & Loyd, 2019; Constable, 2004; Mok, 1998; Qiu & Muturi, 2016). Asian women have typically been represented as sexually desirable, docile, dependent, and attractive partners to the Western male protagonist. Asian males are often depicted as reserved, socially awkward, and emasculate, and rarely, if ever, as sexually and romantically appealing to Western women (Besana et al., 2019; Constable, 2004; Keum, 2016).

Female hypergamy also leads to women like Sharon and Maggie, both of whom were over 30, to be labeled as "leftover women." The disparaging phrase "leftover women" is popularly known to describe successful and independent single professional women in their early thirties (Gaetano, 2014; Hong Fincher, 2014; To, 2013; Wong, 2016). Sharon and Maggie faced a phenomenon shared by many women from larger Chinese cities. Their dating pool potential got narrower as they grew in age and achievements. Research has indicated that most so-called leftover women still desire long-term partnerships or marriage, but they face a series of barriers. For example, urban successful single men like themselves often delay marriage until their late thirties or forties, before settling down with an attractive woman in their twenties (Ding & Xu, 2014; Qian & Qian, 2014; Song & Hird, 2013). The difficulty of finding a suitable partner while still conforming to hypergamy becomes even more complicated when leftover women achieve the same (or surpass) economic success as men because it challenges the patriarchal norm of hypergamy whereby a wife should make less income than her husband (To, 2013; Zurndorfer, 2018). Single women are labelled "leftover fighter" when they are aged between 28 and 32 and

“leftover forever” when they are aged between 32 and 35, those aged above are titled “leftover queen” (Ding & Xu, 2014) – a snide commentary at their pickiness and unwillingness to settle for less.

The state-sanctioned Women’s Federation propagates this stance.

“Girls with an average or ugly appearance...hope to further their education to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is they don’t realize that, as women age, they are worthless and less, so by the time they get their MA or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellowed pearls.” (Hong Fincher, 2014, p. 3) — a passage from a column posted on the Women’s Federation website in March 2011, just after International Women’s Day. Relatives, the media, and the government continuously propagate the image of successful older career women as selfish, greedy, and picky individuals. State-run news columns touted headlines like “Do Leftover Women Really Deserve Our Sympathy?” (Hong Fincher, 2014).

Partly due to their difficulty finding a “good Chinese man” at their age and the stigma attached to singlehood at their late 20s or 30s, these women employed the strategy of seeking alternative avenues: foreign men. They may not have to lower their expectations in what they want in a man since they are tapping into an alternative pool of eligible men. At worst, they are able to find a “decent” man that will accept a woman of her higher age and education - indicating reverse hypergamy. This pattern is seen in contemporary cross-border marriage-scapes as well. There are examples of Chinese brides who are well-educated professionals that would marry a man from a more developed country but do not necessarily move higher on the chain of economic resources — with their standards of living dropping after marriage and migration (Constable, 2004). In short, Chinese women interviewed perceive foreign men to not care about women’s age as much.

However, as both Sharon and Maggie were quick to point out, it isn't so much that they prefer foreign men, but that foreign men have qualities that they cannot easily find in available Chinese men. This distinction between Chinese men (who women sometimes described as disloyal, brutish, and money loving) and Western men (considered loving, loyal, open) was seen made by participants in some studies (M. Liu, 2015, 2019a, 2019b; Zurndorfer, 2018). With the ascent of China's economic prowess and the previous associations of Western masculinity with wealth fading, they argue that Western masculinity (in women's eyes) have undergone a "plastic surgery" – different but still beautiful. Western masculinity continues to retain its global hegemonic power by focusing on foreign men's internal qualities instead of their financial capital – with claims that Western men are morally superior to Chinese men despite their declining economic status. Here, we see Sharon and Maggie claiming that there is less likelihood that foreign men would hold the same negative stereotypes about Chinese women's ages as Chinese men. Maggie excitedly announced that she would date an alien as long as they have the qualities she was looking for and didn't care about her age. Sharon said that a foreigner would be less desirable to her if he became "too Chinese."

She said, "I don't like dating foreigners who have been in China too long; they will start exuding this greasy feeling that Chinese men have by largely mirroring how locals would act. It makes me want to gag. But, on the other hand, I like foreigners because of the difference in mindset and background; seeing a foreigner act like a Chinese is difficult for me to accept. The moment a foreign man spouts Chinese idioms at me, I am out."

This sentiment is mirrored in Liu's study of marriage agencies that facilitated introductions between older divorced women in China and Western men. In her study, she finds that agencies perpetuate the image that Western men are better than Chinese men because they are not tainted

by the tendency to seek for much younger women (M. Liu, 2019a). Staff at matchmaking agencies asserted that something particular about Chinese culture compels men to only seek partnerships with younger women. Staff even warned their clients against dating Western expatriates in China because they would have been “polluted” by Chinese culture and would only want to date young attractive women. As such, the staff at these agencies molded nationalistic gendered discourses to promote their business and convince older women to use their services, even dissuading them from looking for foreigners that they would have access to without the agencies (the foreigners living in China) by claiming that Western expatriates would share similar ideals of Chinese masculinity.

Liu (2019) helps point to an existing discourse in China that demonstrates how masculinity (in the eyes of women) is fluid, malleable, and continuously being reconstructed in accordance with the changing demographic and socioeconomic patterns within China and outside of China. The “leftover women” phenomenon is one of the results of the one-child policy which drastically affected demographic and socioeconomic patterns in China. It is in effect empowered urban daughters to gain easier access to higher education and well-paid employment compared to the generations before them (Fong, 2002).

Maggie and Sharon hold on to their standards and still practice female hypergamy by looking for a less competitive pool of available men - foreigners. Both recognize that foreign men are “not most women’s cup of tea” for long-term relationships.

### **3.2.1 The White Junk: “We are out of Foreign Men’s League”**

There is, however, a caveat to dipping into the alternative metaphorical pool of available men — the quality of some foreign man may not necessarily meet the Chinese woman’s standards. In this section, I explore the complexity of the foreign male image in the Chinese dating context.

In the earlier sections of this chapter, I examined the perceived superiority of foreign males over Chinese males in the dating context by some interviewees. However, the image of the all-powerful attractive foreign male can be seen challenged as cities in China gain more international exposure (M. Liu, 2015, 2019a). This section looks at how Chinese female dating app users develop strategies to avoid matching with foreign male users that are deemed “not good enough” in order to maintain the female hypergamy status quo in the intimate relationships they forge — this is done through filtering the way the foreign users portray themselves on the apps.

### **Helene**

Helene is 28 years old, from Guangzhou, and was working in Shanghai when I met her. She worked at a marketing consultancy business that conducted teen-culture research. She had been residing in Shanghai for 3 years. Helene exclusively sought Western men on dating apps and heavily criticized Chinese men. She said that foreign men have better emotional intelligence than Chinese men and attributed that to Chinese men’s tendencies to date later in their lives than their Western counterparts. She noted that her gay Chinese friends have better emotional intelligence than straight Chinese men. However, she readily admitted that many foreign men who ended up in China are “white junk” (a phrase I repeatedly heard by my informants, both foreign and Chinese).

A lot of people always say a lot of foreigners are really not all that much. But they are still really popular in China. The person I am dating from Tinder is considered attractive even in Europe. In the Tinder market in Shanghai, he would be considered a top 5%. I am the first Chinese girl he dated from Tinder when he

first arrived in Shanghai, so he hasn't anticipated that he was going to be super popular and could have his pick with women a lot more attractive than I am. Before COVID, international schools in China love hiring foreigners, or at least foreign-looking people. The barrier of entry is low; all you have to do is look white to teach English. This inevitably leads to a drove of foreigners with no real skills flooding the Chinese dating scene. We call them 'white junk,' they are people that can't even survive in their own country or are the lowest of the low of professionals in their own country. But when they come to countries like China that have a lower cost of living, they can enjoy a better standard of living than where they come from. They are more likely to also be more popular with Chinese women here. I won't date this level of foreigners [in reference to English teachers]. In fact, if you are observant, you see that some foreign men write 'I'm not an English teacher on their profile.'

### **Mark**

Mark is a 34-year-old African American male. At the time of the interview, Mark had returned to the United States after living in China since 2012. I had first met him at Central China Normal University in Wuhan, where he was enrolled in a preparatory Mandarin course. He liked China so much that he decided to remain in China, primarily Wuhan, where he taught English to Chinese adults at language schools. He does not have any formal training for teaching English. He was waiting for pandemic border restrictions to be relaxed so he could return to China.

One of the biggest stereotypes of foreign men that go to China and date Chinese women [is that they] are losers in their own country, because they fail to [attract] women in their own country, and have to date people from Asia [...] There

are a lot of cultural barriers, especially in China. Sometimes parents don't want their daughters to date foreigners, so you have to deal with this stigma where parents don't want you to date their daughters, simply because "oh, you're a foreigner, you will take our daughter far away from us." They think that foreigners will take their daughters away from the country, that foreigners cannot be trusted. The usual mumbo jumbo. Many Chinese parents think their daughters will be taken away because I am black; parents just don't like me because I'm black. It happens. But it is alright; it is what it is. I have grown up with this in my entire life; this prejudice doesn't affect me really as much.

### **Ankit**

Ankit, mentioned earlier, is a 27-year-old who is originally from India and was working in Shanghai as a yoga teacher instructor. At the beginning of the interview, he said how easy it was for him to get a Chinese girlfriend. However, he also noted that there is still a hierarchical difference between races and nationalities.

Chinese women would definitely prefer dating foreign men. Oh yes, 100% yes, they prefer dating foreign men. I think it's because of the financial security, looks-wise, more attractive, career. But do you know what the problem is? A big loophole, I think. The Chinese woman is usually so beautiful, but the foreign guy she is with is not ugly, [but] not very good looking. When I see that, I am like, 'oh, my god.' Just because he is a foreigner, he has a huge advantage. It is very unfair. I feel very stressed about this. It is not fair at all. It's like if I'm a 45-year-old guy with a big tummy, I can still go out with a 25-30 years old girl. These Chinese

women just want someone rich and foreign. I've seen these so many times, quite often, actually. But I think this mostly applies to white men. I feel like maybe (but I could also be wrong) China is a little bit racist because it's easier for white men to attract women than brown men. Well, it's just a guess; I'm not sure how true it could be. But it will be easier for a white man to connect with a Chinese woman compared to a brown man. Oh, especially British guys, their accent helps them land the ladies.

### **Sharon**

Sharon, the 36-year-old pastry chef introduced above, says she is a dating app expert when it comes to filtering out the “good kind” of foreign men.

“In the more experienced Chinese women's eyes, we know that international school's foreign English teachers make very little money. Around 20k RMB to 30k RMB ( ~3,000 USD to 4,000 USD) in Shanghai. That's nothing by Shanghai standards. So, I avoid these *white junks* like the plague.”

---

Helene also observes that the bar is lower for foreign men in China and also described them as “white junk” due to international schools offering a large swath of employment opportunities to teach English just for being foreign. “Junk” here refers to trash, useless and unwanted. Mark referred to these foreign expatriates in China “losers from their country” – a sentiment that Prasso (2009)) also heard while observing Guangzhou professional women discussing how western men would not make good husbands. Sociologist James Farrer refers to foreigners that are English teachers, local hire expats, or recent university graduates as “middling transnational.” (p.9) This

group differs from the “elite migrants” (p.9) who usually hold managerial positions or are intercompany corporate transfer migrants (Farrer, 2016).

My British-born and American-born Asian friends had a difficult time procuring an English teaching job, but my white German classmate had no problem finding English teaching opportunities and he received several offers. He was even approached on the street by strangers who invited him to teach English at after-school centers. He wryly noted his advantage in this market due to the way he looked. He was also asked to say he was American if any of his student's parents enquired. This was despite him having only an average grasp of the English language which he spoke with a heavy German accent.

Helene and Sharon were interested in pursuing foreign men. However, they were not, as one of my informants put it, “blinded by their whiteness.” Helene and Sharon carefully picked out the kinds of foreigners they wanted to date, men who fulfilled the female hypergamy criteria. They were confident of their worth and would not lower their expectations. Their experience dating foreign men also enabled them to pivot and tighten their requirements on the kind of foreigners they dated. The “white junk” reputation was not unnoticed by foreign men in China. As mentioned, Mark was cognizant of the stereotype and was often lumped into the “white junk” category for being an English foreign teacher in China, despite being African American. Helene also mentioned that some foreign men’s dating profiles made special mention (despite the word count limit) of not being English teachers - even after inputting their occupations in their profiles. Others would avoid putting images on themselves backpacking in rural areas of China - a sign that they have been in teaching programs assigned to teach in rural China. Both parties are aware of the stereotype and manipulate the 2D dating app space to deftly avoid being seen as the white junk (for the foreign male) and to be with the white junk (for the discerning Chinese woman).

When I was studying in China in 2011 and visited Shanghai, foreigners were still what was considered a “fresh commodity” as some of my friends used to say. I had a few Caucasian friends and every time we went out, we would be stopped. As the only Asian person in the group, I would be asked by Chinese passersby to take a picture of them and the group of foreigners, as if the foreigners were celebrities. Visiting Shanghai in 2019, things could not be more different - I noticed that foreigners rarely got a second look in the streets. I remember sitting at a bar with a British friend of mine, a school-mate from years earlier when I was an undergraduate in China, and he lamented that it was not like the good old days. True, he could still skate by with his whiteness and accent (I noted his self-awareness amusingly), but it took a lot more to impress the more discerning Chinese woman, especially a beautiful, well-educated woman from the city — the kind that he was attracted to. As an English teacher in China, he found impressing that kind of woman a lot more difficult than it used to be. At the same table, a mutual friend of ours, a Chinese woman who was educated in the UK, did not find his malaise deserving of sympathy and chuckled good-heartedly. She blurted out, “That’s because we Chinese girls know a lot better now! We are not the innocent wide-eyed girls from ten years ago that didn’t know that there are white losers like Chinese losers! We have seen a lot more of the world [我们见了世界].”

Intersectionality can help to explain this phenomenon. Foreigners are generally perceived as more powerful and modern. However, their “power” decreases as their foreignness intersects with other factors such as race and occupation. Liu’s (2019) study on “e-mail order brides” shows how China’s changing social structure and continued national economic growth reshape Chinese women’s mate-selection strategies and perceptions of Western men. China’s uneven development has fragmented the local migration niche sectors who perceive Western men and the relative decline of the West differently, based on their own social status. For example, wealthy Chinese

women view their Western suitors to be poorer but to have better morals than local Chinese men. However, women from lower income groups see their Western suitors as morally and economically superior.

These dynamic echoes a paradigm I proposed in my work on how Muslim women's agency is framed (Wong, 2019). Similar to Liu (2019), I imagined how power is fluid and moves along an axis according to the situation and the object of comparison. I term this "power convolution."<sup>7</sup> Power convolution can be considered in relation to intersectionality of identities, helping us to recognize that different people occupying different positions that shift across the continuum of power, depending who they are being compared to or who they are seen in relation to. This helps to present a more accurate representation of diversity within the group.<sup>8</sup>

Chinese women, like Sharon, Helene, and Maggie all made decisions based on the attractiveness and suitability of a foreign match by looking at "foreignness" and the social capital the men possess. This is decided in relation to their own social capital as well (e.g., their level of education, socioeconomic status, etc.). Using his theory of social capital, Bourdieu reasons that

---

<sup>7</sup> 'Convolution' is a mathematical operation in functional analysis on two functions that goes on to produce a third function. This helps demonstrate how one's shape is transformed by the other. The term is in reference to the results and process of computing of the function (Dijk, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> If we consider that the individual/group that we hold in relation to (even if it is the researcher), the position the individual/group hold can still shift according to the situation they are cast in. For example, Wolf (1992) describes how when she entered a field site – a small town in Taiwan, she started off with a higher level of social power. However, this reduced over time when her observers noted that depends on the locals heavily – causing the power dynamic to shift (She still retained some power associated with being a guest from a powerful country). This example demonstrates how agency, rights, oppression, and power can be fluid.

social exchanges need to include capital and profit in all their forms rather than simply an economic or self-interested model of social exchanges. His theory relies heavily on ideas of social reproduction and symbolism, ultimately emphasizing societal constraints based on gender, race, and ethnicity. This helps us to criticize the popular reductionist and essentializing discourse of the “foreign man” in China who is different from and not integrated into the Chinese society, thus viewed as an unmoving monolith (the all-powerful rich foreigner), not subject to the gaze and position of the Chinese woman.

### **3.3 A Brief Note on Purposefulness**

In the previous chapter, I explored how dating app users had the tendency to provide ambiguous motivations when asked about why they were using dating apps. It was only over time that they revealed that they were searching for a partner— in one form or another— on dating apps. This was because seeming anti-purposeful to others (people enquiring about their dating app usage), themselves, and their matches help combat the stigma of desperation. Appearing as if one is being purposeful or putting in a lot of effort on dating app is “uncool” and can come off as unattractive. This is ironic to me because the critics are similarly also looking for a partner themselves. Moreover, the anti-purposefulness also acts as a coping mechanism for the self against the time-intensive process of looking for a partner on dating apps. Convincing oneself that one has less pointed motivations or no purpose would mean there is less risk of a failure; this helps motivate the users to “continue on the grind” as one of my participants put it.

So, why are the group of dating app users described in this chapter different? Even before they were approached, most of their dating app profiles clearly signaled their intentions. For

Chinese users, some used the language of the nationality they were targeting in their profile bio, uploaded images of them taken in a different country with a more Westernized fashion sense, while others were even so blatant as to mention in their bio “looking for a native English speaker to practice English (or other foreign languages) with” - a clever first date idea I was told. For foreign users, it wasn’t as explicit. This was understandable considering that the majority of users they would encounter were Chinese, and that foreigners would be the minority. It would be easier for them to filter out other foreigners by simply swiping them away. This was later confirmed to be true. The people interviewed for this chapter and some with whom I only shared brief interactions confirmed that they would actively swipe foreigners’ profiles away to signal their disinterest (see Mary above). Interviews with the participants in this chapter were also fairly straightforward. All of them told me about their intentions in a lot less ambiguous fashion.

I noted their forwardness. Mimi, a 24-year-old Chinese history teacher, said,

I think it is because Westerners are more refreshingly straightforward (爽快) and brazenly honest. They are not like Chinese people, we are more tactful (玩转). We don’t like to say things too directly, it is rude and uncomfortable to most people. It is so traditional and frankly gets really tiresome. I prefer being straightforward. I think it is cool. I think it is international. And I try to emulate that. At some point, it just became natural. I don’t think it is a problem that I am so direct when it comes to dating too because I am looking for foreign men, and foreign men are used to directness right? They probably prefer that because they are used to that. So, I want them to think that I am different from the rest of the Chinese, that I am much like a woman they can find back home, that they can relate

to me. I probably scare off a lot of Chinese men this way. Good riddance. I don't want them anyway. They can't handle all this feistiness.

Just like Mimi, other interlocutors see the trait of being straightforward about their purpose on dating apps as a symbol of globalization and Westernization. Their purposeful search for a foreign partner was to find people they hoped would share similar ideological stances (e.g., straightforwardness and brazen honesty<sup>9</sup>) with - stances they think most of their Chinese peers would not share. "Purpose," which was envisioned to be laced with ill-intentions, closed-mindedness, and desperation in the previous chapter is now transformed into a symbol of internationalization, a break from the traditional frame of mind, and a refreshing directness.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

As I have argued, both Chinese and foreign male dating app users in China regularly mentioned penis size and associated the male appendage with national pride. It is a symbol of victory when a male "conquers" a woman from a different nationality. Thus, male dating app users, both foreign and Chinese, discursively connect their attractiveness — or their male appendage to the "other". This discourse is often found amusing by female dating app users (foreign and Chinese). Instead of simply buying into it, they qualify this discourse as men's common excuse for everything because it is essentially unfixable. Rather than focusing on becoming a more

---

<sup>9</sup> I would note here that this seems to be rooted in a perception shared by informants, I am unsure what it is informed by.

attentive sexual partner, they simply blame it on having a smaller appendage and assume that women begrudge them for it.

There is, as noted, significant war-like discourse among Chinese male dating app users when discussing the possibility of dating foreign women through dating apps. They describe it as a means of individually conquering foreign women, and thus by extension it serves as a representation of the superiority of their own country. They view their own sexual conquests of Chinese women as a source of patriotic pride. However, again, this pattern of discourse is not accepted by female Chinese app users.

The lack of Chinese male-foreign female pairings is related in part to ideals of female hypergamy. Female hypergamy also leads to the more common pattern of foreign male and Chinese female. Chinese men informants perceive foreign women as occupying a more powerful position in relation to them. This causes them to be more hesitant to approach them with any seriousness, while at the same time fantasizing about being with them. A Chinese man being with a foreign woman indicates to other Chinese men that the Chinese man is more powerful than the foreign woman, thus promoting feelings of nationalist pride amongst all Chinese men.

Chinese women dating app users in this research show that looking for a foreign boyfriend is a strategy to overcome their declining foothold in the Chinese dating market. Older, highly educated, and financially stable women are well known to have greater difficulty finding suitable Chinese partners while adhering to the ideal of female hypergamy. As such, looking at a different pool of available men (foreign men) gives them more options, especially since foreign men are perceived to not judge their age, education, and wealth as harshly.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the foreign man is viewed as an all-powerful desirable man who is not subject to evaluation based on his social capital. Chinese women dating

app users have developed skills to identify and strategies to filter out foreign men they perceive as not meeting their standards or requirements. They perceive some foreign men as undeserving of them and not matching up to them. They call these foreign males “white junk” regardless of their race. Foreign male dating app users are seemingly aware of this negative connotation. Some foreign male dating app users actively make it known on their profiles that they are not English teachers, thus fending off the idea that they may be just “white junk.”

In summation, this chapter departs from the previous one about anti-purposeful behavior among dating app users who preferred to proffer ambiguous motivations about why they were on dating apps. Chinese dating app users who were looking to form intragroup relations were explicitly purposeful about their motivations - to the researcher, themselves, their matches, and sometimes their friends and family members. This is related to a desire to escape the local dominant culture and to reframe purpose through the lens of a more international ideology (in their perception).

#### **4.0 Double Liminality: Dating App Space During the COVID-19 Quarantine Period**

In Spring 2020, I completed my comprehensive exams and defended my dissertation proposal. I was officially a doctoral candidate and excited to embark on a year of fieldwork in China. It was around February that I heard from my friends in China about the COVID-19 outbreak. I remembered bringing it up with my academic advisor and discussing the possibility of not conducting fieldwork that year. We both agreed rather too optimistically that it would blow over soon, and I would be able to conduct fieldwork in the summer, at worst. Unfortunately, that did not come to fruition that fall, especially since I was not a Chinese national and China severely limited the entry of foreigners. Quarantine mandates were also encouraged around the United States in the summer of 2020. Like countless others, I experienced abrupt social distancing, coupled with my struggles of maintaining relationships with colleagues, friends, and family members at a distance and through various online methods, now using break-out rooms and screen sharing. It also made me think about how quarantines affected my field sites: dating apps and China. Dating apps' primary purpose is to serve as a mobile online platform that facilitates intimate relationships, with the end goal being an in-person meet-up. Admittedly poetic and overdramatic, at the moment, I thought: "Without being able to meet online, wouldn't that make my whole research pointless if dating apps have been rendered purposeless with the quarantines?!"

Thematically, "purpose" has guided me through this research. In chapter two, "The coolness of anti-purposefulness," I showed that dating app users actively avoid appearing purposeful in their interactions on dating apps in order to appear attractive to other users. In chapter three, "Purposefully matching with foreigners," I introduced a niche group of dating app users who sought out foreign partners and were purposeful about the way they operate on dating apps. The

idea that dating apps may have lost their primary purpose - dating - during the quarantine began to frame this inquiry. Without the original purpose, how were dating app users in China approaching dating apps? Did they still wish to use them? If yes, what adjustments were they making to utilize dating apps to their advantage? If not, why not, and will it, or does it, affect their long-term dating app usage?

In a time when people can acutely feel loneliness while in quarantine, dating apps have captured the media's imagination globally.<sup>10</sup> As a dating app researcher, that did not surprise me, especially since research has shown that dating app users may turn to dating apps to ameliorate feelings of loneliness (Sumter, Vandebosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017). Other than their relationship with loneliness management, dating apps provide a quarantine-approved avenue to meet strangers in a more intimate setting. It is an online space that has been designated to help users mimic intimate, real-life exchanges (e.g., dating or flirting) — a necessity for those looking for a semblance of intimacy during an isolated time.

One pre-pandemic study already demonstrated that dating apps are used by those who feel lonely and, at the same time, are locationally bounded. In De Seta and Zhang's (2015) study in China, they found that shop-owners, hawkers, and sales personnel used dating apps while maintaining necessary stasis to their workplace, such as stalls or shops in the night market. Members of the dating app formed a group chat within the app to chat despite not knowing each other in real life. One user shared that she was part of the dating app group because it was simply

---

<sup>10</sup> Between April 21st to July 4th, 2020, the LexisNexis database found 596 news-based articles in English on the pandemic and dating apps. Most of these articles chronicle the second coming of dating apps and how in these "unprecedented" times, dating apps are here to radically change the way we date.

too "lonely and cold" (ibid.:180) to just sit there [in the market stall] day in and day out. As such, it was reasonable for me to suspect that the quarantine would encourage people to seek out dating apps to experience some semblance of the kind of social interaction they would otherwise miss.

Digital technological contexts can create mechanisms to mimic cultural practices that are otherwise difficult to access in young Shanghai people's daily lives, while simultaneously creating opportunities for new intimate formats such as affective labor or alternative dating scripts. For example, Mukbang, a Korean livestream where the broadcaster eats while talking to the viewers, was popularized in response to a desire not to eat alone. Koreans who find themselves eating alone can turn to Mukbang to feel like they are eating with someone (Choe, 2019; Kircaburun, Harris, Calado, & Griffiths, 2021; Woo, 2018). Similarly, I investigate how dating app users' usage and perception of such apps have changed in relation to the changes in their offline reality (the quarantine). How do they use dating apps to replace in-person dates? Do they see it as a replacement, or are they redefining the kind of intimacy they end up seeking on dating apps during periods of minimal social isolation?

To answer these questions, I turn to my case study of young Chinese professionals and their experiences with dating apps while in city-mandated quarantine. This chapter focuses on a distinctive virtual place, and a group of people in flux, at a particularly turbulent time. It demonstrates the contingency of mobile technology use, the heterogeneity of people who use it, and some of the paradoxes involved. In this study, I hope to rethink the idea of mobile dating app spaces as undifferentiated and static virtual zones and to see them instead as spaces that metamorphose as the offline world changes.

In this chapter I argue that this change in the use and understanding of dating apps can be understood through the framework of liminality. Briefly, liminality can be imagined as a state of

transition between one stage and the next, especially in the context on a major life event or through the rite of passage (V. Turner, 1967). Below, I further explore the concept of liminality and I argue that mobile dating space became liminal during the COVID-19 pandemic. The concept of liminality helps us understand how the quarantine shapes user experiences within the mobile dating space. The chapter is based on conversations with dating app users in China between the summer of 2020 and the fall of 2021. Depending on the informants' comfort level, the conversations happened on one of three different mediums, either chat, voice call, or video call. The conversations are presented here mainly in the form of monologues. The "speakers" are generally identified by their age, location, and occupation. Additional information is presented when it is necessary to fully understand the conversation. I have not met any of the interlocutors (four men, five women) in this chapter in person.

The discussion sections are formatted as follows: (1) the monologues relevant to the section, (2) a walkthrough of the interview and the conclusions derived from them, and (3) theoretical or historical context. As in the previous chapters, this format aims to center the voices of the research participants and to give them more uninterrupted space for the reader to pay attention to their feelings and thoughts with minimal intervention before I provide my analysis and discussion of the broader implications of their words.

This chapter addresses the following points: (1) how dating apps are used as a temporary balm in the face of the uncertainties that come with COVID-19 quarantines or international border restrictions, (2) how dating app users redefine the kind of value and intimacy they can temporarily extract from dating apps, (3) how users experience emotions that are akin to a spiritual experience from using dating apps during the quarantines, and (4) why users who abandon dating apps during the quarantine returned to the app post-quarantine.

## 4.1 Combatting a Period of Quarantine Liminality

*“Life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and to rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way.” — Arnold van Gennep ([1960] 2019: 189–190)*

### 4.1.1 Temporary Balm

This section shows how dating apps are used as a temporary balm in response to the ambiguity and uncertainties of COVID-19 quarantines and international border restrictions. It also introduces a liminality framework and explains how it can be applied to the quarantine period.

#### Kyson

Kyson is a 29-year-old interior designer. He has been in Shanghai for four years. He has a Taiwanese girlfriend, but she left for Taiwan during Chinese New Year [2019], and at the time of the interview, she had not been able to return to Shanghai to their shared home due to travel restrictions. I met Kyson on Tinder, where he had pictures with his face plastered over his profile, despite his fear that his girlfriend's friends might see him and report back to his girlfriend. When asked about his experience using dating apps during quarantine, he stated the following:

I did not use dating apps before the pandemic, as my girlfriend was home, and we would spend our free time meeting friends or going out for food. We lived together, which made it difficult to use dating apps difficult if she was around. Being on my own gets a little boring too. I don't know what to do with myself because I am so used to a life with a girlfriend. Dating apps essentially become a

game, just like all the other mobile games on my phone. A little bit of excitement, a little bit of gamification. It is fun— a purposeless sort of fun. I would say that initially, I was definitely looking for sex. After all, I haven't had sex for six months since she left for Taiwan. I know this is wrong, but I get lonely, especially being alone in this apartment all by myself. But then, I realized it was not as if we could meet up anyway. The purpose I initially had when I downloaded dating apps was simply not realistic. We are quarantined. So, then it just became sort of an empty way to pass the time, until the girlfriend returns, or until the pandemic is over. I feel like dating apps cause people to be more introverted in China. Especially since the Chinese tend to be more introverted already. If there were no dating apps, you would have to go out and socialize to meet people. Because of quarantine, the sense of introversion gets exacerbated. At least, that is what I am telling myself about why I have not taken the initiative to meet my matches even though quarantines are largely lifted now in my area. Plus, this is a temporary balm, at least until border restrictions are relaxed and my girlfriend can return, and I can resume my old life. I know it won't exactly be the same, the pandemic will change things, but it will somewhat resemble pre-pandemic, you know.

### **Poe**

Poe is a 24-year-old tech salesperson. He has been in Shanghai for the past 20 years. After asking Poe some basic questions about himself and his dating status and philosophies, I asked him to tell me why he used dating apps during quarantine and how that experience was.

I was already using dating apps before the pandemic. However, my usage of Tinder grew exponentially when the outbreak happened. It was so much fun because there were so many more new or active users. There were a lot of Chinese that lived overseas 'fleeing' back to China since March. I think this huge influx, combined with people needing new entertainment mediums, led to an increase in dating app users. It definitely helps make this temporary situation [the quarantine] a lot more bearable. Marriages are also getting broken up during this period; I am sure you have seen the news. Married couples have to face each other all day long and can't hide from their marital problems anymore, leading to divorce. Maybe these people are on dating apps too. I met a few who said they are contemplating divorce and are on dating apps to test the water. They are probably using dating apps to dip their foot into the dating pool, to see what it is like, especially while their marriages are crumbling. This is all temporary, though. The moment things go back to normal, they will find those relationship problems to evaporate as they have to worry about bigger things like work and can distract themselves with friends and outdoor activities. Or maybe they will take the next step and get divorced? One of the women I talked to on the dating apps who ended up confiding in me, even said that being on dating apps and innocently talking to men is probably a temporary solution to a temporary problem [the marital problems].

---

Poe and Kyson are the first two participants I spoke to. Both repeatedly mentioned the word "temporary" or utilized phrases in relation to such term. Kyson said how he was in a state of limbo or flux during the quarantine and border restriction; he did not know when the border

restrictions would be lifted (as of the time of writing, the international border has not been reopened to most foreigners) and he could return to a *semblance* of his old life. Here, I note the word “semblance” to highlight that Kyson was aware that a life post-restriction would be a shadow of his old life and would resemble his old life, yet it would not be completely identical to his old life. Therefore, the concept of “liminality” can be usefully applied to this quarantine period (and to border restrictions for some).

The concept of liminality was first developed by folklorist Arnold van Gennep (2019) and later popularized by Victor Turner. V. Turner (1974b)) describes liminality as the "betwixt and between" of any situation or object. In anthropology, liminality refers to the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a rite of passage. During this period, participants no longer hold their pre-"ritual" status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold post-"ritual." The in-between period - the "ritual" itself - causes participants to "stand at the threshold" between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, community, and a different way of life which is established once the "ritual" is completed. These rites of passage involve three stages: separation (preliminal), transition (liminal), and reintegration (postliminal) (V. Turner, 1967).

A few other scholars have applied the concept of liminality to the quarantine during the pandemic. For example, Orlikowski and Scott (2021)) see quarantine as an opportunity for liminal innovation, especially with technology. Another scholar argues that liminality is evident in one's experience in a quarantine camp in Vietnam, as quarantine is both a physical and social isolation that is temporary (Nguyen, 2021). Also, making the connection between quarantines and liminality, Bell (2021)) published a short article about the liminality of the stay-at-home orders in Australia entitled "Pandemic Passages: An Anthropological Account of Life and Liminality during

COVID-19." A common theme in these articles is that the quarantine leads to participants living outside of their typical environments and therefore they often feel spatially and temporally dislocated, and socially unstructured within this liminal context. Thus, in the liminal stage, we see a separation phase, which usually involves a symbolic behavior indicating detachment of the participant from an earlier fixed social status or identity (V. Turner, 1967). Thus, the status of the participant becomes liminal.

In Kyson's case, when his girlfriend who lived with him in Shanghai could not reenter the country from Taiwan, he felt like he could not reinstate his former life structure. He felt lost. As he said, "I don't know what to do with myself because I am so used to a life with a girlfriend." During this period of uncertainty concerning his girlfriend's return, he turned to dating apps as a temporary balm. He was hoping to arrange for meet-ups post quarantine while also engaging in affective conversations with the opposite sex and hiding the fact that he is, in fact, attached. However, he did not follow through with meetups because he felt too introverted to leave his home to make that connection physically.

However, he admitted to continuously harboring hope for sex with his matches, even if he had no intention of actively making that happen. The dating app space became a liminal space for him as well, in that sense. He entered it with an intention that he hoped to fulfill in response to a liminal situation - the quarantine and border restriction (preliminal) and was continuously engaging in conversations with matches that might lead to sex (liminal), turning the match into a physical interaction when a match showed potential (postliminal). Because he was not ready to move to the postliminal stage of "actually cheating" on his girlfriend, he continuously resided in the liminal dating space. He hovered in between his intention to find a sex partner and actually having sex with a match. The liminal experience of "the search" that remained online (and mostly

on dating apps) provided Kyson with a way to cope with feeling untethered from the loss of structure in his life due to the pandemic.

While Poe did not explain much about why and how dating apps have made his life more bearable, I included his interview here because he brought up an interesting phenomenon that he experienced during his time on dating apps in the pandemic. He first mentioned that there were more people on dating apps during the quarantine and hypothesized that it might partly be because many couples are having marital problems because of the pressure that comes with living in close, quarantined quarters. He talked to some married women who viewed dating apps as a way to try their hand at dating in secret as a way to cope with their unhappy marriages during the quarantine. Poe said, "One of the women I talked to on the dating apps, who ended up confiding in me, even said that being on dating apps and innocently talking to men is probably a temporary solution to a temporary problem [the marital problems]," indicating that once the liminal period of quarantine was over and the stresses related to it were lifted, this liminal temporary solution of seeking the attention of the opposite online would also be discontinued. Dating apps served as a liminal testing ground, between pre-quarantine and post-quarantine, between being married and divorced. The next section looks more closely at how and why the dating app space becomes liminal during the quarantine.

#### **4.1.2 Differently Temporarily**

"Tantan brings you on a journey to find the love of your life" (Source: Tantan official website) is the motto of one of the most popular dating apps in China. It is displayed prominently on the front page of their official website. A short paragraph describes how to use the app accompanies the tagline:

“Swipe right to like, swipe left if you have no feeling, explore the pictures Tantan delivers to you, to search for your closest fateful experience. if the person you liked likes you back, congratulations, it is love at first sight!”

The slogan and paragraph frame the primary purpose of the dating app very well - to look for love, or at the very least, to date. The language used is overtly romantic and grand; phrases like “the love of your life,” “fateful experience,” and “love at first sight” are employed heavy-handedly. While none of my informants saw dating apps as “romance central,” they acknowledged that the dating apps’ primary purpose is to create real-life dates, and not to create platonic relationships. It is important to emphasize that the online exchanges are intended to be taken offline, and that the dating app acts as a mere facilitator or as an introductory medium for a potential relationship. Tantan recognizes this, too. In the second half of the paragraph on the website banner, Tantan mentioned the following: “With Tantan, say goodbye to the awkward introductions with strangers.”

While dating apps can still introduce potential partners to each other online, because of the quarantine, dating app users were not able to complete the process by taking the exchange offline and meeting up with their online matches to further ascertain compatibility. This renders dating apps’ primary purpose temporarily suspended during the height of the pandemic when quarantining is mandated.

In this section, I look at how a flexible understanding of liminality is helpful. This is because it allows us to see how the online dating internet space entered a period of liminality when the primary purpose of such apps is suspended. When the primary purpose of dating apps was suspended, it brought about disorientation. The disorientation stemmed from users not being able to partake in an activity - transitioning matches to offline dating - that they were used to engaging

in pre-pandemic times. I follow the story of Sherlock, Giselle, and Poppy who experienced that disorientation, and still found different ways to extract value and meaning from dating apps - in ways that they weren't intended for during the quarantine.

### **Sherlock**

Sherlock is a 29-year-old product manager who has been living and working in Shanghai for six years. When asked about his experience conversing on dating apps in Shanghai during quarantine, he stated:

What do I talk about with my matches online? I mostly ask about their occupation and what the pandemic is like at their place. During the pandemic, I used dating apps a little more. It feels like one app isn't enough (because there are limitations to how many I can swipe a day), so I downloaded many dating apps. I tend to use the apps a little more at home, so I use them a lot more because of the quarantine. But I approach it more casually. This is a special period; my goal for using the app was to meet up with girls. So, I had to find a new purpose within mobile dating apps. It took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do with it [the dating apps]. I can't stop because it is already such a habit of mine to check on my dating apps as I go about my day. At the end of the day, dating apps are meant to facilitate people meeting up in real life. Since that is not possible during quarantine, I see it as just an aimless form of chatting to fill up the time. I would see it as equivalent to playing games on my phone. [NW: Would you go back to looking for dates once you can meet up with your matches?] Definitely! What I am doing now on dating apps is just during the quarantine; I still use dating apps because it is part

of a habit that I already had pre-pandemic, and I now have a lot of time on my hands.

### **Giselle**

Giselle is a 26-year-old financial consultant. She is a Chinese national who has been working in New York City for the past few years. However, she returned to China when the pandemic began to be with her family. She lived in China for a few months and planned to return to the United States when the pandemic situation stabilized. She installed dating apps when she returned to China. When asked why she installed dating apps in China, she responded:

I don't have a lot of friends here in Hangzhou. Most of my social life is in the United States. My friends in China are scattered all over the country. Since I am here temporarily, I am not looking for a boyfriend or anything serious at the moment. I have used dating apps for dating while I was in New York though, just not here. I just want to have interactions with people other than my parents. Being social has always been the norm. The internet has just become the only option for that right now. [WW: What about your friends in the states?] The time difference makes it difficult. Also, there is something more "intimate" about feeling that the person I am talking to is somewhere in my vicinity even if we don't meet, even though I have no interest whatsoever in how they look. So, instead of using dating apps the usual way, my profile is set to match with both men and women. I made a lot of female friends! I find the conversations a lot deeper, maybe because people have more time to pay attention to conversations. I also notice that people ask me

about the things I have written in my profile a lot more. That's interesting. Will I use it for in-person dating again? Sure, after I return to the US.

### **Poppy**

Poppy is a 28-year-old traditional Chinese music teacher. She has been in Shanghai for five years. When asked about her experience on dating apps during the quarantine, she stated:

I have used dating apps even before the quarantine. During the quarantine, I was not with my family and remained in Shanghai. So, beyond having to stay home, nothing much has changed for me; my needs have not changed. I still want to be social; I still want a sexual partner. I want to remain positive. Life is short, and I want to enjoy life as much as possible, even in a pandemic. However, I am also aware that dating apps serve a specific purpose [dating and hookups]; we all follow a tacitly agreed rule of conduct on how to go about things. You chat, you arrange to meet, and well, you fuck. Or at least, I do. But during the social distancing period, it is anarchy. What are the 'rules?' What are we supposed to do here [dating apps]? It is like the Wild Wild West until things return to normal. The moment the quarantine rules were relaxed, I ended up meeting up with two guys that I chatted with during the quarantine.

One gave me an experience that I never thought I could experience in bed. The other guy is insatiable! He needs sex every day and goes at it many times a night. I am still cautious, though. They live super close to me, and we are all healthy. With dating apps, I could set my location to be less than 1 mile away. That

way, I could meet people that are close by, and it won't be that dangerous since I don't have to travel far to meet them.

---

In the conversations above, we see Sherlock, Giselle, and Poppy using dating apps a little differently during the quarantine than they had earlier. Sherlock used dating apps during the quarantine period as a form of mindless entertainment and suspended his intention of finding a girlfriend or someone to meet with in person. Sherlock reasoned that the dating app had lost its primary function when social distancing was encouraged or enforced, considering that dating apps were previously used to facilitate in-person meetings. Giselle was using dating apps to make local platonic friends, including men and women, which was a significant departure from how she used dating apps before the pandemic. Poppy still used apps to meet men in person, but with more caution. During the pandemic she also only chatted with men who lived less than a mile away from her, so that she could facilitate a safer (closer) meet-up when the quarantine restrictions began loosening up, but the threat of infection was still there.

Liminal periods can be destructive and constructive (Thomassen, 2016). A more flexible understanding of liminality allows us to see how ritual spaces open up for new possible uses, beyond what Turner had suggested (Thomassen, 2009). Broadly speaking, liminality applies to both space and time. Moments and places can be liminal, such as countries undergoing regime change or "borderlands." In this study, the online dating space enters a period of liminality during the height of the pandemic because the primary purpose of the dating app is temporarily suspended.

Both Sherlock and Poppy highlighted their initial confusion regarding using dating apps at the onset of the quarantine. However, they were already avid dating app users before the quarantine, and they assumed the quarantine would not last forever.

Poppy's use of the phrases — “anarchy”, “Wild Wild West”, and “until things return to normal” indicate that the dating app space entered a liminal period. Giselle, a heterosexual woman, had completely ignored the dating aspect of the dating app during this period. Instead, she found meaning in looking for platonic friends during her stay in China because she was not planning to stay in China for a long time as well. One would wonder why she would use dating apps if she was not planning to stay in China, since she planned to return to New York as soon as she could, especially since the normal purpose - dating - was suspended. However, Giselle was able to find an alternative purpose for the kind of apps that she was already familiar with in the United States (she said she used different dating apps in the US for dating purposes quite frequently and was comfortable with the formats of the platforms). During the quarantine period, Giselle used this time on dating apps to create a new form of sociality on dating apps not only with men, but also with women — an activity that she did not previously engage in on dating apps, nor something that dating apps actively advocated. This period brought about disorientation, as the quarantine brought about withdrawal from normal modes of action in this case: communication that leads to offline sex and dating.

Giselle, Poppy, and Sherlock assumed that the space would eventually exit or shift out of its liminal stage, and they would once again be free to date as they used to, with several caveats. For example, Poppy still limited her range of matches to those closest to her geographically so she would not have to travel far to meet her dates to minimize the risk of contracting COVID-19. One primary characteristic of liminality is an “exit” or an end point (V. Turner, 1967). Turner argues all liminality must eventually expire, as it is a state of extraordinary intensity that cannot sustain itself for an extended period without some form of structure to stabilize it. For example, the individual can return to the surrounding social structure. Otherwise, liminal communities may

eventually develop their internal social structure, which Turner named "normative *communitas*." How are dating users aware of the eventual demise of the liminal mobile dating space?

The liminal mobile dating space is created by a "collapse of order" due to the worldwide pandemic. Sherlock's usage of the phrase "special period" demonstrates that he understood the experience during the epidemic to be temporary and directly affected by the pandemic. The "outside world" and the "dating app online world" are not mutually exclusive but deeply intertwined. We can see a sample of how online and offline affect each other in (Madge & O'Connor, 2002) study.

The authors show how new mothers experience the simultaneity of online/offline experience by exploring cyberspace as a performative liminal space, a space in which women experiment with different versions of motherhood. As such, these women have residual attachments to embodied experiences and practices, while in cyberspace they can produce new selves within the digital space (Madge & O'Connor, 2002). This example illustrates how mobile dating space and offline space are intersecting and entwined.

In the same vein, some scholars argue the unique mobile nature of dating app spaces facilitate their sensitivity to offline reality (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015; Maliepaard & van Lisdonk, 2019; Miles, 2017; Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016). For example, Miles (2017), 1603-1604) writes, "The user can go about their work in physical space while also communicating with men on a virtual platform provided by the apps simultaneously and in an interconnected manner". Thus, the mobile dating app is a platform that makes it easy for users to switch back and forth between both spaces because mobile phones are almost always with the users.

In short, as the offline world enters a liminal stage, the dating app space also enters a liminal stage. Faced with this "double liminality," dating app users must suspend their usual dating app

practices and create new protocols and rules to navigate the dating app space to continuously extract meaning and use out of it — as with the case of Giselle, Poppy, and Sherlock.

#### **4.1.3 Revelations, Introspections, and Awakenings**

Above, this chapter established that the quarantine period in the physical world itself is a liminal stage. I explored the idea that the shared internet space that dating app users occupy while they use dating apps becomes liminal during the onset of the quarantine — especially when dating apps were rendered temporarily “purposeless.” The virtual (dating app) and the physical (China) were at times simultaneously liminal.

However, this is not necessarily the only change. As users find their footing in dating apps and find new ways to use them meaningfully, in ways that repurpose dating apps beyond their original intended use, the dating app slowly shifts out of liminal space for everyone. The period of “anarchy” and the “Wild Wild West” may end, even if the liminal quarantine period has not. However, in the scope of this research, the participants were interviewed at a time when both the virtual and the physical “spaces” were liminal. Next, I interrogate that point further by investigating the effects of liminality on dating app users while they are experiencing “double liminality” — particularly their feelings of self-realization, revelation, and introspection — feelings that are often linked to the effects felt by those experiencing liminality.

Here, I present the monologues of Jessica and Tumbleweed. Both of them were dating app users even before the quarantine and both used dating apps for dating purposes. Jessica and Tumbleweed experienced fear of precarity and loneliness as a result of the effects of the quarantine on their daily lives and the way dating apps operate. This suspension of their known realities manifests in introspection about themselves on a personal level, especially on dating apps, since

dating apps are of a more personal nature. They experienced something close to a “spiritual” experience — not in the conventional “religious” sense but in a more “in-touch with oneself” sense. In this sense they developed a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. They were able to do this by slowing down and evaluating why they were on dating apps, what they were looking for in the long run, and what would fulfill them. Broadly, I link this more introspective evocation to the effect that one can find among those experiencing liminality.

### **Jessica**

Jessica is a 25-year-old woman who had worked in the fashion supply chain industry in Shanghai for three years when I met her. She was living and working on her own in Shanghai during the quarantine period. When asked what she was looking for on dating apps during quarantine, she stated:

I still use Tinder during quarantine. I think it's out of killing loneliness and trying to find someone to talk to. Around this time, I also developed the mindset of 'looking for nothing and everything.' The pandemic shook me. It made me value dating apps differently. I now look to dating apps as a way to stimulate a fresh mindset, meaningful conversation, good sex, chilled date. Anything that brings me a sense of newness! A way to trigger my inspiration and enthusiasm for life! It made me look inward to figure out who I am, my boundaries, and the kind of partner I need in a relationship. Covid-19 is a double-edged sword. It boosts depression and anxiety, which creates a stronger need and eagerness for intimacy. People turn to dating apps because people are seeking company during this period of uncertainty and loneliness during the quarantine. I learned a lot throughout this quarantine

period on dating apps. As if I have gone through a cleanse, some sort of an awakening. Through contact with people, I realized that we could know ourselves better, as my matches interact with me either positively or negatively. Through my interactions on the dating app, I also realized the fundamental importance of loving ourselves and taking better care of ourselves. Dating apps provide us with an avenue where we can leverage them [the apps] for our self-improvement. During the pandemic, dating apps helped me to improve myself, mitigate uncertainty, and face an unpromising future with courage.

### **Tumbleweed**

Tumbleweed is a 22-year-old Chinese man who was a university student based in Shanghai. When asked why he was using dating apps during quarantine, he stated:

I don't generally use dating apps outside of this quarantine period. This is because I am a realistic and goal-oriented person. Since I am not willing to look for marriage or a girlfriend or even a friend with benefits on dating apps, there is no point in using them at all. I had a girlfriend that I met online before, which burned to the ground, so I don't trust the apps to date anymore and have generally avoided it. I have only downloaded it during the quarantine. It is also why I don't talk to people based on the way they look. In fact, I don't mind dating apps where people don't put up pictures of themselves. I am not worried about how they look because I don't treat my matches as dating material. It is not a pre-requisite for a covid friend. I used dating apps outside of covid times very briefly in the past for dating, and I quickly realized that it was just not for me. But I did experience a revelation!

I was more focused on their pictures in the past, and now I find myself gravitating to fun and long introductions in the match's profile— the written word. Since my purpose is different, my attention goes to words instead of their faces. I realized that these women are interesting beyond their looks. It had been my ignorance. I also find the conversations to be deeper because we are forced to be more in tune with our thoughts without external distractions. We talk about the difficulty the pandemic poses to our lives, the mundanity of being home (especially with family members), the things we read and watch during the pandemic.

I asked him whether he got lonely. He said:

I have not been dating for more than six months, so yes, I am lonely. But I am not bothered by the fact that I have not been intimate with a woman for a while. When I get to talk about personal experiences with matches in the same circumstances as I am, it is intimate enough for me. I do have a memorable person that comes to mind. There is a girl that updates her profile every day where she shares her thoughts on different topics or talks about her day. It is as if I am subscribing to some kind of magazine column. It feels intimate, accessing these public thoughts that feel oh-so-secret. I know she knows that people read this, I mean, that's why she puts it out there, but something is exciting and intimate about her not knowing that I, Tumbleweed, am reading them. That I get to know so much about her when she doesn't even know I exist.

When asked if he ever nudged the conversation towards a more sexual nature, Tumbleweed said, "I don't, even if I want to! However, I don't expect this to be the majority, especially during the quarantine. But I am sure I am not alone in my sexual frustration. But, considering that even

couples can't make love these days, we singles should just suck it up and shut up. That is how I comfort myself, at least."

---

Tumbleweed and Jessica discussed at length the way their usage of dating apps during the pandemic fundamentally changed the way they viewed themselves, their relationships, other dating app users, and the platform itself. Jessica thought dating apps "made [her] value dating apps differently." She changed her attitude by looking to dating apps to stimulate a fresh mindset, a sense of newness, and a way to trigger her "inspiration and enthusiasm for life!" Jessica described how she was forced to look inward because of the uncertainty of the pandemic, which was further proliferated by the ambiguous state that dating apps entered because of the temporary inability to meet people in person. She said, "During the pandemic, dating apps helped me to improve on myself, mitigate uncertainty, and face an unpromising future with courage."

This quote also shows that she was very aware of the precarity of the future, especially with the way the pandemic very quickly changed how she and the people around her lived. This caused her to reevaluate her outlook on life, to think about self-improvement and how to "mitigate uncertainty." Unintentionally, dating apps, in their moldable liminal state, helped her embark on a process of learning more about herself and what she wanted in a partner — likening it to an "awakening."

She said, "I learned a lot throughout this quarantine period on dating apps. As if I have gone through a cleanse, some sort of an awakening." She is not unique in this "awakening" during her time on dating apps over the quarantine. Tumbleweed experienced a "revelation" of sorts as well.

He said, "I did experience a revelation [.....]. I realized that these women are interesting beyond their looks. It had been my ignorance. I also find the conversations to be deeper because we are essentially forced to be more in tune with our thoughts without all the external distractions."

Tumbleweed reevaluated both how he previously used dating apps as well as how he viewed women on dating apps. He talked about how he felt as if his old self was shallow and saw women's value (on dating apps) as largely defined by their appearance. Soon after the pandemic began, Tumbleweed found himself focusing on their personalities and writings on online profiles because quarantine eliminated the in-person aspect of dating. He reached out and apologized to women who he was matched with, the ones he had previously dismissed without getting to know them on a personal level. He found it enriching and rewarding to have "discovered this revelation." In short, he learned about his previous superficiality and felt a strong sense of personal growth during the pandemic. He learned to value women as people, and not just as bodies.

Furthermore, Tumbleweed also experienced intimacy with a woman who he did not even talk to on the dating apps. He mentioned how the woman would jot down her musings in her profile, and it changed every day - like a diary. He felt close to her, even though they had never spoken or exchanged messages. During that period, he found an alternative form of intimacy, one that was not advertised by the dating apps — covert intimacy.

Victor Turner described liminality as a "stage of reflection and [. . .] a realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle the factors of existence (V. Turner, 1967, p. 53)." Hence, liminality may be envisioned as a realm of pure possibility in which unconventional ideas and relations may emerge. Tumbleweed and Jessica repurposed dating apps amid the restructuring of the mobile dating app ecosystem. They discovered new ways of using the platform that did not necessarily fit into the "dating" category, and in the process, they discovered new

things about themselves that enhanced themselves from within. Turner explained that we are not dealing with structural contradictions when discussing liminality but with the essentially unstructured. Therefore, individuals experiencing liminality are withdrawn from their structural positions and, thus, from their values, norms, sentiments, and techniques associated with those positions. They are also more likely to shed their previous thoughts, feelings, and actions and to form new ones. Individuals are simultaneously forced and encouraged to think about themselves and their societies. Both Tumbleweed and Jessica's actions align with Turner's argument that sees liminality as a stage of reflection (V. Turner, 1967, p. 241).

When uncertainty interrupts and suspends established practices, the preexisting practices are reevaluated. This may create an opening — a liminal time and space. This opening disrupts usual practices in a way that engenders the possibility for creativity (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Orlikowski & Scott, 2021). V. Turner (1967)) has pointed out that liminality creates a ripe condition for novel configurations of ideas and promotes a sense of spirituality. Jungians applied Turner's concept of social liminality. They used it to show that individuals undergo the individuation process of self-realization while moving through liminal space and time. Taking place in the disorientating phase of liminality is a process of breaking down to (re)make whole one's meaning, purpose, and sense of relatedness once more (Homans, 1995; Miller, 2004; Shorter, 1987). This is clearly seen in the case of Tumbleweed and Jessica. In a period of liminality (quarantine) in a space that is liminal (the dating app space), both Jessica and Tumbleweed expressed having "revelations" or an "awakening" in relation to their dating app usage in relation to their profound self-realization.

## **4.2 Using Dating Apps to Combat a Period of Post-liminality**

In this section, I give space to young Chinese dating app users who did not use or stopped using dating apps during the quarantine. Then, I explain why they did not use them and how and why they returned to dating apps post-quarantine.

### **Luna**

Luna is a 26-year-old who has lived in Shanghai for four years. She works in marketing communication. She downloaded dating apps only when quarantine restrictions began to loosen up and had not used them before the pandemic. In our interview, she said:

During the quarantine, my friends and family don't have to go to work. So, I was not lonely. I got to spend lots of time with them, in person with family members and online with friends. It was like a mini holiday. But now, even with the pandemic still looming in China, it got better, and people are going back to work. So, I am lonely now. The difference is stark. It went from all the people I love hanging out with me to all of them going back to work. So, I downloaded dating apps to find a boyfriend. [WW: Why not look for a boyfriend during the quarantine on dating apps?] There is no point. Dating apps are used to facilitate in-person meetings for relationships or hookups, right? During the quarantine, we can't do that. Plus, I am not lonely. So, I spent some time with people in my life.

### **Sherry**

I talked to Sherry when quarantine restrictions had been lifted in major cities in China. She did not want to provide me with information regarding her age or occupation. She was living with

her family in her hometown during the pandemic, and at the time of the interview, she had recently returned to Shanghai to resume working in person. She said that she did not download dating apps until she returned to Shanghai and was living alone again.

I do not see the point of downloading dating apps during the quarantine. There is no opportunity to meet anyone at that time, no? I prefer to meet people in person, so I wasn't looking to find matches on dating apps when I couldn't. So, I didn't feel lonely. I was with my family, a rare occurrence, and I got to talk to my friends all of the time because everyone wasn't working. It was great! Also, I guess it feels like my life had a long pause [referring to the quarantine period] as if nothing happened during the quarantine period. Now, I feel like I have broken out of that trance and should return to my life again. I am also lonelier now. A lot of my friends haven't returned to Shanghai yet.

I interviewed Luna and Sherry after the quarantine in Shanghai was lifted. I expressed my interest in interviewing them about their experiences using dating apps during the quarantine. Both told me they did not use them anymore because they did not need them. I was tempted to thank them for their time and move on. But instead, we struck up conversations, and I am glad for it. They highlighted a different way that dating app users responded to the quarantine and how they managed the post-liminal stage with dating apps.

Luna and Sherry, who were avid dating app users before the quarantine, promptly returned to dating apps after the quarantine ended. It was also when they left their parental homes for Shanghai. During the quarantine, they suspended their need for romantic companionship because they could spend quality time with family members from their hometown — a rare treat for the young professionals who work far away from home. Knowing that quarantines were temporary

also encouraged them to put dating matters aside and to focus on friends or family members who were similarly as idle as they were. Prior to the quarantine, both of them were casually looking for romantic partners. Like many young career women in major cities in China that I have come across in my fieldwork, Luna and Sherry were always “in the market” for a potential partner prior to the quarantine. Friends, family members, and co-workers were always on the lookout for a good match that they could introduce to them. Both would casually attend social events and note the single men in attendance. They also used dating apps. These were all suspended during the quarantine when they left for their hometown.

However, upon their return to the city, they felt an acute sense of loneliness in cosmopolitan cities like Shanghai, surrounded by strangers. Dating apps have been documented to be used by Chinese migrants in cosmopolitan cities by Xu and Wu (2019)). Without preexisting and strong social networks based on school or family, singles used dating apps to meet other strangers. Termed *mosheng ren* (stranger) communication, Chinese migrants from all walks of life participate in this Chinese practice of cosmopolitanism. *Mosheng ren*, who may not be accustomed to starting interactions with other strangers in person, turns to dating apps to connect without a clear purpose. This contrasts with more targeted introductions facilitated through family members, friends, colleagues, or acquaintances.

Both Luna and Sherry re-participated in *mosheng ren* communication the moment they returned to Shanghai post-quarantine. However, this does not necessarily mean that they reverted to an unchanged pre-liminal existence of dating apps. On the contrary, in their post-liminal world, Luna and Sherry felt a more acute sense of loneliness after experiencing increased levels of

intimacy with their friends and family members during quarantine, so much so that both became more active dating app users compared to their use before the quarantine.<sup>11</sup>

In summary, Luna and Sherry's experiences give us a glimpse into rejecting or ignoring apps during the quarantine and then reinstating them in the post-liminal world, post-quarantine where dating apps' primary purpose is reinstated, but with a renewed purpose. This illustrates a breadth of experiences and highlights the heterogeneity of people's use of dating apps, as well as some of the patterns involved. It also serves to recast imaginings of the dating app space as a static virtual zone, and in turn, this chapter has shown how it shifts alongside and in relation to the offline world with which it interacts. Luna and Sherry recognized that the dating app space had temporarily become relatively useless to them during the quarantine, primarily because of their intimate familial relations, but they rediscovered its renewed "useful-ness" post quarantine.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

I started this research during the pre-pandemic period, with the intention of finding out how young Chinese professionals used dating apps. The project quickly shifted during the pandemic to a study of how users responded to dating apps during a period of isolation and how the space of

---

<sup>11</sup> I cannot comment on whether or not this trend continues or whether or not usage will be normalized to the pre-liminal stage after their friends and family members settle down into their everyday lives post quarantine. However, I suspect that the shock of post-quarantine life will eventually wear off.

dating apps also shifted. I found a rich and heterogeneous experience anchored in, what I argue is, the liminality of both space (the dating app space) and time (the quarantine period).

As we have seen above, some young Chinese professionals redefined the way they extracted intimacy and value from dating apps, during what they assumed would be the “temporary” quarantine period. Some users used dating apps not to search for something concrete (like physical sex), but as a temporary balm to ease the struggles and loneliness of the quarantine. They recognized the impermanence and liminality of the quarantine and used it to transform and rethink their situations and expectations.

As the offline world entered the liminal stage with quarantine mandates, the dating app space also entered a liminal stage, which I call double liminality. Dating apps connect to and correspond with the offline world and are influenced by it. This is because the apps were originally intended to serve as a conduit to facilitate offline meet-ups. Without their core offline purpose, dating apps essentially became a playground for users to find different ways to extract value from them. Some adjusted their strategies to arrange for offline meet-ups post quarantine; others derived value from alternative forms of connections and intimacies, anchored within dating apps, e.g., reading other users' profiles to feel closer to them, or developing deep conversations and exchanges with people who they would never meet outside of the space of the app.

While some interlocutors elicited practical value from alternate forms of intimacies through dating apps, others saw the experience of being on dating apps during a pandemic as an unprecedented opportunity and catalyst to self-exploration and learning. This is another element that typically accompanies a liminal experience. Users have credited the ambiguity of the dating app space and quarantine period to help them discover new things about themselves and to reorient

their frame of mind. Informants expressed having personal revelations, insights, personal growth, or awakenings from this unique experience.

However, not all users remained on dating apps during the quarantine. Some abandoned dating apps during the quarantine period in favor of the close quarters and company of those who shared their quarantine bubbles, such as family members and close friends. Because many Chinese were not working during the first major quarantine, they had an unusual opportunity as young working adults: an extensive amount of time that they could spend with their close network. Some experienced it as a “holiday” whereas others were profoundly lonely and alone. Those that I have interviewed who experienced family intimacy during the pandemic “holiday”, however, promptly returned to dating apps post quarantine. They attributed their return to the app to a heightened sense of loneliness as a migrant returning to a cosmopolitan city away from their family. They also felt that the dating app had left its liminal stage, which gave them more clarity on how and why they should use dating apps.

To conclude this chapter, I have used a liminality framework to show how COVID-19 and its quarantine period have temporarily reshaped intimacy, especially the technologically mediated intimacy of dating apps. By exploring the intersection between technology, intimacy, and a global epidemic, I have presented examples of how technological tools meant for dating are transformed into other affective activities beyond the scope of the mobile dating space. The investigation of the mobile app dating space during the pandemic, by young Chinese professionals, helped expose the contingency of Internet use, the diversity of ways that people use it, and the contradictions involved. It suggests the need to reimagine virtual spaces capable of occupying a liminal zone instead of seeing them or assuming they are static and unyielding.

## 5.0 Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how cultural identities, imaginaries, and intimacy among Shanghainese dating app users are remade, subverted, and communicated through engagement with dating apps' digital technology. In this concluding chapter, I highlight the core themes and insights that emerged during fieldwork, analysis, and writing.

The first theme is the centrality of *purpose* and how purpose is fundamental to understanding what guides young Shanghainese's unique dating apps usage. Dating app users engage in what I refer to as “purposeful anti-purposefulness” to explore more flexible modes of intimacy while pursuing more stable, long-term relationships. The second theme is the *adaptiveness* of dating app users, which is made even more salient during the COVID-19 quarantine period. Furthermore, I look at how users adapted from the “purposeful anti-purposefulness” model to *subvert* the core purpose that dating apps are designed for. Instead, they found new ways to derive value from dating apps (whose core function is to facilitate offline interactions) during the immobility of the COVID-19 quarantine period.

The third theme is the “tension between tradition and modernity.” This theme shows how the experiences of Shanghainese dating app users, as they navigate between old and new, is gendered. Finally, the fourth and final theme is the importance of anthropology in the design of digital artifacts, like the dating apps I have been studying. The unique experience of Shanghainese dating app users shows that dating apps (or, more broadly, digital artifacts) can be and are experienced and adapted differently in different localities. This experience is influenced by everyday cultural, economic, political, and health realities. Based on the findings in this

dissertation, this theme also argues for tech companies to invest in more intersectional on the ground research that takes specific localities into account.

### **5.1 Purposeful Anti-purposefulness**

When I first approached dating app users in 2019, they offered more ambiguous reasons for using dating apps, such as curing boredom and treeholing. Ambiguous motivations are consistent among dating app users in other regions of the world. For example, some dating app researchers have consistently argued that "to pass the time" or "to relieve boredom" are key reasons why people engage with other dating app users (Chan, 2017; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Through extended, longer-term interviews, the participants in my research admitted that ambiguous reasons are a convenient, catch-all answer. These answers to "What are your motivation for using dating app(s)?" are doled out to researchers, fellow dating app users, and acquaintances. Their stated motivations were cryptic to avoid more probing questions into a very personal matter.

As such, this often requires the researcher to have a closer, long-term relationship with the informants as is the case in long term and sustained anthropological research. This gives the research subjects time to develop a trusting and more intimate relationship with the researcher. Dating app researchers often rely on people's self-reports about their practices and attitudes which, in turn, are taken at face value without examining how the discourse emerged or is structured - an issue highlighted by media anthropologist Debra Spitulnik (1993)) regarding media-based social research. In this research, as is the case with most long-term anthropological fieldwork (Constable, 2003; Lukács, 2020), I found that users opened up over time, just as they do with one another. This

could be one of the multi-faceted reasons why dating app users often initially provided ambiguous or vague answers regarding their motivations.

Ronnie, a male participant in his late 20s, explained it like this:

There is nothing much one can say if I say I use dating apps because I am bored. What can they ask? If I say I am trying to look for a love-based relationship, people might think I am desperate to rely on a dating app — even by people who also use dating apps with the same goal. The more busybody acquaintances would start setting me up with their neighbors and whatnot. I don't want the hassle. It is easier to say I am just trying to dispel some boredom. It is none of anyone's business anyway what I am trying to do in my personal life, even more especially so to some researcher that is a total stranger. That is why I told you that when you first approached me about why I use dating apps.

Beyond sidestepping probing questions into their intimate lives, I argue that it reflects the dating dynamic described by Farrer (2014)). “Love as commitment: aiming for a common future (but keeping options open)” is a chapter subheading in Farrer's work about marriage and premarital intimacy in Shanghai (Farrer, 2014, p. 69). Farrer describes how the young people he interviewed in China still thought of love and marriage as the final destination. They entered intimate relationships with the goal of a common future — a love-based relationship or marital partnership. However, that did not mean that their intentions were static. Because they were unmarried, were uncertain of their relationships, or weren't cohabitating, heterosexual young people maintained more than one relationship while also seeking and engaging other possibilities for social, emotional, or sexual relations with the opposite sex. Acceptable boundaries of what an

intimate relationship constitutes were thus more open to interpretation than in the 1980s and early 1990s (Farrer, 2014).

I posit that the landscape of intimacy in dating apps reflects the social script Farrer described for relationship-seeking and formation among young Shanghainese. Young Shanghainese using dating apps are often in the exploratory stage of relationship-seeking and formation — a stage that can be ambiguous and dynamic. While young Shanghainese desire for a common future (one that involves love, commitment, and potentially marriage), they are also keeping their options open. They are exploring and engaging with different opportunities for social, emotional, or sexual relationships. By doing so, they are more willing to engage in intimate relationships that don't necessarily fit into the “marriage track” while they simultaneously seek a more “serious” partnership. The decision to use dating apps instead of the more purposeful marriage websites or pursue *xianqin* shows users' inclination to date both purposefully and non-purposefully. Dating app users hope to explore the expanding intimate landscape in urban China and engage in varied experiences (non-purposeful), but also to work towards the goal of establishing a committed relationship (purposeful).

Nevertheless, this does not discount the apps' affordance for providing users with “ambiguous” functions (to cure boredom and as a tree-hole). Chinese dating app users can capitalize on the kind of user base that dating apps attract - strangers - to unload their daily stress by confiding or flirting with strangers. Dating app users spend most of their time on these activities and often cited them. However, users I got to know better over extended interactions have said that these activities are “placeholders” until a potential partner comes along (online or in real life). However, projecting ambiguous motivations can benefit Chinese dating app users. By projecting ambiguity, users can maintain or reclaim their “coolness,” keep themselves motivated to search

for a partner, not appear desperate, reduce the appearance of *mudixing*, or adhere to the more casual environment the dating app environment engenders. Nevertheless, the ambiguous nature of these interactions can backfire, especially after repeated failure to establish love-based partnerships over time. Discouraged by the laborious time and effort of securing a romantic relationship, Chinese dating app users tend to become less motivated to use dating apps for partner searching endeavors.

Despite the arguments I have laid out here, I do not assert that all users who claim to have ambiguous motivations have obscure and convoluted agendas. Nevertheless, in the context of my ethnographical research-based in Shanghai's intimate landscape, many of my informants had very complex feelings and analyses about their experience using dating apps. Anti-purposefulness can be purposeful. Dating app users use this purposeful anti-purposefulness to help explore anti-purposeful modes of intimacy, all while searching for a long-term partner.

## **5.2 Adaptive Users of a Digital Artifact**

I have argued that dating app users' purposes and motivations can change, especially when the world around them changes significantly. As I have argued, dating app users are not unmoving, faceless users. Instead, they are adaptive and can make digital tools their own to fit their needs and lived experiences. Here, I emphasize how users shifted from the model of "purposeful anti-purposefulness" discussed above to a mode of operation that encapsulates the experience of being quarantined due to the pandemic.

My research on dating app user motivation started in 2018, two years before the pandemic hit. That research period very much informed the phenomenon explained at the beginning of this section. However, when the central government-imposed quarantine mandates in Shanghai in

2020, the respondents I recruited from dating apps were suddenly behaving very differently. Most dating apps are designed to facilitate offline dates. With the quarantine in place and mobility restricted, the dating app landscape plunged into a period of uncertainty. What is the point of using a dating app when you cannot date?

Some dating app users who were active pre-pandemic agreed with this sentiment. However, not all users remained active on dating apps during this period of immobility. They abandoned dating apps to spend quality time with family members and close friends. As we saw, many migrants in Shanghai returned to their hometown in other states during the Lunar New Year (a time also when the state-mandated quarantines started). Because they could not return to Shanghai to work, they had the unprecedented opportunity to spend extended time with their friends and family members in their hometowns. Some enjoyed this time of bonding with their close networks; others found it a lonesome and sequestered period. Unexpectedly, those that experienced familial intimacy during the quarantine period returned to dating apps post quarantine. Their sense of loneliness was heightened in the wake of returning to Shanghai to continue working as a migrant. They also wanted to return to a sense of normalcy and resume their pre-quarantine practices — one of which is using dating apps.

However, dating apps also allow for “immobile mobility.” This phrase is borrowed from Wallis (2013)), who defines it as a socio-techno means of surpassing spatial, temporal, physical, and structural boundaries. She framed immobile mobility in the everyday experience of migrant women using mobile phones while facing severe limitations on their geographic mobility and time. But in the context of this research, we see young Shanghainese who were immobile due to the quarantine explored functionalities beyond the confines of what is advertised in dating apps. Quarantined Shanghainese experienced a rich and heterogeneous experience anchored in what I

argue was the liminality of both space (the dating app space) and time (the quarantine period). This double liminality occurred as the offline world entered the liminal stage with quarantine mandates. Simultaneously, the dating app space also entered a liminal stage. Quarantined Shanghainese capitalized on the double liminality and adapted how they extracted intimacy/value from dating apps during what they believed to be an ephemeral quarantine period.

Without the core offline purpose (facilitating offline meet-ups between strangers in an intimate context), quarantined Shanghainese used dating apps not to search for something concrete (like physical sex) but as a temporary balm to help ease the struggles and loneliness experienced during the quarantine. Some adjusted their strategies to arrange for offline meet-ups post quarantine. Others derived value from alternative forms of connections and intimacies anchored within dating apps, e.g., reading other users' profiles to feel closer to them, or sharing deep conversations and exchanges with people they would never meet outside of the space of the app. For example, some used dating apps to reach out to users beyond their geographical region and sometimes beyond their national borders.

We already know of instances of dating apps, forums, and websites being used as a door to other regions when faced with structural immobility (Bacallao Pino, 2015; Constable, 2003). For example, Cubans had one of the lowest Internet accesses in Latin America. However, in that communist country where Internet access was not only a real privilege but an almost impossible action, Bacallao Pino (2015)) found that online dating profiles were mostly in English, and users were typically looking for a relationship with a foreigners residing overseas. They avoided being associated with prostitution by using narrative strategies that alluded to aspects of romanticism, suggestions of future plans, statements of their seriousness in finding love. Given that the majority of Cuban dating profiles had a clear orientation towards foreigners as potential partners, Cuban

online daters utilized digital dating practices to alleviate spatial boundaries and political constraints.

The difference between the Cuban and Shanghainese cases is that quarantined dating app users in Shanghai recognized the impermanence and liminality of the quarantine. Shanghainese dating app users used it to transform and rethink their situations and expectations. While some interlocutors elicited practical value from alternate forms of intimacies through dating apps (described above), others saw the experience of being on dating apps during a pandemic as an unprecedented opportunity and catalyst to self-exploration and learning. This is another element that typically accompanies a liminal experience. Users have credited the ambiguity of the dating app space and quarantine period with helping them discover new things about themselves and reorienting their frame of mind. Informants expressed having personal revelations, insights, personal growth, or awakenings from this unique experience.

Taken in its entirety, this research rejects the idea of media technology's totalizing power. In some studies, media is framed as a force shaping users' existence and participation within their society. This is because media provides consumers with ways of seeing and interpreting the world (Hall, 1992; O'Shaughnessy & Lumley, 1985; G. Turner, 1990). Moving beyond that limiting perspective, this dissertation aligns with Coleman (2010)) view instead. He asserts that "Whenever and wherever individuals and groups deploy and communicate with digital media, there will be circulations, reimaginings, magnifications, deletions, translations, revisions, and remakings of a range of cultural representations, experiences, and identities, but the precise ways that these dynamics unfold can never be fully anticipated in advance" (Coleman 2010: 488).

While I agree that the way dating apps are designed can affect how dating is framed in Shanghai, I have found that the kinds of intimacies manifested within the platform are not fully

anticipated or intentional. As discussed, the dating app-scape changed when “normal” life shifted into quarantine life, with users adapting the way dating apps were used and the kind of intimacy they were seeking. Immobile mobility, facilitated by technology, allowed quarantined Shanghainese to traverse their constraint in order to imagine and enact new identities and modes of intimacies that are virtual but still centered in the actualities of their daily existence (Wallis, 2013). These modes of intimacies were sometimes unintentional and are not driven by the dating apps’ design or messaging. Digital artifacts can help engender new collectivities such as bloggers (Lukács, 2020), cross-border marriage facilitation (Constable, 2003), or game streamers (Suganuma, 2018), whose senses of self, profession, and group sociabilities are reshaped significantly. However, it is important to note that they are not shaped exclusively or deterministically by digital technologies (Coleman, 2010).

In short, I have explored the convergence between technology, intimacy, pre-pandemic society, and the quarantine period prompted by a global epidemic. Through this, I have presented examples of how users have exercised their agency to adapt dating apps to their needs. I have also shown how young Shanghainese adapted to their offline surroundings and developed strategies to elevate their experience on dating apps. By studying dating app users before and during the pandemic, the dissertation exposes the contingency of media technology use, the diversity of ways people use it, users’ agency, and the paradox involved.

### **5.3 The Tension Between Tradition and Modernity**

I have argued that there is an inherent tension between tradition and modernity in relation to the introduction of dating apps into the Chinese dating market. Young Shanghainese navigate

between tradition and modernity in the ways they utilize dating apps. The pursuit of relationships with foreigners on dating apps is gendered and reflects how young Chinese internally negotiate the burden of tradition with the desire for selfhood and autonomy. The use of the terms tradition and modernity/contemporary here is not oblivious of the critiques of the values and assumptions attached to the terms. These terms are, however, necessary to capture their pliable currency and meaning in young Chinese' everyday efforts to make sense of their lived experiences in a country that is experiencing rapid change (Ji, 2015).

Dating apps arrived relatively later in the Chinese intimacy landscape. Before 2011, marriage-matching online services and online dating websites were the primary online options for singles to find a partner. As such, the first generation of online dating was more *xiangqin* based because they encouraged users to find lifelong partners (Fiore & Donath, 2004; Wen, 2015). That also means that the primary options for young Shanghainese to find a partner were limited to only one mode of relationship making - for marriage. These sites are still active and well-known among young Chinese. They are still used by users that are single-mindedly seeking marriage.

On the other hand, by contrast, dating apps, which are operated on mobile phones, arrived into the relationship-making landscape in 2011 with much controversy. Dating apps positioned themselves differently from dating websites in their initial campaigns by launching advertisements with overt sexual tones (T. Liu, 2016). The dating app, Momo, inspired by Tinder's reputation as a hook-up app, rapidly gained the reputation as a "genius tool for getting laid" (*yuepao shenqi*) which departs from the single-tracked and more severe image that dating websites have cultivated in the courtship market. This caught the attention of the Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda and Ideological Work Directorate. Dating apps in China were condemned for "anti-Chinese values" (Solis & Wong, 2019; Xu & Wu, 2019) and seen as an import of Western ideologies that

corrupts the much-touted philosophy of “不以结婚为目的谈恋爱就是要流氓 (Those who date without the purpose of marriage are hooligans).”

Research shows that marriage is often early and almost universal in China, even in the face of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and mass education since the 1980s (Ji & Yeung, 2014; Jones & Gubhaju, 2009; Yeung & Hu, 2013). As the government shifted to more Western neoliberal modernity, the official propaganda of Marxist ideology, and its more egalitarian gender ideology, is losing its place in contemporary China. While China is experiencing rapid economic reformation and modernization, the country is also simultaneously witnessing a resurgence of the patriarchal Confucian tradition in recent years (Hong Fincher, 2014; Ji & Yeung, 2014). In fact, the pace of Chinese women delaying or eschewing marriage is much slower and lower compared to equally educated Chinese in other Asian diasporas (Ji, 2015). Paired with institutional obstacles like a weak social welfare system and the exclusive legitimacy of childbirth within marriage, pro-family values have proliferated.

For example, Confucian norms suggest that marriage should be achieved by a certain age, and children’s deviation from this norm causes Chinese parents to develop psychological distress (D. Chen & Tong, 2021). Indeed, the pressure for young people to marry by a socially acceptable age is associated with single people being labeled “leftover” or “bare branches” (Ji, 2015; Yu, 2019; Yu & Nartey, 2021). Furthermore, Confucian traditions emphasize lineage prosperity. Without marrying by a socially accepted age, the child’s unmarried status threatens parental perceived parenthood fulfillment (D. Chen & Tong, 2021). Finally, the desire to not marry may cause young Chinese to suffer from social pressure from their network of relatives, friends, neighbors, and the government (Hong Fincher, 2014).

As such, we see a tension between “Chinese traditions” and “un-Chinese ways” of approaching intimacy. For example, some Chinese parents believe that life is only “complete” when marriage and family formation are achieved (D. Chen & Tong, 2021). On the other hand, we see young Chinese being more accepting of non-normative relationship formation, e.g., Participating in relationship formation through “deviant” dating apps. There is, therefore, an increasing disagreement between parental expectations and children’s intimate desires and aspirations (Gaetano, 2014; Hong Fincher, 2014).

In Chapter Two, “The coolness of anti-purposefulness: Understanding the what and the why of dating app users’ motivations,” we saw how young Shanghainese negotiate the traditional and the modern by choosing to open up their options on dating apps (mediums condemned by the Chinese central government for not upholding Chinese moral values). This is partly due to the ambiguous environment of dating apps and the mutual patrolling by dating app users to ensure a light and ambiguous atmosphere. The anti-purposefulness that dating app users strive to portray enables them to explore non-traditional relationships (e.g., Hook-ups, same-sex relationships, confidantes) while simultaneously searching for a more “legitimate” and tradition-approved partner in the platform and outside. Young adults’ individualized approaches to intimacy are seemingly counter to the more traditional expectations embodied in filial piety (Blair & Madigan, 2019). They are even labeled as more “Westernized” approaches to mate selection (Pochagina, 2004).

Over the past several decades, young adults have increasingly adopted more Westernized approaches to mate selection (Pochagina, 2004). Romance, public displays of affection, and individual choice of both partners and relationship behaviors (including sexual activity), have increasingly become common among contemporary young adults (Gui, 2017). The more

individualized perspectives of young adults, specifically concerning dating and marriage, seem counter to the more traditional expectations embodied in filial piety.

This research challenges the argument that Chinese users on dating apps are exclusively seeking anti-purposeful experiences in a bid to push back against social pressure, increasing materialism within marriage formation and their prescribed role (Chan, 2020; De Seta & Zhang, 2015). Rather than a deterministic and consistent march toward contemporary individualized ideals of relationships, the dating app users in this research demonstrate that they are precariously balancing both their desire to explore more varied types of intimate interactions *and* their wish to fulfill their self or parental-imposed desire to find a more stable partnership. This way, some dating app users can still feel like they are productively using their time on dating apps despite the apps' negative connotations.

The difference between my argument and some of the other dating app researchers might stem partly from the kinds of interactions the researchers engender because of their identities. For example, Ji (2015)) notes in her research on “leftover women” that it is possible that her informants were trying to impress her with their modern views by claiming a feminist lens over their derogatory title of “leftover woman.” This may likely be due to her affiliation with a prestigious overseas university and her Ph.D. degree. However, she kept that in mind and strived to include discussion of the myriad traditional aspects of their life as well. In my own research experiences, I also experienced informants delivering narratives that they felt would align better with my more “modern and Western” sensibilities. Over time, however, the narratives would morph into more complex ones.

This is particularly evident in the interactions which led to the findings in Chapter Three — “Purposefully matching with foreigners: nationalism, penis obsession, female hypergamy, and

navigating ‘white junk’.” Some of the Chinese men I interviewed claimed that they had a more “modern” mindset which made them well suited to pursue foreign women on dating apps. However, they also professed that they are more timid about approaching foreign women, especially white women, because of the foreign women’s perceived higher status due to their more “powerful” country of origin. Here, we see hypergamy in action since tradition encourages men to marry or date down.

Ji’s informant (a Shanghainese woman in her early 30s) explained the dynamic as such: "Traditionally, people usually assess others in the rank of ABCD. A man would look for B women, B men for C women, and so on. Then only A women and E men are leftover. Now, I want to say there are probably many A women. I am not sure where A men are" (Ji, 2015, p. 1067).

In a societal flux of traditional and modern values, Chinese men must navigate the paradox of being a modern man but still fulfill traditional gender norms in the dating market. In other words, they want to align themselves with the image of being a modern and more open-minded men, but struggle to align their modern values with their actions when it comes to certain aspects of intimacy e.g., dating someone outside their race or dating a Chinese woman that is socioeconomically higher than them. Interestingly, my Chinese male informants still fantasized about having a foreign partner because it would cement the idea that they are of higher status than foreign women. This translated to the male informants’ country (China) reigning superior over that of their foreign female partners’ countries of origin. Their idea of hypergamy is therefore evolving according to their circumstances.

In the case of Chinese women actively seeking foreign partners on dating apps, my informants talked about their declining foothold in the Chinese dating market as they age. Labeled “leftover,” these women tend to be in their late 20s or 30s, highly educated, and financially stable.

They often have difficulty finding a partner that fits the ideal of hypergamy. In response, they look towards a different pool of available men - foreigners. This is also rooted in the belief that foreign men are less likely to penalize them for their age, education, wealth, and stronger personality (To, 2013). Although, it is important to note that the Shanghainese women I have interviewed still discern between “strong foreign candidates” and “white junk.” The former tends to occupy non-professional vocations and the lower to lower-middle-class in their country of origin. Most Shanghainese women I spoke to insisted that even though they were trying to date foreigners, it did not mean they would be blinded by their foreignness and settle for less. This tends to be the *modus operandi* established after some experience dating foreigners in their “younger days of folly.”

At first glance, we see these women adhering to the traditional hypergamous mode of relationship formation common in “traditional” China. However, upon further inspection, Shanghainese women interested in pursuing foreign relationships on dating apps are not necessarily doing so to please their parents. Some Shanghainese women expressed and exercised their autonomy by seeking emotional and sexual intimacy with foreign men, despite disapproval from friends and family members.

This aligns with the new wave of anti-foreign sentiment in China from the early 2010s up until now, ignited by reports of foreign men sexually harassing Chinese women in public.<sup>12</sup> These

---

<sup>12</sup> On 8 May 2012, a drunk British man molested a young Chinese woman near Tiananmen Square. He was then beaten by angry passers-by. The interaction was videotaped and disseminated online, causing outrage among Chinese netizens. In another incident, a Russian man put his feet up against the back of the seat of a Chinese female passenger in a train. When she asked him to stop, he insulted her in Mandarin. Again, netizens disseminated video footage of the incident widely, and he was suspended from his position as a principal cellist in the Beijing Symphony orchestra.

incidents provoked Chinese netizens, which prompted strong contempt and xenophobic condemnation of these foreigners. Some urged them to go back to their own countries, while others urged the government to “sweep out the foreign trash” (P. Wang, 2019). Following the incident, the central government tightened controls on foreigners in China by initiating a 100-day campaign for the purpose of cracking down on illegal foreign entry, residency, and employment. CCTV’s English language news anchor, Yang Rui, supported the central government’s action by posting the following on social media: “The police need to clean out the foreign trash, we should arrest foreign troublemakers and protect innocent young Chinese women” (R.G., 2012). He also urged people to recognize foreign spies who would “shack up” with Chinese women while compiling intelligence reports. This “digital Occidentalism” mobilized by Chinese nationalists stimulated discussions and debates on international love and romance in China (P. Wang, 2019). The Chinese government also launched a campaign about international love called “Dangerous Love” to warn Chinese citizens about the dangers of foreign male spies seducing innocent Chinese females working in the government.<sup>13</sup> These campaigns and narratives are very gendered. Chinese women are painted as naive and innocent, without the ability to discern whether or not they are being deceived. Furthermore, only Chinese women, not Chinese men, are depicted as being in danger of deceptive foreigners in foreigner-Chinese interactions (P. Wang, 2019).

The Shanghainese women who were interested in foreign partnerships whom I interviewed did not agree with the above discourse about the likelihood of their deception by foreign men.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> See here for the comic panel entitled “Dangerous Love” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/20/beware-of-dangerous-love-with-foreign-spies-china-tells-its-women>

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that some of my female Chinese respondents who were not interested in pursuing foreign partners also said they did not completely embrace the state and state-controlled media message about the dangers of

They saw it as propaganda and a move by the government to keep the Chinese community (and especially women) “pure.” Their pursuit of foreign men signified their increasing break from Chineseness - be it the condemnation of Chinese men and their patriarchal views and treatment of women, their embrace of Western/foreign culture and language, or a rebellious dismissal of their friends, family members, and the central government concerning who they should date. They repeatedly conveyed their autonomy, their “modern” views, and their frustration with the patriarchal nature of many Chinese traditions. At first glance, one might argue that these Shanghainese women are breaking from Chinese traditions completely. But I disagree and I argue instead that these women are *strategically navigating* China’s ever-shifting modern-traditional landscape. They strive to maintain their modern side while partially subscribing to patriarchal norms - such as the adherence to maintaining the hypergamy status quo.

To conclude, Chinese dating app users, like the contexts in which they live, are simultaneously an entanglement of traditional and modern elements. Sometimes, they use so-called “modern” ways to deal with so-called “traditional” issues (Ji, 2015). For example, using dating apps to seek foreign partners or explore different modes of intimacy while simultaneously searching for more conventionally accepted forms of relationships.

---

foreigners. However, they did not want the hassle associated with dating foreigners, such as disapproval of parents, friends, and close networks that are more receptive to state propaganda. They also wanted to avoid the risk of finding out that the dangerous foreign traits advertised by the state media might be true. Finally, they were also reluctant to manage the incompatibilities that could arise from dating someone from a different culture and country than dating a trusted or better understood Chinese man.

## 5.4 Application of Anthropology to Industry User Research

*“To grasp more fully the broader significance of digital media, its study must involve various frames of analysis, attention to history, and the local contexts and lived experiences of digital media—a task well suited to the ethnographic enterprise.” (Coleman, 2010, pp. 488-489)*

Part of my goal in conducting anthropological research on dating apps is influenced by my interest in user experience surrounding digital artifacts. When I begin my graduate studies, I was unaware of a field that is slowly gaining a foothold in the tech industry: user experience research (UX). I was first made aware of this field during my preliminary doctoral fieldwork. While conducting fieldwork three and a half years ago, I matched on a dating app with the product manager of that particular app. This was a pivotal moment for me because it was my first entry point into the inner workings of the decision-making process behind the type of product I was studying. Bill, the product manager, agreed to an interview at a local coffee shop. Throughout our conversation, I learned that as a product manager, he collaborated with user experience researchers to understand user behavior and experience to decide how the dating app should be designed. The company also recognized that there are user behavior differences geographically. As such, Bill and a few UX researchers were sent to conduct two-week fieldwork stints in markets in which the dating app was hoping to establish a presence or already had a presence. He noted that most tech companies do not invest in studying user behavior differences across the world. Often, they make assumptions on user behavior based on Eurocentric user behavior. Bill and I had a lively conversation about different dating app user behavior in China and India. At the end of the three-hour conversation, Bill said, “You know, an anthropologist would be a great asset to dating app companies like the one I work at as a UX researcher.”

In the next few years, after that conversation, I learned more about anthropology's value to the companies that create digital experiences. I interned at three different tech companies as a UX researcher, ranging from a 5-person team start-up to a global multinational company focusing on e-commerce and cloud computing. Unfortunately, I experienced some resistance as a UX researcher, mostly due to my academic and anthropology background. I vividly remember conversations where employers were concerned that I would be too "anthropological" and not get research done in a short enough time frame. Indeed, the research topics assigned to me were often Eurocentric and did not consider the possible differences between varied cultures and communities. As a result, product decisions were being made without sufficient consideration on whether they would align with the needs or expectations of different groups. As a result, users become a homogenous group, assigned to broad, cartoonish archetypes, and they often lacked agency.

When I asked why studying user behavior in particular regions wasn't a priority, a senior UX researcher I worked with responded, "Because the US and European markets are the markets we understand. So, the rest of the world will simply have to adjust to what we design for the Americans and Europeans." The senior UX researcher made this statement despite the company's biggest user base including several non-English speaking countries.

As my research on dating apps in Shanghai has shown, users' responses to digital artifacts are highly localized. For example, Shanghainese dating app users' navigation between tradition and modernity on dating apps may not necessarily mirror the way a New Yorker utilizes dating apps due to their different lived experiences. On a more micro-scale, how people use dating apps in an international metropolitan like Shanghai may differ from how people use dating apps in a smaller city in China. After all, academic researchers have been arguing that digital habits are

largely affected by offline cultural and local features (Correll, 1995; Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000; Wheeler, 2001), implying that the Internet is not a “unified and universalizing virtual realm”(Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008). Digital artifacts can be conceptualized as separate rooms that serve different purposes. For example, young Israeli-Jews viewed dating websites as unsuitable for finding dates (Levin 2015). Instead, they preferred forums dedicated to dating among singles like Tapuz, an online discussion site they used daily. This distinction was not due to structural differences between digital sites but argued to be based on local imagination and mythologies.

Levin’s (2015) study of Israeli Jewish online dating experience in Israel demonstrated how Israeli-Jewish youth’s perceptions of these avenues differ. Dating sites were framed in an international manner, by espousing American culture and using English as the main language. Key dating sites adopted English names instead of Hebrew. Jewish Israelis were in awe of American technological superiority, but America was still perceived as an over-mechanical culture, one that was intellectually superficial and devoid of ideal social relations. Users associated dating sites with the word “supermarket,” giving it a shallow, superficial image of consumption, marked by America's unflattering image.

Despite America evoking non-positive associations, adhering to its partly positive image allowed Jewish Israelis to disassociate matchmaking sites with the negative image of the “Jewish matchmaker” and to view dating websites as a place one can “work hard” to find a compatible partner. The purposefulness of online dating sites differed from forums, which symbolized more of a warm and genuine community, sometimes referred to as “orchard” (inspired by the main forum Tapuz which can be translated to orange fruit). Orchards came to represent the early agricultural period in the Land of Israel. However, in the last 40 or so years, Israelis have witnessed the

uprooting of many orchards for residential towers. This implied a callback to the social spirit typical of life before urban restructuring. As such, interaction within the forums dedicated to dating among singles could also be seen to echo ideological, cultural aspects (Levin, 2015). This case study shows how an understanding of the local socio-cultural view offline is important for understanding how different digital mediums are perceived and used even within digital mediums.

The term “mediascape,” first introduced by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1990)), is a useful concept in this context as well. Mediascape describes and situates the role of electronic media in “global cultural flows,” which are fluid and inconsistent as they travel across global and local boundaries. According to Appadurai, mediascape indexes the electronic capabilities of production and dissemination of the world's images created by media. This model can serve as an important stepping stone to draw cyberspace back into offline processes and understand how different media formats interact to create a localized experience. Technologies are seldom only technology. Instead, they come packaged with interesting cultural armatures (M. M. J. Fischer, 2016). Especially since identities are negotiated, duplicated, and registered in different ways in online interactions. These cannot be understood without considering the offline context (Wilson & Peterson, 2002).

With apps and online sites that touch both digital and physical spaces, their usage becomes entwined with social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. As a result, a user's experience with digital artifacts like dating apps cannot be universal. Since dating apps and websites rely on both technology and social context, one user's experience will differ from another. For example, in scenarios where dating sites’ users are in locations that have few participants will have a drastically different experience than users with more options (Bacallao Pino, 2015). In more traditional societies, online courtship can be for the means of finding a marital partner, while others

will use it as a way to seek one-night stands, webcam sex, or simply to pass the time (De Seta & Zhang, 2015; Ozgun, 2015). Or in the case of this dissertation research, a way to simultaneously explore non-traditional modes of intimacy while seeking more traditionally approved relationship formation. These examples show the dynamic nature of the experience of online courtship within a globalizing world, as local and global definitions and cultural contexts meld together in virtual environments.

This research contributes to the argument that we can productively learn from existing UX research studies while applying anthropological methods and questions to the phenomena we study. UX research will benefit from being situated within theories and methods common to anthropology. This approach may improve the situated analysis of local cultural and digital artifact phenomena. As Ginsburg has proposed, anthropology can contribute to media studies: "To break up the 'masses' of the media ... by recognizing the complex ways in which people are engaged in processes of making and interpreting media works with their cultural, social, and historical circumstances (Ginsburg, 1994, p. 8).

Within the scope of this research, I take my task as an anthropologist to "provincialize" a digital artifact (Chakrabarty, 2000). Provincializing digital media like dating apps is not to deny their scale and global reach (Boyer, 2007; Sassen, 2002; Zaloom, 2006). Instead, it is important to consider the ways these media can be central to the articulation of perspectives, the enactment of rituals, and the modes of being. This dissertation serves to argue that digital artifacts like dating apps matter culturally. But more importantly, we must ask how, where, and why it matters to fields beyond academia (e.g., UX research in tech) to prevail against confined conjectures about the universality of digital experience (Coleman, 2010).

## Bibliography

- Abu-Lughod, L. (2008). *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (15th anniversary ed.). Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Adjepong, A. (2019). Invading Ethnography: A Queer of Color Reflexive Practice. *Ethnography*, 20(1), 27-46. doi:10.1177/1466138117741502
- Anderson, T. L. (2005). Relationships Among Internet Attitudes, Internet Use, Romantic Beliefs, and Perceptions of Online Romantic Relationships. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 8(6), 521-531.
- Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7(2-3), 295-310. doi:10.1177/026327690007002017
- Arkaraprasertkul, N. (2018). Gentrification and its Contentment: An Anthropological Perspective on Housing, Heritage and Urban Social Change in Shanghai. *Urban Studies*, 55(7), 1561-1578. doi:10.1177/0042098016684313
- Bacallao Pino, L. M. (2015). 'Dating' or 'Escaping'? Cuban Profiles in Dating Websites. In I. A. Değim, J. H. Johnson, & T. Fu (Eds.), *Online Courtship : Interpersonal Interactions across Borders* (pp. 57-70). Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.
- Baker, H. D. R. (1979). *Chinese Family and Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Barraket, J., & Henry-Waring, M. S. (2008). Getting it On(line): Sociological Perspectives on E-dating. *Journal of Sociology*, 44(2), 149-165. doi:10.1177/1440783308089167
- Bell, G. (2021). Pandemic Passages: An Anthropological Account of Life and Liminality during COVID-19. *Anthropology in Action*, 28(1), 79-84. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3167/aia.2021.280115>

- Besana, T., Katsiaficas, D., & Loyd, A. B. (2019). Asian American Media Representation: A Film Analysis and Implications for Identity Development. *Research in Human Development, 16*(3-4), 201-225.
- Blackwell, C., Birnholtz, J., & Abbott, C. (2015). Seeing and Being Seen: Co-situation and Impression Formation Using Grindr, a Location-aware Gay Dating App. *New media & society, 17*(7), 1117-1136. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814521595>
- Blair, S. L., & Madigan, T. J. (2016). Dating attitudes and expectations among young Chinese adults: an examination of gender differences. *The Journal of Chinese Sociology, 3*(1), 12. doi:10.1186/s40711-016-0034-1
- Blair, S. L., & Madigan, T. J. (2019). Dating, Marriage, and Parental Approval: An Examination of Young Adults in China. *Social science quarterly, 100*(6), 2351-2368. doi:10.1111/ssqu.12718
- Boellstorff, T. (2015). *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. c. J. D. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Boyer, D. (2007). *Understanding Media: A Popular Philosophy*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm.
- Brownell, S. (1995). *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brownmiller, S. (1993). *Against our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Bryant, K., & Sheldon, P. (2017). Cyber Dating in the Age of Mobile Apps: Understanding Motives, Attitudes, and Characteristics of Users. *American Communication Journal, 19*(2), 1-15.

- Caillois, R. (2001). *Man, Play, and Games*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Chan, L. S. (2017). Who Uses Dating Apps? Exploring the Relationships Among Trust, Sensation-seeking, Smartphone Use, and the Intent to Use Dating Apps based on the Integrative Model. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 72, 246-258.  
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.02.053>
- Chan, L. S. (2020). Multiple Uses and Anti-Purposefulness on Momo, a Chinese Dating/Social app. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(10), 1515-1530.
- Chan, L. S. (2021). *The Politics of Dating Apps : Gender, Sexuality, and Emergent Publics in Urban China*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Chen, C. (2017). *Making Couples: Kinship, Intimacy, and Consumption in Contemporary Urban China*. (Doctor of Philosophy). University of Chicago, (10641298)
- Chen, D., & Tong, Y. (2021). Marriage for the Sake of Parents? Adult Children's Marriage Formation and Parental Psychological Distress in China. *Journal of marriage and family*, 83(4), 1194-1211. doi:10.1111/jomf.12749
- Chen, X. (2020). *Dating, Digital Media, and Diaspora: Contextualising the Cultural uses of Tinder and Tantan among Australian Chinese Diasporas*. Queensland University of Technology,
- Cheng, S. (2021). The Male Malady of Globalization: Phallocentric Nationalism in South Korea. *Current anthropology*, 62(S23), S79-S91. doi:10.1086/711664

- Chin, Y.-L. (2015). Keeping it Unreal: Online Dating with Chinese Characteristics. In I. A. Değim, J. H. Johnson, & T. Fu (Eds.), *Online courtship: Interpersonal interactions across borders* (pp. 208-228). Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.
- Choe, H. (2019). Eating Together Multimodally: Collaborative Eating in Mukbang, a Korean Livestream of Eating. *Language in Society*, 48(2), 171-208.  
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404518001355>
- Coleman, G. E. (2010). Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 39(1), 487-505. doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.012809.104945
- Constable, N. (2003). *Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and "Mail Order" Marriages* (1 ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Constable, N. (2004). A Tale of Two Marriages: International Matchmaking and Gendered Mobility. In N. Constable (Ed.), *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia* (pp. 166-186). Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Correll, S. (1995). The Ethnography of an Electronic Bar: The Lesbian Cafe. *Journal of contemporary ethnography*, 24(3), 270-298. doi:10.1177/089124195024003002
- Courtenay, W. H. (2000). Constructions of Masculinity and their Influence on Men's Well-being: A Theory of Gender and Health. *Social Science & Medicine*, 50(10), 1385-1401.  
doi:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(99\)00390-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(99)00390-1)
- Croll, E. (1981). *The Politics of Marriage in Contemporary China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Czarniawska, B., & Mazza, C. (2003). Consulting as a Liminal Space. *Human relations*, 56(3), 267-290. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726703056003612>

- Darnton, R. (2002). Sex for Thought. In K. M. Phillips & B. Reay (Eds.), *Sexualities in History : A Reader* (pp. 203-221). New York: Routledge.
- Davin, D. (2007). Marriage Migration in China and East Asia. *The Journal of contemporary China*, 16(50), 83-95.
- De Seta, G., & Zhang, G. (2015). Stranger Stranger or Lonely Lonely? Young Chinese and Dating Apps Between the Locational, the Mobile and the Social. In I. A. Değim, J. H. Johnson, & T. Fu (Eds.), *Online courtship: Interpersonal interactions across borders* (pp. 167-185). Amsteram: Institute of Network Cultures.
- Diamant, N. J. (2000). *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in urban and Rural China, 1949–1968*. California: University of California Press.
- Ding, M., & Xu, J. (2014). *The Chinese Way*. New York: Routledge.
- Duguay, S. (2017). Dressing up Cinderella: Interrogating Authenticity Claims on the Mobile Dating App Tinder. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(3), 351-367.  
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1168471>
- Enguix, B., & Roca, J. (2015). *Rethinking Romantic Love: Discussions, Imagineries, and Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Farrer, J. (2002). *Opening Up : Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Farrer, J. (2011). Global Nightscapes in Shanghai as Ethnosexual Contact Zones. *Journal of ethnic and migration studies*, 37(5), 747-764. doi:10.1080/1369183X.2011.559716
- Farrer, J. (2014). Love, Sex, and Commitment: Delinking Premarital Intimacy from Marriage in Urban China. In D. S. Davis & S. L. Friedman (Eds.), *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers:*

- Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Urban China* (pp. 62-96). Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Farrer, J. (2016). Foreigner Street: Urban Citizenship in Multicultural Shanghai. In N.-K. Kim (Ed.), *Multicultural Challenges and Redefining Identity in East Asia* (pp. 31-58). New York: Routledge.
- Farrer, J., & Dale, S. (2014). Sexless in Shanghai: Gendered Mobility Strategies in a Transnational Sexual Field. In A. I. Green (Ed.), *Sexual fields: Toward a Sociology of Collective Sexual Life* (pp. 143-169). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fei, X., Han, G., & Wang, Z. (2012). *Xiang tu Zhongguo = From the Soil : The Foundations of Chinese Society* (1st edition ed.). Beijing: Wai yu jiao xue yu yan jiu chu ban she.
- Fink, E., Saine, U., & Saine, T. (1968). The Oasis of Happiness: Toward an Ontology of Play. *Yale French Studies*(41), 19-30. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/2929663>
- Fiore, A. T., & Donath, J. S. (2004). *Online Personals: An Overview*. Paper presented at the CHI'04 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems.
- Fischer, M. M. J. (2016). Anthropological STS in Asia. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 45(1), 181-198. doi:10.1146/annurev-anthro-102215-100258
- Fischer, P. A., Martin, R., & Straubhaar, T. (1997). Should I Stay or Should I Go? . In T. Hammar, G. Brochmann, K. Tamas, & T. Faist (Eds.), *International Migration, Immobility and Development*. Oxford: Berg (1st edition ed., pp. 49-90). London: Routledge.
- Fong, V. L. (2002). China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters. *American anthropologist*, 104(4), 1098-1109.
- Fong, V. L. (2004). *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-child Policy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Freedman, M. (1963). A Chinese Phase in Social Anthropology. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 14(1), 1-19. doi:10.2307/587316
- Fu, T. (2015). What are the Shengnv Looking for in Online Heterosexual Dating and Courtship? A Content Analysis of Shanghainese Women's Personal Profiles on Jiayuan.com. In I. A. Değim, J. H. Johnson, & T. Fu (Eds.), *Online courtship: Interpersonal interactions across borders* (pp. 186-207). Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.
- Gaetano, A. (2014). "Leftover Women": Postponed Marriage and Renegotiating Womanhood in Urban China. *Journal of research in gender studies*, 4(2), 124-149.
- Geertz, C. (1972). Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight. *Daedalus*, 101(1), 1-37. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.pitt.idm.oclc.org/stable/20024056>
- Ginsburg, F. (1994). Culture/Media: A (Mild) Polemic. *Anthropology Today*, 10(2), 5-15. doi:10.2307/2783305
- Gittings, J. (2005). *The Changing Face of China: From Mao to Market*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Glodava, M., & Onizuka, R. (1994). *Mail-order Brides: Women for Sale*. Colorado: Alaken Inc.
- Greenhalgh, S. (2008). *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gui, T. (2017). "Devalued" Daughters Versus "Appreciated" Sons: Gender Inequality in China's Parent-Organized Matchmaking Markets. *Journal of family issues*, 38(13), 1923-1948. doi:10.1177/0192513X16680012
- Guthrie, D. (1998). The Declining Significance of Guanxi in China's Economic Transition. *The China Quarterly*, 154(154), 254-282. doi:10.1017/S0305741000002034

- Guthrie, D. (2009). *China and Globalization: The Social, Economic and Political Transformation of Chinese Society* (Rev. ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1992). Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. A. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural Studies* (ed. ed., pp. 277-294). New York: Routledge.
- Hanson, K. R. (2021). Becoming a (Gendered) Dating App User: An Analysis of How Heterosexual College Students Navigate Deception and Interactional Ambiguity on Dating Apps. *Sexuality & Culture*, 25, 75-92. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09758-w>
- Hinsch, B. (2013). *Masculinities in Chinese History*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Hom, P. W., & Xiao, Z. (2011). Embedding Social Networks: How Guanxi Ties Reinforce Chinese Employees' Retention. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 116(2), 188-202. doi:10.1016/j.obhdp.2011.06.001
- Homans, P. (1995). *Jung in Context: Modernity and the Making of a Psychology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hong Fincher, L. (2014). *Leftover Women : The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*. London, England: Zed Books.
- Hooper, C. (2001). *Manly States : Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hu, Y., & Scott, J. (2016). Family and Gender Values in China: Generational, Geographic, and Gender Differences. *Journal of family issues*, 37(9), 1267-1293. doi:10.1177/0192513X14528710
- Huizinga, J. (1955). *A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon.
- Jacobs-Huey, L. (2002). The Natives Are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice, and Accountability among "Native" Anthropologists. *American*

- anthropologist*, 104(3), 791-804. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.pitt.idm.oclc.org/stable/3567257>
- Ji, Y. (2015). Between Tradition and Modernity: "Leftover" Women in Shanghai. *Journal of marriage and family*, 77(5), 1057-1073.
- Ji, Y., & Yeung, W.-J. J. (2014). Heterogeneity in Contemporary Chinese Marriage. *Journal of family issues*, 35(12), 1662-1682.
- Jones, G. W., & Gubhaju, B. (2009). Factors Influencing Changes in Mean Age at First Marriage and Proportions Never Marrying in the Low-fertility Countries of East and Southeast Asia. *Asian population studies*, 5(3), 237-265. doi:10.1080/17441730903351487
- Jordan, D. K. (1997). *Chinese Matchmakers of Tiānjīn & Táoyuán*. Paper presented at the Conference on Anthropological Studies in Taiwan, Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica.
- Keum, B. T. (2016). Asian American Men's Internalization of Western Media Appearance Ideals, Social Comparison, and Acculturative Stress. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, 7(4), 256-264.
- Kim, J. (2015). From "Country Bumpkins" to "Tough Workers": The Pursuit of Masculinity Among Male Factory Workers in China. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 88(1), 133-161.
- Kipnis, A. B. (1997). *Producing Guanxi : Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China village*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kircaburun, K., Harris, A., Calado, F., & Griffiths, M. D. (2021). The Psychology of Mukbang Watching: A Scoping Review of the Academic and Non-academic Literature. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 19(4), 1190-1213.
- Kolko, B. E., Nakamura, L., & Rodman, G. B. (2000). *Race in Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge.

- Kondo, D. K. (1986). Dissolution and Reconstitution of Self: Implications for Anthropological Epistemology. *Cultural anthropology*, 1(1), 74-88. doi:10.1525/can.1986.1.1.02a00030
- Kong, T. S. (2015). Romancing the Boundary: Client Masculinities in the Chinese Sex Industry. *Cult Health Sex*, 17(7), 810-824. doi:10.1080/13691058.2015.1004197
- Lee, D. Y., & Dawes, P. L. (2005). Guanxi, Trust, and Long-term Orientation in Chinese Business Markets. *Journal of international marketing*, 13(2), 28-56.
- Lee, J. (2019). Mediated Superficiality and Misogyny Through Cool on Tinder. *Social Media + Society*, 5(3), 1-11. doi:10.1177/2056305119872949
- Levin, D. (2015). The Role of Places and Symbols: A Cultural Interpretation of the Online Dating Experience in Israel. In I. A. Değim, J. H. Johnson, & T. Fu (Eds.), *Online Courtship : Interpersonal Interactions Across Borders* (ed. ed., pp. 148-166). Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.
- Li, L. (2011). Performing Bribery in China: Guanxi-practice, Corruption with a Human Face. *The Journal of contemporary China*, 20(68), 1-20. doi:10.1080/10670564.2011.520841
- Li, Y. (2020). *The relationship between guanxi and corruption in the Chinese public sector*. (Doctor of Philosophy). University of Glasgow,
- Lincoln, Y. S., González y González, E. M., & Aroztegui Massera, C. (2016). “Spanish Is a Loving Tongue...” Performing Qualitative Research Across Languages and Cultures. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(7), 531-540.
- Liu, M. (2015). Surrogate Dating and the Translation of Gendered Meanings Across Borders: The Case of China’s E-mail-order Brides. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41(1), 29-53.

- Liu, M. (2019a). Devoted, Caring, and Home Loving: A Chinese Portrayal of Western Masculinity in Transnational Cyberspace Romance. *Men and Masculinities*, 22(2), 317-337.
- Liu, M. (2019b). Seeking Western Men: Divergent Trajectories of China's "Email-Order Brides". *Qualitative Sociology*, 42(3), 431-453.
- Liu, T. (2016). Neoliberal Ethos, State Censorship and Sexual Culture: a Chinese Dating/hook-up App. *Continuum*, 30(5), 557-566. doi:10.1080/10304312.2016.1210794
- Liu, T. (2019). Video Games as Dating Platforms: Exploring Digital Intimacies through a Chinese Online Dancing Video Game. *Television & new media*, 20(1), 36-55. doi:10.1177/1527476417736614
- Liu, Y. (2017). Women Rising as Falf of the Sky? An Empirical Study on Women from the One-child Generation and their Higher Education Participation in Contemporary China. *Higher education*, 74(6), 963-978.
- Louie, K. (2002). *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Louie, K. (2012). Popular Culture and Masculinity Ideals in East Asia, with Special Reference to China. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 71(4), 929-943.
- Lukács, G. (2020). *Invisibility by Design: Women and Labor in Japan's Digital Economy*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Luo, X. R., Zhang, J., & Marquis, C. (2016). Mobilization in the Internet Age: Internet Activism and Corporate Response. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59(6), 2045-2068.
- Madge, C., & O'Connor, H. (2002). On-line with E-mums: Exploring the Internet as a Medium for Research. *Area*, 34(1), 92-102.

- Maliepaard, E., & van Lisdonk, J. (2019). Online Dating Practice as a Perfect Example of Interwoven Worlds? Analysis of Communication in Digital and Physical Encounters. In C. J. Nash & A. Gorman-Murray (Eds.), *The Geographies of Digital Sexuality* (pp. 137-157). Singapore: Springer.
- Mankayi, N., & Shefer, T. (2005). Masculinities, Militarisation and Unsafe Sexual Practices: A Case Study of a Young Man in the South African Military. *Agenda*, 19(63), 66-78.
- Masters, N. T., Casey, E., Wells, E. A., & Morrison, D. M. (2013). Sexual Scripts among Young Heterosexually Active Men and Women: Continuity and Change. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 50(5), 409-420. doi:10.1080/00224499.2012.661102
- Miles, S. (2017). Sex in the Digital City: Location-based Dating Apps and Queer Urban Life. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(11), 1595-1610.
- Miller, J. C. (2004). *The transcendent function: Jung's model of psychological growth through dialogue with the unconscious*: SUNY Press.
- Mok, T. A. (1998). Asian Americans and Standards of Attractiveness: What's in the Eye of the Beholder? *Cultural Diversity and Mental Health*, 4(1), 1.
- Murray, S. H. (2018). Heterosexual Men's Sexual Desire: Supported by, or Deviating from Traditional Masculinity Norms and Sexual Scripts? *Sex Roles*, 78(1), 130-141.
- Narayan, K. (1993). How Native Is a "Native" Anthropologist? *American anthropologist*, 95(3), 671-686. doi:10.1525/aa.1993.95.3.02a00070
- Nguyen, M.-H. (2021). Liminality, Third-culture and Hope in a Quarantine Camp. *Cultural Dynamics*, 33(3), 199-201.
- Nieuwenhuis, T. (2020). *Are You Afraid of Missing Love? The Role of Fomo Within The Affordances of Hinge and Tinder*. (BA). Universiteit Utrecht,

- O'Shaughnessy, M., & Lumley, B. (1985). Media and Cultural Studies. In Z. G. Barański & J. R. Short (Eds.), *Developing Contemporary Marxism* (ed. ed., pp. 268-292). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Orlikowski, W. J., & Scott, S. V. (2021). Liminal Innovation in Practice: Understanding the Reconfiguration of Digital Work in Crisis. *Information and Organization*, 31(1), 1-6.
- Osburg, J. (2013). *Anxious Wealth : Money and Morality among China's New Rich*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Ozgun, A. (2015). Talking to Strangers: Temporality, Identity and Politics in Live Webcam Sex Channels. In I. A. Değim, J. H. Johnson, & T. Fu (Eds.), *Online Courtship : Interpersonal Interactions Across Borders* (ed. ed., pp. 229-241). Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.
- Parish, W. L., & Whyte, M. K. (1978). *Village and Family in Contemporary China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pochagina, O. (2004). Chinese Youth: Attitude toward Family and Marriage. *Far Eastern Affairs*, 32(1), 133-149.
- Prasso, S. (2009). *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, and Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Qian, Y., & Qian, Z. (2014). The Gender Divide in Urban China: Singlehood and Assortative Mating by Age and Education. *Demographic Research*, 31, 1337-1364.
- Qiu, J., & Muturi, N. (2016). Asian American Public Relations Practitioners' Perspectives on Diversity. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 27(3), 236-249.

- R.G. (2012, May 21st, 2012). Foreigners in China: Barbarians at the Gate, Again. *The Economist*. Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/analects/2012/05/21/barbarians-at-the-gate-again>
- Ranzini, G., & Lutz, C. (2017). Love at First Swipe? Explaining Tinder Self-presentation and Motives. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 5(1), 80-101.
- Robertson, J. (2012). Hemato-nationalism: The Past, Present, and Future of “Japanese Blood”. *Medical Anthropology*, 31(2), 93-112.
- Rofel, L. (1999). *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sassen, S. (2002). Towards a Sociology of Information Technology. *Current sociology*, 50(3), 365-388. doi:10.1177/0011392102050003005
- Schaeffer, F. A. (2012). *Love and Empire: Cybermarriage and Citizenship across the Americas*. New York: NYU Press.
- Seal, D. W., & Ehrhardt, A. A. (2003). Masculinity and Urban Men: Perceived Scripts for Courtship, Romantic, and Sexual Interactions with Women. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 5(4), 295-319. doi:10.1080/136910501171698
- Shorter, B. (1987). *An Image Darkly Forming : Women and Initiation*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Simmel, G. (1971). The stranger. In D. N. Levine (Ed.), *On Individuality and Social Forms* (pp. 144-149). Chicago: Routledge.
- Smart, A. (1993). Gifts, Bribes, and Guanxi: A Reconsideration of Bourdieu's Social Capital. *Cultural anthropology*, 8(3), 388-408. doi:10.1525/can.1993.8.3.02a00060

- Solis, R. J. C., & Wong, K. Y. J. (2019). To Meet or Not to Meet? Measuring Motivations and Risks as Predictors of Outcomes in the Use of Mobile Dating Applications in China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 12(2), 204-223.
- Song, G., & Hird, D. (2013). *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China* (Vol. 6). Leiden: Brill.
- Spitulnik, D. (1993). Anthropology and Mass Media. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 22(1), 293-315. doi:10.1146/annurev.an.22.100193.001453
- Sprecher, S. (1998). Social Exchange Theories and Sexuality. *Journal of Sex Research*, 35(1), 32-43.
- Stempfhuber, M., & Liegl, M. (2016). Intimacy Mobilized: Hook-up Practices in the Location-based Social Network Grindr. *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 41(1), 51-70.
- Stephure, R. J., Boon, S. D., MacKinnon, S. L., & Deveau, V. L. (2009). Internet Initiated Relationships: Associations Between Age and Involvement in Online Dating. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14(3), 658-681.
- Suganuma, N. K. (2018). *An Ethnography of the Twitch: Tv Streamer and Viewer Relationship*. California State University, Long Beach,
- Sumter, S. R., Vandenbosch, L., & Ligtenberg, L. (2017). Love me Tinder: Untangling Emerging Adults' Motivations for Using the Dating Application Tinder. *Telematics and informatics*, 34(1), 67-78.
- Sun, W. (2020). Consumption Plus Love: Inequality, Domestic Utopia, and China's New Politics of the Future. *Modern China*, 46(1), 49-78.
- Szasz, I. (1998). Masculine Identity and the Meanings of Sexuality: A Review of Research in Mexico. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 6(12), 97-104.

- Thai, H. C. (2008). *For Better or for Worse Vietnamese International Marriages in the New Global Economy*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press.
- Thomassen, B. (2009). The Uses and Meaning of Liminality. *International Political Anthropology*, 2(1), 5-28.
- Thomassen, B. (2016). *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-between*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Timmermans, E., & De Caluwé, E. (2017). To Tinder or not to Tinder, That's the Question: An Individual Differences Perspective to Tinder Use and Motives. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 110, 74-79.
- To, S. (2013). Understanding Sheng Nu ("Leftover Women"): The Phenomenon of Late Marriage Among Chinese Professional Women. *Symbolic interaction*, 36(1), 1-20.
- Turner, G. (1990). *British Cultural Studies : An Introduction*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Turner, V. (1967). Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage. In *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Vol. 93-111). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V. (1974a). Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology. *Rice Institute Pamphlet-Rice University Studies*, 60(3), 53-92.
- Turner, V. (1974b). Liminal to liminoid, in play, flow, and ritual: An essay in comparative symbolology. *Rice Institute Pamphlet-Rice University Studies*, 60(3).
- Van Gennep, A. (2019). *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wallis, C. (2013). *Technomobility in China : Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones*. New York: New York University.
- Wang, P. (2019). International Romance: Changing Discourses of Chinese-foreign Intimacy in the Decades of Economic Reforms. In Y. Ling & S. Wanning (Eds.), *Love Stories in China:*

- The Politics of Intimacy in the Twenty-First Century* (ed. ed., pp. 185-202): Taylor and Francis.
- Wang, X. (2017). *Gender, Dating and Violence in Urban China*. New York: Routledge.
- Wang, Y. (2021). Playing Live-Streaming ‘Love Games’: Mediated Intimacy and Desperational Labour in Digital China. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 30(5), 1-12.
- Watson, R. S. (1991). Wives, Concubines, and Maids: Servitude and Kinship in the Hong Kong Region, 1900–1940. In R. S. Watson & P. B. Ebrey (Eds.), *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (pp. 231-255). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Weiss, M. (2016). Discipline and Desire: Feminist Politics, Queer Studies, and New Queer Anthropology. In E. Lewin & L. M. Silverstein (Eds.), *Mapping Feminist Anthropology in the Twenty-First Century* (pp. 168-188). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Wen, C. (2015). The Advertising and Profit Model of Leading Dating Sites in China: A Comparison of Jianyuan, Baihe and Zhenai’s Targeting and Advertising. In I. A. Değim, J. H. Johnson, & T. Fu (Eds.), *Online courtship: Interpersonal interactions across borders* (Eds. ed., Vol. 9, pp. 106-116). Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.
- Wheeler, D. (2001). New Technologies, Old Culture. In C. Ess & F. Sudweeks (Eds.), *Culture, Technology, Communication : Towards an Intercultural Global Village* (ed. ed., pp. 187-212). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Wiederman, M. W. (2005). The Gendered Nature of Sexual Scripts. *The Family Journal*, 13(4), 496-502. doi:10.1177/1066480705278729
- Wilson, S. M., & Peterson, L. C. (2002). The Anthropology of Online Communities. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31(1), 449-467. doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085436
- Wolf, M. (1968). *The House of Lim*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

- Wong, W. M. (2016). Parental Matchmaking: Is it really such a Selfless Act after all? (A Case Analysis of China's Marriage Markets). *Asian Profile*, 44(4), 315-326.
- Woo, S. (2018). Mukbang is Changing Digital Communications. *Anthropology News*, 59(6), e90-e94.
- Xu, D., & Wu, F. (2019). Exploring the Cosmopolitanism in China: Examining Mosheng Ren ("The Stranger") Communication through Momo. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 36(2), 122-139.
- Yamaura, C. (2020). *Marriage and marriageability : the practices of matchmaking between men from Japan and women from Northeast China*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Yang, C. (2017). *Television and Dating in Contemporary China: Identities, Love and Intimacy*. Singapore: Springer.
- Yang, J. (2010). The Crisis of Masculinity: Class, Gender, and Kindly Power in Post-Mao China. *American Ethnologist*, 37(3), 550-562.
- Yang, M. M.-h. (1988). The Modernity of Power in the Chinese Socialist Order. *Cultural anthropology*, 3(4), 408-427. doi:10.1525/can.1988.3.4.02a00050
- Yang, M. M.-h. (1999, 1999). *Spaces of their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, Minneapolis.
- Yang, M. M.-h. (2016). *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Yeung, W.-J. J., & Hu, S. (2013). Coming of Age in Times of Change: The Transition to Adulthood in China. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 646(1), 149-171. doi:10.1177/0002716212468667

- Yoo, W. (2019). *The Making of God's Subject: Christian Conversion and Urban Youth in China*.  
University of Pittsburgh,
- Yu, Y. (2019). Metaphorical Representations of “Leftover Women”: Between Traditional Patriarchy and Modern Egalitarianism. *Social semiotics*, 31(2), 1-18.  
doi:10.1080/10350330.2019.1625515
- Yu, Y., & Nartey, M. (2021). Constructing the Myth of Protest Masculinity in Chinese English Language News Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Representation of ‘Leftover Men’. *Gender and language*, 15(2). doi:10.1558/genl.18823
- Yuan, C., Xuehui, H., & Dagsvik, J. K. (2011). Marriage Pattern in the City of Shanghai: Behavioral Two-Sex Marriage Model and Multistage Marriage Life Table Approach. *Chinese sociology and anthropology*, 43(4), 74-95.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1996). *Women and the Biological Reproduction of “The Nation”*. Paper presented at the Women's Studies International Forum.
- Zalewski, M., & Parpart, J. L. (1998). *The “Man Question” in International Relations*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Zaloom, C. (2006). Markets and Machines: Work in the Technological Sensoryscapes of Finance. *American quarterly*, 58(3), 815-837. doi:10.1353/aq.2006.0072
- Zhang, L. (2010). *In Search of Paradise: Middle-class Living in a Chinese Metropolis* (1 ed.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Zhang, X. (2011). *Carrying Out Modernity: Migration, Work, and Masculinity in China*.  
University of Pittsburgh,
- Zhang, X. (2015). One Life for Sale: Youth Culture, Labor Politics, and New Idealism in China. *Positions*, 23(3), 515-543.

Zheng, T. (2009). *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China* (N - New ed.).  
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Zurndorfer, H. (2018). Escape from the Country: The Gender Politics of Chinese Women in  
Pursuit of Transnational Romance. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 25(4), 489-506.