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**(Re)Constructing Chinese Womanhood through UK Higher Education: A  
Transnational, Intersectional, and Arts-Based Study**

**Qiao Dai**

**A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)**

**School of Education  
College of Social Science  
University of Glasgow  
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## **Abstract**

This research aims to explore Chinese women international students' (re)construction of Chinese womanhood through UK Higher Education (UKHE). I ask two questions: 1) In what ways did participants construct Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings and wider transnational intersectional contexts? 2) What is the role of UKHE in participants' construction of Chinese womanhood?

I situate these questions within the existing literature on Chinese womanhood and Chinese (women) students in international higher education. I construct a transnational intersectionality framework and adopt a life history and arts-based research approach. 56 participants participated in collage-facilitated, culturally responsive focus groups. Subsequently, 30 of them participated in timeline-facilitated life history interviews. Dialectics, intersectionality, and temporality guided my two-round data analysis.

Participants often perceived themselves as self-contradictory and discussed various contradictions in their construction of Chinese womanhood. I argue that their perception of contradictions between modern and traditional Chinese womanhood, incorporating six specific dilemmas, was shaped by the intersectionality of state neoliberalism and state heteropatriarchy through dichotomisation. Through UKHE, many participants became more aware of and resistant to the homogenisation, belittlement, restraints, and contradiction of the prescribed Chinese womanhood. They also developed towards diverse, autonomous, feminist, and integrated selfhood. Therefore, their sense of contradictions stemmed from: 1) the dichotomisation of state neoliberalism and state heteropatriarchy; 2) the conflict between their perceptions of dichotomies and their intersectional lived experiences; and 3) the tension between various restraints and their developing autonomy through UKHE.

I further conceptualise three ways in which interview participants' autonomy can be understood in relation to heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism: neoliberal autonomy, feminist autonomy, and uncertain autonomy. These concepts seek not only to understand participants' (re)construction of modern versus traditional womanhood but also to (re)imagine the power dynamics in their past-present-

future (re)construction, where UKHE played a significant yet complex role. Specifically, some participants developed neoliberal autonomy through experiencing and internalising transnational neoliberalism and injustices, alongside their subjectification of familism-patriotism. However, many participants developed their feminist autonomy through various channels: formal education in social justice and gender; autonomous, alternative, and cooperative learning; diverse and alternative womanhood, temporalities, and politics; and transnational media.

My research grounds participants' transformations within their social conditions to purposefully imagine alternative praxis of Chinese womanhood that transcend transnational axes of domination. For participants, this meant forging alternative ways of being beyond the dichotomy of traditional versus modern womanhood, as well as creating alternative ways of relating beyond the framework of collectives versus individuals and competition. Additionally, my research valorises the impact of UKHE on participants' autonomy and its feminist implications, while also problematising neoliberal and (neo)colonial practices. |

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## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: Qiao Dai

Signature:

## List of Abbreviations

HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
UKHE	UK Higher Education
UKHEI	UK Higher Education Institution
IoHE	Internationalisation of Higher Education
IHE	International Higher Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ACWF	All-China Women's Federation
WF	Women's Federation
UG	Undergraduate
PGT	Postgraduate Taught
PGR	Postgraduate Research
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
SHAPE	Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts
LH	Life History
LHR	Life History Research
ABR	Arts-Based Research
RQ1	Research Question 1
RQ2	Research Question 2

## 1 Chapter 1 Introduction

*Entering university, I put all my effort into studying English because I wanted to study abroad. I felt that going to another country would allow me to see different things, observe how others live, and learn about lifestyles beyond China. (Chen)<sup>1</sup>*

In May 2024, after drafting the findings and literature review chapters, I began to see the end of this thesis journey for the first time. I was excited and couldn't help but *imagine* what the introduction would look like, a thought that took me by surprise. Having taught at Glasgow University for over three years, I thought it was clear what an introduction *needs to* look like. I often told my undergraduate and postgraduate taught students, "Chapter titles are self-explanatory. You use Introduction to introduce research topics to readers, so it can include research background, rationale, personal motivations, research questions, significance, definitions of key terms, and the structure of your work...". But in this moment, I found myself resistant to writing this way – the way I was taught and taught my own students to write. Having studied and lived the construction of Chinese woman's womanhood through time and UKHE, the thought of having to write pre-determined elements linearly organised felt as if some parts of me were taken away from this thesis. How instead might I make this more visible? How might I move to represent fragments of my feelings and findings in my introduction? Feeling excited but unsettled by this idea, I brought it up for discussion with my supervisor Lisa and mentor Daria. They liked it and so generously shared their similar doings to encourage me. Further inspired by their work, I felt empowered to ask myself, what makes an introduction mine?

It needs to *differ* from the aforementioned structure. The act of separating different elements of the introduction with its linear presumption of thesis-making no longer makes sense to me. I have changed during this thesis-making journey. After drafting all other chapters, I'm now writing the Introduction at the end of

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<sup>1</sup>The participants of this research have shaped the feminist I am and made this thesis possible. To honour their contributions, I will open each chapter with fragments of their excerpts. This approach also aims to juxtapose multiple truths and show the iterative process of thesis-making.



this journey to introduce my work to readers at the start of this thesis. I could see and feel on my skin the multiplicity and nonlinearity of time, feeling unable to write a thesis with linear presumptions and struggling with the tenses of verbs. To my newer self, it *feels right* to weave my personal experiences, social encounters, and relationships, with some scholarly discussion across the coexistence of past, present, and future, and across multiple places. Then, it becomes something I would be *willing to share* with others. So, it's something *different*, something that *feels* right to me and that I would like to *share*. “For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” (Lorde, 1984, p. 107), I decided to attempt to write an introduction that feels like mine – a story of how my lived experiences led me to ask certain questions and search for certain literature.

I grew up wearing gender-neutral clothes, sporting short haircuts, and playing roughly with boys. I got good grades, attended some of the best schools and my parents supported and invested in my studies. I didn't consider myself very girly and believed my parents didn't have many gendered expectations in my upbringing. Fast forward to my decision to major in preschool education, which I believed was driven by my natural affection for children. 49 out of 50 students in my class were women. Existing literature says that the one-child policy (1979-2015) improves educational opportunities for only-child girls in urban China (e.g., Xu & Yeung, 2013), yet gender inequality persists, as evidenced by gendered parental expectations and children's gendered perceptions (e.g., Hu & Shi, 2020). My past upbringing now becomes more gendered. Dad earns more and dominates our family. Mom is strong and always tolerates. I was told that I needed to learn chores to be marriageable. Throughout my childhood and early adulthood in China, friends often called me 'brother,' a label I enjoyed. This is similar to the only-child teenage girls in Liu's study (2014), who enjoyed being labelled as tomboys because it gave them a sense of empowerment – I realised I felt the same.

My women classmates in the preschool education programme felt dissatisfied with the underpaid profession as kindergarten teachers, yet they also viewed these positions as suitable for women seeking a good marriage and a happy life. After completing my internship, I received a job offer from an exclusive international kindergarten in China. I was not excited about the offer at all. At the kindergarten,

I witnessed teachers humiliating children, such as calling a child “retarded” and using activities like playing catch in a demeaning way. This left me feeling powerless and uneasy about the environment. Observing the lives of my mother and some middle-aged women colleagues, I worried that getting married and having a child would halt my life. Despite being raised in what I believed was a gender-neutral environment, I found myself questioning: how did I end up here?

Existing literature says that urban Chinese girls and women of the one-child generations faced contradictory expectations, seen as both substitute sons for their parents (e.g., Xu & Yeung, 2013) and as future wives and mothers (e.g., Xie, 2021). Perhaps these expectations influenced my “gender-neutral” upbringing, which emphasised academic success, yet came with the gendered assumption that I would become a tolerant wife and caring mother. This ‘gender-neutral’ education perhaps made it difficult for me to accept how children were treated and how my life seemed pre-planned. I was unwilling to accept these norms, but I saw no other alternatives in my surroundings. The idea of changing environments and studying abroad emerged as a hope to explore other possibilities, both educationally and personally. As Chen, who opens the introduction, put it, *“I felt that going to another country would allow me to see different things, observe how others live, and learn about lifestyles beyond China.”*

After arriving in Glasgow in late 2017, I engaged in group discussions about gender for the first time with primarily Chinese women in my pre-master’s classes. We analysed gender pay gaps, attributing them to the lack of women in senior roles. Some expressed reluctance to pursue such positions due to pressures to marry, reproduce, and manage family care. While many viewed these roles as central to a woman’s happiness, they also highlighted the importance of employment for maintaining social connections, keeping up with their husbands, and fostering a happy, harmonious family life. Thus, despite the gender pay gap, many felt that the scarcity of women in senior roles across industries was natural. We also discussed gender disparities in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Some found this discussion pointless, and many agreed that boys naturally excelled in mathematics, just as girls were inherently skilled in languages. I felt uncomfortable with the idea that these gender differences were natural. The

Master's programme in Education at Glasgow University gave me the opportunity to select the topics for my assignments. I delved into relevant subjects such as nature versus nurture and gender stereotypes. Using literature to reinterpret my lived experiences and social interactions, I came to see the significant limitations of gender stereotypes on girls and women. However, I was perplexed as to why many of my Chinese women peers seemed comfortable with the status quo and didn't perceive any limitations.

Beyond seminar discussions and course assignments, my exploration of gender-related topics during my studies in UKHE also took place outside of formal education. People presented themselves in gender non-conforming ways on the streets. Women peers worked part-time jobs while studying in diverse subjects, including STEM. They talked about their aspirations and sex lives but not the pressures of marriage and reproduction. Some, in their thirties and beyond, were never married nor had children. Others were more senior, and some were visibly disabled; yet, being older or disabled did not deter them from pursuing higher degrees and future careers. I began to see different possibilities for women's lifepaths and education that respected individual agency regardless of gender/sex, age, and other backgrounds. At the same time, many of my Chinese women peers, also in the UK, remained concerned about marriage, reproduction, and age.

The identity or the label of being Chinese became particularly salient after I came to the UK. Some people would approach me and the first question they asked was, 'Are you Chinese?' as if nothing else about me mattered. In my part-time jobs at the University, colleagues often talked about Chinese students, mentioning our large numbers, poor English, quietness, and lack of critical thinking. Sometimes these discussions happened more discreetly under the label of 'international students.' Occasionally, I became the 'insider' expected to explain why Chinese students' English was poor. Many Chinese students in the School of Education were women, and I often heard them being labelled as shy. In the School, I taught seminars where most students were Chinese women. They often used 'Chinese' and 'women' to make sense of their educational and personal experiences, but their self-perceptions were much more diverse than being shy, and their meaning-making extended far beyond a lack of critical thinking. Myself, a Chinese woman

international student who taught and conducted research with Chinese women students in UKHE, I saw and grappled with the complexities and contestability of what it meant to be a Chinese woman.

Feeling different from those women who didn't worry about marriage and reproduction, and being distinguished from other students, I found that the labels of being Chinese and being a woman seemed to merge more than ever during my time studying in UKHE, together carrying complex, evolving, but fuzzy meanings – uncertain and difficult to grasp. My understanding of being a woman seemed to be made anew through experiences of engaging with gender-related studies and seeing new ways of being a woman. Meanwhile, my understanding of being Chinese seemed to be made anew through various experiences of being labelled as such in immigration rules, UKHE settings, media reports, and online discussions in both Chinese and English languages. The wider UKHE contexts beyond classroom interactions seemed to play a significant part in my constant sensemaking and the construction of my subjectivity.

Thus, I wondered how other Chinese women made sense of being Chinese women through broader UKHE settings and wider social contexts. For example, would they still feel dissatisfied with seemingly unfair situations, e.g., the underpaid profession as kindergarten teachers, but also accept them as good/suitable for women? If yes, why? If not, why? Would they still feel that gender gaps in senior roles and STEM were natural after studying in UKHE for a while? Would they still feel pressured to marry and reproduce at specific ages, or would they explore alternative paths? What would the growing salience of being Chinese in the UK mean for their understanding of their own and others' womanhood?

Such exploration is worthwhile as it questions the taken-for-granted categories and labels (Tracy, 2010) of Chinese womanhood. This inquiry is significant as it is essentially concerned with ways of being, situating Chinese women in layered social and political contexts to discuss their autonomies in deciding their life paths. The Chinese state continued to revitalise traditional womanhood, such as moving towards greater coercion of women's reproduction and bodies through the recent two-child policy in 2016, the three-child policy in 2022 and cultural hegemonies (Hong-Fincher, 2023; Zhu & Xiao, 2021), while privatising and

marketising the care economy, such as shifting elderly and child care to families, predominantly women (Meng, 2020; Xie, 2021). Together, this pressured Chinese women to return home from workplaces to fulfil their reproductive and care responsibilities for the family and nation (Hong-Fincher, 2018; Song, 2016). These state policies and socio-cultural influences have significantly impacted the life paths of many Chinese women (Wang, 2015; Zheng, 2016).

At the same time, Chinese women of the one-child generations, who received “gender-neutral” education, could find it hard to accept this gendered coercion (Liu, 2016b), potentially contributing to the growing feminist activism and ever-increasing public interest in feminist debates in China since 2010 (e.g., Yin, 2022). However, the state tightened its crackdown on various dissent and civil rights actions, such as its open suppression of feminist Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and criminalisation of feminist activists since 2015 (Stewart *et al.*, 2024). The plight of feminist development in contemporary China may further limit Chinese women’s access to ways of being different from accepting heteropatriarchal coercion. Chinese women studying abroad may experience some distance from the ways of being women influenced by that coercion in China’s context and encounter alternative ways of being a woman in new contexts. Thus, exploring ways of being a Chinese woman in the context of crossing borders for HE purposes may provide new insights into feminist discussions about Chinese women’s life paths and subjectivities.

Additionally, Chinese students remained the largest group of international students and Chinese women constituted the largest group of women international students in UKHE in 2022 (HESA, 2023b). While evaluations of student outcomes in UKHE primarily focused on immediate and economic aspects, like graduates’ employment (Austen & Jones-Devitt, 2023), some scholars call for investigating the long-term impacts of international HE on Chinese returnees’ lives and their potential socio-political implications for Chinese society (e.g., Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). My inquiry into Chinese women’s construction of ways of being through broader UKHE settings can further the understanding of UKHE’s impacts on the lives of its largest group of international students beyond employability and the potential feminist implications.

Besides, some scholars highlight that both faculty and Chinese international students encountered various dissatisfactions and challenges (Clarke, 2018; Quan *et al.*, 2016), while growing scholarship critiques the deficit conceptualisation of these students, which emphasises their lack of certain skills, challenges, and adaptations (e.g., Huang & Khan, 2024; Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022). Thus, the understanding of UKHE's impacts on Chinese women's construction of subjectivities may, in turn, have implications for how these international students and International Higher Education (IHE) are and should be conceptualised. Focusing on Chinese women with experiences of UKHE, I ask two questions in this research:

1. In what ways did participants construct Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings and wider transnational intersectional contexts?
2. What is the role of UKHE in participants' construction of Chinese womanhood?

This chapter explores how the personal, family, relational, educational, sociocultural, and state influences led me to ask these questions and seek out literature to better understand them. The following two chapters further situate my research questions within the existing literature about Chinese womanhood in China (**Chapter 2**) and Chinese (women) students in IHE (**Chapter 3**).

The discussion of Chinese womanhood and feminism(s) above underscores the importance of examining China's political economy and its implications for the citizens. Therefore, Chapter 2 first reviews the literature on the modernisation of China and the fashioning of Chinese citizens. Additionally, as part of the decolonisation of feminist knowledge-building, I aim to situate this inquiry within the historical legacies of women's movements and feminism(s) in China. Thus, Chapter 2 then examines the literature on women's struggles and resistance before delving into the scholarship related to modern womanhood in post-socialist urban China. This chapter also includes theoretical discussions on neoliberalism, governmentality, and critical socialist feminism within the Chinese context.

Chapter 3 begins by addressing the bigger picture of IHE, international students, and conceptual approaches before focusing on the literature concerning the experiences of Chinese (women) international students.

**Chapter 4** explains how the scholarship on Chinese feminism(s) and the internationalisation of higher education informs the theoretical framework I constructed to guide this research. **Chapter 5** systematically discusses the methodology used to address the research questions, covering life history research, arts-based research methods, data generation, data analysis and research quality. Finally, I will discuss the research findings in **Chapters 6,7 and 8**, before offering an (in)conclusion in **Chapter 9**.

Additionally, these chapters clarify the development of wording in research questions. For instance, Chapter 4 justifies the importance of using intersectionality to understand Chinese womanhood (see p.63) and details what I mean by transnational intersectionality in the research question (see p.70). Chapter 5 explains why I chose to use “participants” instead of “Chinese women” in phrasing my research questions (see p.120). I see many key terms as evolving and contestable, so I will explore them in different chapters of this thesis instead of defining them at the start. For example, Chapter 2 discusses the challenges gender, as an analytical concept, brings to the development of Chinese feminism(s) (see p.34), before Chapter 5 further explains my decisions regarding translation related to gender/sex (see p.110). Similarly, while Chapter 2 discusses the scholarly debates on neoliberalism in China’s contexts (see p.14), Chapter 6 details and justifies my use of the term in forming arguments for this research (see p.162). In this thesis, Chinese womanhood generally refers to the ways of being a Chinese woman, often encompassing both subjectivities and life paths.

I use some Chinese terms throughout this thesis for various reasons, such as the lack of equivalent concepts in English and their significance as a field of study. *Pīnyīn*<sup>2</sup> transliterations are often in the main text, with translations in footnotes. Sometimes, translations are included in the main text when necessary. Occasionally, Chinese characters are included when relevant. Below, I will provide

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<sup>2</sup> The official Romanisation system to transcribe Chinese characters into the Latin alphabet.

a selected glossary of these Chinese terms in *pīnyīn* format, along with their explanations (See Table 1-1), before reviewing the literature on Chinese womanhood in China.

Table 1-1 Selected glossary

<i>Pīnyīn</i>	Explanation
<i>Sùzhì</i>	Quality
<i>Quánmiàn sùzhì</i>	Comprehensive quality
<i>Sùzhì jiàoyù</i>	Education for quality
<i>Nǚquán zhǔyì</i>	Women’s rights-ism
<i>Nǚxìng zhǔyì</i>	Female or feminine-ism
<i>Xìngbié</i>	Gender/sex
<i>Nǚqiáng rén</i>	Female strong man (Xie, 2021). Participants used this term to refer to women with successful careers.
<i>Nánnǚ</i>	Man-woman, or, “all patriarchal abstractions and markings of distinction” (Liu <i>et al.</i> , 2013, p. 11).
<i>Tǎngpíng</i>	Lie flat. It suggests resisting the societal expectation of constant hustle and advocating for a more laid-back and less competitive approach to life (Su, 2023).



## 2 Chapter 2 Literature Review: Chinese Womanhood in China

*The year back in my home country suddenly grounded me in reality. When I was looking for a job in China, I faced a series of issues. During that time, I soberly realised that women's status was still at a disadvantage and that it was a male-dominated society. Our country's environment rigidly limits the age of women. (Liang)*

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews literature about Chinese womanhood in China, starting from the modernisation of China and Chinese citizens, followed by women's struggles and resistance in China, and then modern Chinese womanhood in post-socialist China.

To understand Liang's experiences of "*a male-dominated society*" in China, where women face disadvantages due to their gender/sex and age, serious discussions about Chinese womanhood need to be grounded in China's wider political, economic, cultural, and social contexts and histories (Song, 2023). Thus, section 2.2 traces the genealogy of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) political economy – its proclaimed modernisation of the country – and its impact on the fashioning of citizens. Governmentality, in the general Foucauldian sense, refers to "the conduct of conduct", encompassing various forms of knowledge(s), strategies, and techniques aimed to influence human behaviour (Blackwell, 2012; Foucault, 1982). While states have historically been central to this process, governmentality extends beyond the state to include other entities (Read, 2009). A shared focus among modern governmentality is the fashioning or shaping of citizens (Kaland, 2020; Rose, 2013). This is particularly relevant for this research concerning Chinese women's ways of being and is important in the governmentality of contemporary China, aiming at socialising a specific type of citizen (Miao, 2020).

To set the stage for this research's anticolonial discussion of Chinese womanhood, Section 2.3 traces histories of women's struggles and resistance in modern China and discusses theoretical concepts, such as critical socialist feminism. Section 2.4 then examines the literature on modern womanhood in post-socialist urban China,

elucidating existing knowledge directly related to this research. This includes the fashioning of girlhood and womanhood, its implications for their lived realities, and its influence on subjectivity construction among Chinese women in post-socialist urban settings. Finally, I will explain how the relevant literature informs my research at the end of these sections and the chapter.

## **2.2 Modernisation of China and Chinese citizens**

Section 2.2.1 first traces the genealogy of the party-state before analysing the complexities and contradictions of its current regime named Socialism with Chinese characteristics. Section 2.2.2 reviews the literature on *sùzhi*<sup>3</sup>, which, as the PRC's modernisation of Chinese citizens, idealises and normalises a specific mode of existence (e.g., Kipnis, 2006). This involves an in-depth analysis of *sùzhi* as a vital form of governmentality in modern China, as well as youth's negotiations of and beyond it.

### **2.2.1 Modernisation of China: Socialism with Chinese Characteristics**

The PRC was a state established in 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) following almost three decades of revolutionary struggles informed by Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought. Mao Zedong, the founding father of the PRC, articulated its foundational framework in his work "On People's Democratic Dictatorship." He describes the PRC as "a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants" (PRC. Constitution, cited in Zhao & Wu, 2020). The CCP was not structured as a conventional bourgeois political party but as a 20th-century "new-model political party", serving as both a revolutionary force and a means of mobilisation (Schudson, 1989). Similarly, the PRC wasn't established as a bourgeoisie nation-state, but rather as a multi-ethnic "people's republic," grounded not only in the intersection of national liberation and class struggles within China's semi-colonial capitalist context but also in the concept of the socialist state as a "people's democracy" (Zhao & Wu, 2020).

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<sup>3</sup> Quality.

In contrast to some ahistorical critiques of its one-party rule and authoritarian regime, the Maoist state aimed to govern by actively engaging society, seeking believers rather than subjects (Blecher, 2009). Nonetheless, the stark disparities between the socialist ideals and actual outcomes reached a climax during the Cultural Revolution, a tumultuous socio-political movement initiated by Mao in China from 1966 to 1976. This period was characterised by widespread social upheaval, political purges, ideological indoctrination, and the suppression of dissent, resulting in immense human suffering, and significant economic and social disruption (Kraus, 2012; Li, 2001). The Cultural Revolution severely eroded the CCP's legitimacy and resulted in widespread disillusionment with socialism (Kraus, 2012). Subsequently, the party officially disavowed the Cultural Revolution, partially acknowledged Mao's errors, partially abandoned socialist discourse and bolstered international alliances focused on liberal democratic capitalism (Li, 2001; Mittler, 2020).

After Mao's death, the late 1970s saw the state reinterpret China's socialist past and condemn traditional culture, thus paving the way for neoliberal capitalism (Li, 2001; Wang & Fang, 2019). Specifically, state-sponsored media and academia vilified Mao (Li, 2001) and glorified the previously perceived “reactionary” Kuomintang government<sup>4</sup> (Zhao & Wu, 2020). A state-sponsored documentary explicitly criticised traditional culture and mocked the socialist planned economy, portraying it as a barrier to radical neoliberal reforms (Zhao & Wu, 2020). Rural society, emblematic of both Chinese culture and socialism, was particularly condemned as backward and feudal, requiring transformation through the introduction of neoliberal capitalism (Wang & Fang, 2019). Having analysed the “processes of decollectivisation and proletarianisation, marketisation, fiscal decentralisation, opening up, and spatial differentiation”, So and Chu (2012, p. 171) argue that China was transitioning toward neoliberal capitalism from the late 1970s, marking the inception of economic reform. In the late 1980s, economic difficulties and social grievances sparked a democratic movement that culminated

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<sup>4</sup> Kuomintang was founded in 1911 by Sun Yat-sen as a nationalist party with the goal of overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and establishing a modern republic in China. The term “reactionary” reflects the CCP's ideological stance against the Kuomintang, portraying it as an obstacle to revolutionary change and socialist development.

in a confrontation between protesters and the party-state in Tiananmen Square, resulting in the violent suppression of the demonstrators (Kluver, 2010).

Against this backdrop, the party-state bolstered its political authority in the name of “stability”, while Reformists continued to push for neoliberal capitalist policies in the late 1990s (Béja, 2010; Kluver, 2010). These policies included transforming social services into commodities and further liberalising the economy, such as China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation (Roberts, 2020). Wang (2005, p. 70) considers this as “the secret history of the tangled connection between ‘neo-authoritarianism’ and ‘neo-liberalism’ in China”. For instance, the privatisation and corporatisation of state assets blurred property boundaries and facilitated a blending of state managers and capitalists, resulting in the emergence of a powerful hybrid cadre-capitalist class (Zhang & Ong, 2015). Consequently, as reforms intensified in the late 1990s and dissatisfaction among workers, peasants, and the middle class grew, criticisms of capitalism became more vocal and direct, leading to widespread and often violent protests and demonstrations (Lee, 2021; So & Chu, 2012). China began to experience the adverse effects of a capitalist economy, incorporating the rampant exploitation of labour, particularly young women who migrated from rural areas (Ngai, 2005; Roberts, 2020).

So and Chu (2015) argue that the emergence of state neoliberalism in the early twenty-first century was a response to the significant challenges posed by the deepening of neoliberal capitalism in the 1990s. The new party leadership (2003-2013) under Hu Jintao, the PRC’s president, and Wen Jiabao, the Premier, introduced policies such as “building a new socialist countryside” and promoting a “harmonious society” (Saich, 2007), incorporating measures to de-commodify human social services (So & Chu, 2015). These policies aimed to address social inequality, particularly the growing rural-urban divide, marking a shift in the ideological orientation of the Chinese state (Zhang & Ong, 2015). Thus, some differentiate Chinese state neoliberalism from the neoliberal states of the Washington Consensus and the embedded liberal states of the North, highlighting its strong state apparatus that actively intervened in the economy and its nationalist and authoritarian characteristics, which suppressed labour

demonstrations and restricted popular movements (Harvey, 2007; So & Chu, 2015).

The significant autonomy of the party-state has sparked debates regarding whether contemporary China aligns with neoliberal principles (Weber, 2018). Neoliberalism itself is a contentious concept; Harvey (2007) defines it as a new initiative by the capitalist class to counteract high taxes, stringent regulations, and production constraints imposed by the state and trade unions. Additionally, Foucault's discussions on governmentality have influenced Mitchell Dean (2009) and Nikolas Rose (2002, 2013), whose understanding of neoliberalism encompasses political and economic liberalism, aiming to foster self-sufficient citizens through government intervention or withdrawal from it. Zhou *et al.* (2019) describe neoliberalism as a branch of liberal ideology that prioritises market mechanisms over other societal organising principles. Some scholars outside mainland China classify China as neoliberalism but acknowledge its distinctiveness, labelling it “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” (Harvey, 2007), “state neoliberalism” (So & Chu, 2015; Wang & Liu, 2015), “authoritarian capitalism” (Liu, 2006a, 2008b), “*guānxi*<sup>5</sup> capitalism” (Wang & Rowley, 2017), and “capitalism without class struggle” (Žižek, 2017, p. 110). Many use capitalism, liberalism, and neoliberalism interchangeably, further suggesting the contested characteristics of this term. Some feminists have increasingly recognised and often criticise China's state neoliberalism (Wang, 2021b; Yin, 2022), challenging the often-binary understanding of state and capital. This thesis aligns with this perspective and adopts the label of state neoliberalism<sup>6</sup>.

Despite implementing neoliberal policies, the Chinese party-state has grown increasingly resistant to neoliberal discourse in communication, particularly when the government's role in economic and social affairs is challenged (Zhou *et al.*, 2019). Since the early 2000s, the Chinese government increasingly showed its aversion to Western ideas in communication, leading to the CCP largely banning the promotion of (neo)liberalism in official media and restricting its teaching in universities (Buckley, 2013). In 2017, Xi Jinping, the current leader of the PRC,

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<sup>5</sup> Connection/Network.

<sup>6</sup> See p.177 for a detailed justification of the use of this label.

emphasises China's commitment to “socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era” (2017), further solidifying the official rhetoric rejection of neoliberalism. Political censorship may explain why mainland Chinese scholars have played a limited role in analysing neoliberalism (Zhou *et al.*, 2019).

Amid diverse assessments and labels, there is broad consensus on the unique interplay of capital, state, and society in China, complicating the simplistic understanding of the authoritarian state's driving force and conflicting rationales (Weber, 2018; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). For instance, Zhang and Peck (2016, p. 386) view the Chinese model as “complex and heterogeneous,” suggesting that it may be better understood through its paradoxes rather than a singular, static logic. Keith *et al.* (2013) argue that while neoliberal economic structures promote individualism and detachment, the Chinese model is characterised by relational and contextual dynamics. Zhou *et al.* (2019) highlight the crucial role of the Chinese state, which, while intertwined with capital, also must navigate competing priorities within and outside the ruling elite. Similarly, Ong (2007) considers neoliberalism as a governmentality technology that operates alongside other political rationalities. Furthermore, Zhou *et al.* (2019) propose that instead of viewing China's development as merely a variation of neoliberalism, neoliberalism itself should be seen as a variation of diverse political and economic configurations across various contexts.

Specifically, the paradoxes between China's right-wing economic policies and left-wing ideology and communication since the early twenty-first century have become more pronounced under Xi Jinping's presidency (Boer, 2021; Peters, 2019). Sigley (2006), analysing the PRC's proclaimed modernisation project, views the social engineers' theory of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” as an innovative blend of neoliberal rationalities and revitalised socialist principles. The CCP has underscored its commitment to Marxism and introduced “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” at the 19th National Congress and into the Constitution to consolidate ideological unity and rejuvenate political foundations (Peters, 2019; Zhou *et al.*, 2019).

This ideological shift has reshaped the narratives of China's past-present-future. Xi Jinping has emphasised the continuity between the Mao era and the Reform

era, rejecting contradiction and presenting them as part of a continuous journey in China's pursuit of socialism (Boer, 2021; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). Slogans such as “not forgetting our initial aspirations, firmly remembering our missions” redefine the CCP's original goals as “bringing happiness to the Chinese people and realising the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (Xi, 2017; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). Unlike the state's previous condemnation of socialism and Chinese tradition, Xi Jinping has re-interpreted both, highlighting their compatibility and advocating for “cultural confidence” in China's traditions, the CCP's revolution, and the PRC's socialist path as sources for creative cultural transformation (Xi, 2019). For instance, different from the previous degradation of rural society as backward, the media now frequently showcases state efforts in rural cultural revitalisation, portraying a reinvigorated socialist countryside (Wang & Fang, 2019).

These ideological shifts were implemented through on-the-ground propaganda campaigns, such as the ‘China Dream’ initiative, aimed at socialising a specific type of citizen to legitimise the rule of the party-state (Callahan, 2017; Miao, 2020). These efforts highlighted individual virtues such as filial piety (Zhang, 2016a) and patriotism by romanticising and homogenising the past (Zheng & Ho, 2017). The CCP validates these concepts by framing them as longstanding traditions of China and emphasising how the party revitalised them during the country's modernisation from 1949 (Callahan, 2017; Lin & Jackson, 2023). By accentuating both the historical traditions and socialist legacy as inherently Chinese, the CCP creates a narrative distancing itself from Western values while juxtaposing the ‘China Dream’ against Western ideologies (Peters, 2019). The CCP, presenting itself as the heir to China's cultural legacy and recalling its revolutionary victories over imperial and feudal adversaries, asserts its sole capability to realise the ‘China Dream’ (Miao, 2020; Peters, 2019).

At the same time, the reform era has reintroduced stark class divides between a powerful capitalist class with transnational ties – comprising wealthy business elites, private entrepreneurs, and state-affiliated capitalists – and a vast migrant working class (Zhao & Wu, 2020). This working class consists of rural-to-urban migrants who work in low-paying, labour-intensive jobs and face precarious living conditions with limited access to social services. The marketisation of essential

services like healthcare, education, and housing has worsened disparities in class, leading to increased feelings of insecurity and anxiety (Zhao & Wu, 2020). Critical socialist feminists have also pointed out the revival of pre-socialist gender/sex and class hierarchies since the early 1990s (Wang, 2021b; Yin, 2022). Moreover, Han Chinese chauvinism (Zhao & Wu, 2020) and racialised nationalism, prevalent since the reform era (Cheng, 2019), have had detrimental effects on ethnic relations (Lin, 2015). Consequently, the disparities between official socialist rhetoric and lived experiences of class, gender/sex and ethnic/racial inequalities become focal points for potential social conflicts (Lin, 2015; Song, 2023; Zhao & Wu, 2020) and subjects of academic and public discourse. The paradoxes between China's left-wing ideology and communication and right-wing economic policies serve as the political-economic backdrop for my research into Chinese women's ways of being.

### **2.2.2 Modernisation of Chinese citizens: negotiations of *Sùzhì* and beyond**

The contradictions between neoliberal rationalities and revitalised socialist principles in socialism with Chinese characteristics (Boer, 2021; Peters, 2019) are evident in China's governmentality. Scholars in China studies have extensively explored the concept of *sùzhì*, which entails "governance that places valuations on particular states of being and forms of conduct" (Kaland, 2020, p. 313) to cultivate "a 'quality' citizenship" for national rejuvenation (Lin, 2017, p. 2). While many directly translated *sùzhì* into "quality" (e.g., Sigley, 2009), others study its genealogy and argue for the absence of an equivalent concept in English. For instance, Kipnis (2006, p. 304) translates *sùzhì* into "embodied human quality".

Sigley (2009) defines *sùzhì* as a vital form of Chinese governmentality, blending various concepts from Chinese Marxism, socialist reasoning, and neoliberal practices. Tracing its genealogy, Sigley (2006, 2009) underscores the tensions between regarding individuals as agents of collective revolutionary autonomy and as passive recipients of administrative commands during Mao's era. Despite the persistence of socialist rhetoric, Sigley (2004, 2009) emphasises the cultivation of new qualities for the market since 1979. In analysing *quánmiàn sùzhì*<sup>7</sup>, which

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<sup>7</sup> Comprehensive quality.



encompasses physical, cultural, ideological, and moral dimensions, Sigley (2009) underscores its role in modernising Chinese citizens, aiming to foster both autonomous middle-class subjects and dehumanised individuals in the post-Mao era. Sigley (2004) also notes the shift towards “human capital accumulation” and reduced socialist planning since the early 1990s, resulting in increased social hierarchies and inequalities in China.

Similarly, Liu (2008b, 2011, 2014) links China’s contemporary neoliberal-socialist regime of subjectification with *quánmiàn sùzhì*, framing it as both the ideal subjecthood and an educational objective for Chinese citizens. This regime demands individuals embody traits of self-responsibility, independence, and rationality from neoliberalism, alongside allegiance to the authoritarian and patriarchal party-state, promoting collectivist values from socialism (Fong, 2007; Liu, 2014). Despite the contradictory values of neoliberalism and socialism, Chinese social engineers aim to blend them, promoting an ideal subjecthood that integrates the independent qualities of neoliberal individuals and the collectivist beliefs of socialist citizens (Liu, 2008a; Sigley, 2006). This effort aims to cultivate high-quality citizens beyond economic skills as social engineers believe that nurturing spiritual qualities can counteract prevailing individualism, which party leaders deem detrimental to social cohesion (Yan, 2009).

Under the framework of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and the discourse of “*quánmiàn sùzhì*”, the conflicting ideologies of neoliberalism and socialism appear theoretically cohesive (Liu, 2006b, 2008a, 2011). However, looking into the literature, it remains unclear whether the “socialist-collectivist” values are genuinely pursued, where neoliberal values often seem to prevail in value conflicts between the two regimes. For example, Wang and Fong (2009) show how the state encourages consumerism, individual expression, and the beauty economy-products of neoliberalism – over traditional socialist-collectivist values like frugality. Economic development is promoted through economic reforms and the discourse of idealised subjecthood (Fong, 2004; Liu, 2006b). The party-state advocates for wealth accumulation and increased consumption to instil a strong desire for material gain among Chinese citizens (Fong, 2007; Keith *et al.*, 2013). Media and official documents widely promote a middle-class lifestyle and

consumption habits (Liu, 2008a, 2014; Xie, 2021). Moreover, feminists critique the state's invocation of familialism (Wang *et al.*, 2020) to justify pronatalist propaganda and condemn the state-sponsored gendered hyper-consumerism, arguing that these practices deviate from socialist values despite official claims (Meng & Huang, 2017; Yin, 2022). Thus, Liu (2011, 2014) and Xie (2021) suggest that the survival and application of traditional and socialist values in *sùzhì* discourse depend on their alignment with economic development and existing power structures, such as social class, party leadership, and patriarchy.

Examining policies related to birth control and *sùzhì jiàoyù*<sup>8</sup> during the reform era, Kipnis (2006, 2007) and Lin (2017) elucidate the intricate connections of *sùzhì* with eugenics, Confucianism, socialism, authoritarianism, nationalism, and neoliberalism. Specifically, the propaganda surrounding the one-child policy (1979-2015) advocates for superior birth and education to cultivate comprehensive *sùzhì*, encompassing both inherent and cultivated qualities (Fong, 2012; Rodriguez, 2023). Kipnis (2006) traces its origins to eugenicists' emphasis on genetic and racial enhancement during the Republican era and the socialist government's mandate to foster all-rounded citizens. Lin (2017) further explores the Confucian influence, like utilising a sense of shame to motivate individuals' self-development, in *sùzhì jiàoyù*. Additionally, Kipnis (2006, 2007) critiques the authoritarian discourse in the PRC, which sanctified *sùzhì* to justify various policies and injustices. The intense competition in China's education and job markets fuelled widespread national concerns about *sùzhì*, often leading to anxiety among the one-child generations (Kipnis, 2006, 2007; Lin, 2017).

Finally, scholars agree that the CCP often integrates *sùzhì* with nationalist cultivation to legitimise its authority, framing the destiny of individuals as intertwined with that of the nation-state (Kaland, 2020; Kipnis, 2006; Lin, 2017). For example, Lin (2017) notes that although *sùzhì jiàoyù* initially facilitated the emergence of pedagogy aimed at self-development, later government policies redirected its focus towards the ideological and moral *sùzhì* of patriotic citizens. The moralisation of patriotism through education, accelerated in Xi's presidency, framed "patriotism as a virtue essential to being a good Chinese person" (Lin &

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<sup>8</sup> Education for quality.

Jackson, 2023, p. 344). This initiative aimed to “cultivate students’ deep feelings of loving the Party, the country, and socialism” (National Textbook Committee, 2021, quoted in Lin & Jackson, 2023, p. 349), invoking Chinese Confucian cultural rhetoric to provoke emotional and moral connectedness to the family-country (Zhou & Xie, 2022). Alternatively, the state’s patriotic education emphasises the consequences of being unpatriotic and demonising unpatriotic people (Fei & Jackson, 2022; Lin, 2024).

Literature increasingly explores the impact of these complex ideologies and policies surrounding *sùzhì* discourse on youth subjectivities and lived realities in contemporary China. Research suggests that China’s one-child policy has resulted in a skewed demographic, with more men than women (Akimov *et al.*, 2021) and a decline in support for traditional patrilineal beliefs (Hu & Shi, 2020). This policy has popularised the “4-2-1” family structure, consisting of four grandparents, two parents, and one child (Wang & Fong, 2009). Sex-selective abortion and female infanticide during the one-child policy caused a significant sex imbalance (Akimov *et al.*, 2021). However, attitudes towards sons have shifted among the reform generation in urban China, with fewer parents adhering to patrilineal succession (Hu & Scott, 2016).

Moreover, Chinese society has experienced significant competition in both job and education markets, characterised by credentialism and “diploma inflation,” particularly affecting the one-child generations (Brown, 2003; Yan, 2020). Qualitative studies in the past two decades suggest a trend toward individualistic approaches to achieving a middle-class lifestyle among university-educated youths, characterised by a relentless pursuit of academic competitiveness and market advantage (Bakken & Bakken, 2000; Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021). For example, Liu (2006b) discovers that advantaged only-child undergraduates at prestigious universities felt compelled to continuously strive for academic success to maintain their middle-class status. Similarly, Xie (2021) finds that Chinese urban middle-class graduates, many with international higher education degrees, exhibited comparable experiences. Thus, urban middle-class graduates of the one-child generations adopt an individualistic strategy to secure their position in the

competitive market economy, emphasising material wealth, competition, and consumerism.

Despite state promotion of “*quánmiàn sùzhì*,” underpinned by neoliberalism-socialism, Chinese youth’s identity construction largely disregards communist-collectivist ideals in favour of the free-choosing, self-determining, and self-responsible neoliberal subject (Bakken & Bakken, 2000; Fong, 2007; Liu, 2011). The combination of fierce competition, consumerism, rampant corruption, state-promoted rhetoric of meritocracy and familism, and state withdrawal of social services convinces the one-child generation that they and their families are the most trustworthy providers for individual welfare (Li, 2023; Liu, 2016c). Thus, the extent to which they autonomously choose neoliberal subjecthood is debatable. Chen (2019) offers different interpretations of Chinese youths’ pursuit of academic excellence, suggesting that some middle-class families view international higher education as a means to cultivate socialist subjecthood and contribute to society. Chen (2019) argues that these families are transitioning from egoism to altruism, with Confucian values and social contributions potentially becoming key aspects of middle-class identity in the future.

While constant self-improvement fosters economic growth, some scholars express concerns about the overly individualistic understanding of success and failure (e.g., Liu, 2011, 2014). This reflects a form of “epistemological fallacy”, where citizens seek individual solutions despite societal structures shaping opportunities (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). In contemporary China, this is exacerbated by the state promotion of socialist rhetoric, the rise of the state market economy, and authoritarian censorship under Xi’s presidency (Peters, 2019; Wang, 2021b). Consequently, some are concerned that Chinese youths, despite their higher education, may be incapacitated from critically analysing the interconnected social structures shaping their lives, such as social class, gender, and various norms (Liu, 2006b, 2011). Overall, while the party-state may attempt to dictate the meaning of *sùzhì*, Chinese youth’s realities indicate that its interpretations are open-ended and constantly subject to negotiation (Kaland, 2020).

Some youths extend their negotiations beyond comprehensive *sùzhì*, the idealised and normalised way of being, to explore alternative modes of existence, as

evidenced in the recent discourse surrounding Chinese neologisms. *Nèijùn*, translated as ‘involution,’ serves as the backdrop against which these innovative alternatives emerge. Its current application in China captures both a relentless competition for opportunities and resources and a sense of ‘burnout, ennui, and despair’ associated with participation in this competition (Mulvey & Wright, 2022). In this context, retreatism emerges as one form of alternative existence, exemplified in neologisms. Buzzwords like *tǎngpíng*, translated as ‘lie flat’, and *bǎilàn*, translated as ‘let it rot’, gained popularity in 2021 and 2022, respectively (Brossard, 2022; Chi, 2022). These terms reflect youths’ feelings of hopelessness and voluntary withdrawal from ultra-competitive environments, rejecting societal expectations of ambition and hard work for a simpler life (Chi, 2022; Zhang & Li, 2023). Su (2023, p. 137) contextualises lying-flatism within the exacerbated domestic competition due to the economic slowdown and international tensions during and post-pandemic, along with extensive official discourse promoting nationalism, thus viewing lie-flat-ism as “a non-violent uncooperative spontaneous declaration of a way of life”.

While the state media condemns retreatism as nihilistic and counter-productive to national rejuvenation, scholarly discussions tend to view it as resistance to social injustice, such as market exploitation and state narratives, and a collective yearning for social change (Chan, 2023; Su, 2023; Zheng *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, while discussions in mainland China perceive lie-flat as a phenomenon of the young middle class, Brossard (2022), tracing the genealogy of various innovative forms of retreatism in PRC history, argues for lie-flat as a philosophy of autonomous degrowth for the lower social classes to achieve individual and collective fulfilment.

Escapism emerges as another alternative. Specifically, the government’s Zero-Covid policy and lockdowns in 2022 spurs interest in a more radical solution on Chinese social media (Chan, 2023; Huang, 2022). *Rùnxué*, translated as ‘runology’, is the study of how, why, and where to run away from China. Huang (2022) suggests that the Shanghai lockdown was merely the final trigger of youths’ pre-existing dissatisfaction with their environment. This dissatisfaction culminated in China’s A4 Protest that began in November 2022, a series of protests against

China's stringent Zero-Covid policy (Chan, 2023; Thornton, 2023). These protests, sparked by deaths and injuries during a lockdown in Xinjiang, constitute rare movements transcending localities and class boundaries in the face of strict authoritarian censorship and dissent crackdown in contemporary China (Chan, 2023; Thornton, 2023). Thus, Chan (2023) compares them to Tiananmen Square and argues for the revolutionary potential of the protests and the power of the internet, while Su (2023) considers the protests as a radical shift in Chinese youth culture, signalling a transition from retreatism and escapism to more radical and active forms of resistance.

### **2.2.3 Summary**

In tracing the genealogy of the PRC, I highlighted the complexities and contradictions of its current regime, known as Socialism with Chinese characteristics, such as the tensions between neoliberal rationalities and socialist principles (Boer, 2021; Peters, 2019). By examining the literature on *sùzhi*, I analysed its intricate connections to ideologies, such as eugenics, Confucianism, Socialism, authoritarianism, nationalism, and neoliberalism (Kipnis, 2006, 2007; Lin, 2017). I further emphasised how comprehensive *sùzhi* seemingly serves as a cohesive form of governmentality within the neoliberal-socialist regime (Liu, 2008b, 2011; Sigley, 2009). Thus, through reviewing the relevant literature, I situate my research on Chinese womanhood within these contradictions and complexities of ideologies in China's political economy and its fashioning of citizens. Against the backdrop of the modernisation of China and Chinese citizens, the next section reviews the literature on women's struggles and resistance in China.

## **2.3 Women's struggles and resistance in China**

Mohanty (2003b) posits feminist scholarship as inherently political, critiquing its tendency to reduce "Third World" women's experiences to a singular, ahistorical narrative of oppression. Jayawardena (2016) counters Western hegemony in feminism by exploring the intertwined histories of feminism and national liberation movements in "Third World" countries, which oppose external imperialism and internal feudal regimes. These feminist movements, intricately

linked with their nations' quests for liberation and democracy, were endorsed by male bourgeois elites as part of national modernisation projects and spawned socialist feminists aiming to dismantle patriarchy and capitalism (Jayawardena, 2016; Yin, 2022). Jayawardena's (2016) work reframes "Third World" women not as passive recipients of Western enlightenment and male leadership but as active agents in their countries' and their own emancipation. Thus, a genealogy of women's struggles and resistance in modern China sets the stage for this research's exploration of Chinese womanhood and its intended anticolonial contribution to the past-present-future of Chinese feminism(s).

Vision is intertwined with power and may carry implicit violence (Haraway, 2020). Thus, I strive to depict the contested past of feminism(s) in modern China and elucidate the ideologies embedded in current visions, where relevant, for the future of feminism(s). Feminist historians commonly view the start of the reform era (1979) as a significant rupture in women's struggles in modern China (e.g., Ko & Wang, 2007). Hence, I will first explore feminist histories from the early twentieth century to 1978, before delving into feminist activism, discourses, theorisation, and imagination since the reform.

### **2.3.1 Early twentieth century to 1978**

The emergence of Chinese feminism at the turn of the twentieth century served as a significant force in challenging imperialist and feudal dominance (Liu *et al.*, 2013; Yin, 2022). The term "feminism", introduced into China during this period, was translated as "nǚquán zhǔyì"<sup>9</sup> to show feminists' political demands (Xu, 2009). Many scholars perceive early Chinese feminism as a predominantly male-driven movement aimed at national rejuvenation through women's economic empowerment (e.g., Shen, 2016; Sudo, 2010; Sudo & Hill, 2005). Consequently, China's early twentieth-century feminism, which focused on national reform while perpetuating male dominance, was labelled "feminism under patriarchy" (Evans, 2021; Li & John, 2005). Feminist historians nonetheless highlight the significant

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<sup>9</sup> Women's rights-ism – this translation centers on rights.

contributions of women intellectuals and workers to the revolutionary movements (Davin, 1976; Wang, 2017; Yu, 2020).

Elite men and women collaborated for women's rights, notably during the May Fourth Movement (1915-1921), where male intellectuals sought to liberate Chinese women for national benefit, while women intellectuals directly challenged women's oppression (Min, 2005; Wang, 2021b; Yu, 2015). For instance, He-Yin Zhen critiques the *nánnǚ* system<sup>10</sup> as the prevailing Chinese gender structure intertwined with capitalism and nationalism (Wang, 2021b), envisioning women's liberation through the dismantling of these hierarchies (Ko & Wang, 2007; Song, 2023). By 1922, feminist organisations had emerged nationwide, advocating for rights including abolishing foot-binding<sup>11</sup> and securing equal political participation, education, employment, and freedom in marriage and divorce (Evans, 2021; Yin & Sun, 2021). In this context, 'women's rights' leaned more towards the development of individual women rather than the nation (Ko & Wang, 2007).

Feminism declined during the Republican era (1912-1949) (Dai, 2006; Ko & Wang, 2007). Initially endorsing feminist demands, the CCP shifted towards a socialist agenda focused on class struggle since the mid-1920s, marginalising feminists as bourgeois, so feminists within the CCP needed to adapt to the proletarian women's liberation discourse (Ko & Wang, 2007). The 1920s and 1930s also saw the emergence of "new women" as "the embodiment of an urban middle-class subjectivity" and reflecting "colonial modernity" (Ko & Wang, 2007, p. 469). Despite women's increasing financial independence (Evans, 2008), public campaigns discouraged their political involvement (Barlow, 2004). Economic panic in the 1930s further impeded women's rights, pushing them from the workforce to domestic roles to serve family and country (Sudo, 2010).

Since 1949, Marxist ideology has been widely embraced to promote women's liberation during Mao's era (Croll, 1995; Shen, 2016). Song (2023) identifies key

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<sup>10</sup> The hierarchical division of men and women.

<sup>11</sup> A traditional Chinese practice involving the tight binding of young girls' feet to alter their shape and size, creating small, deformed feet that were considered symbols of beauty and status.



aspects of women's liberation during the collectivist era (1949-1966), emphasising collective liberation, the necessity of a collectivist society, collectivism as a way of life and interpersonal relationships, and liberation for all. The Marxist conception of women's liberation elevated women's social status to that of full members of society, celebrating the selfless and hardworking "iron girls" (Ko & Wang, 2007; Yu, 2020). The well-known feminist ideas of "women and men are the same" and "women hold up half the sky" resulted in state-led feminism facing scholarly criticism in the post-Mao period for its pursuit of gender sameness (Evans, 2021).

Nevertheless, these critiques often overlook state feminists' achievement in advancing women's rights through public initiatives, policies, and legislation, primarily via the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) (Wu & Dong, 2019; Yin & Sun, 2021). Despite some progress towards gender equality (Wang, 1999), the male-centric Maoist ideology perpetuated and exacerbated gender disparities, especially during the Cultural Revolution (Wang, 2017; Yu, 2015). Feminism became taboo and state feminists carefully navigated through male supremacist and feudalistic ideologies within the male-dominated CCP (Ko & Wang, 2007; Yu, 2020). Wang (2017) introduces the concept of state feminists' "politics of concealment," wherein they had to obscure feminist agendas and authorship to align with Party programs, leading to prevalent anonymity.

However, the ACWF's structure marginalised non-state actors and their politics of concealment hindered internal feminist activists from articulating critical feminist scholarship outside orthodox Party discourse (Wang, 2017). Additionally, Maoist emphasis on class struggle overshadowed feminist efforts to concurrently challenge gender and class oppression (Wang, 2017), setting the stage for future gender tensions (Dong, 2023). This era's limitations, like gendered division of labour, and immature welfare system, together with high female labour force participation, foreshadowed the exploitation of working women today (Dong, 2023; Song, 2023).

### 2.3.2 Feminism(s) after 1979

Some feminist scholars label contemporary China as post-socialist to signify the significant transition from state socialism to state capitalism in the late 1970s (e.g., Spakowski, 2018; Wang, 2017). While this transition resulted in social polarisation in China (So & Chu, 2012), the state rendered class irrelevant and taboo (Guo, 2009; Stewart *et al.*, 2024). Elites directly attacked socialist feminist practices of empowering lower-class labouring women as masculinisation (Yin, 2022). The prevalence of this critique suggests the erasure of socialist state feminist history and the sealing of intellectual space, as many equated the post-socialist (re)production of mainstream anti-socialist discourse with the historical reality of socialism (Wang, 2017). Additionally, Cheng (2019) suggests that Chinese nationalist racism favouring Han ethnicity worsened in the 1980s, while Wang (2017) critiques the white-supremacist beauty standard promoted by consumerism from the late 1990s when feminism was re-translated as *nǚxìng zhǔyì*<sup>12</sup> to de-masculinise and re-feminise women (Ko & Wang, 2007).

The impact of shifts towards state neoliberalism, especially the re-construction and masking of class, gender/sex, and race hierarchy (Song, 2023; Stewart *et al.*, 2024; Yin, 2022), along with socialist aftermaths, sets the stage for the multi-sited and complex feminism(s) in contemporary China. I will first review the literature on the often-discussed two generations of feminism(s), followed by the increasingly controversial popular feminism(s), and the emerging feminist scholarship.

#### 2.3.2.1 Two generations of feminism(s)

Post-Mao China witnessed the development of state feminism led by the Women's Federation (WF) system, including the ACWF and its local branches, functioning as a controversial governmental NGO with top-down influence on women-related issues (Shen, 2005; Sudo, 2010). This era saw the emergence of female academics, attorneys, reporters, and ACWF professionals establishing NGOs, gaining momentum after the 1995 World Women's Conference in Beijing, a pivotal

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<sup>12</sup> Female or feminine-ism – this translation centers on femininity.

moment for advancing Chinese feminism(s) both organisationally and discursively (Wang & Zhang, 2010; Wu & Dong, 2019). Collaborations between WF feminists and burgeoning NGOs, often funded by international organisations, expanded efforts in gender mainstreaming and equipped feminist leaders with the necessary skills (Yang, 2020; Zhou, 2023). Numerous WF leaders, possessing substantial training and expertise, left to establish autonomous women's NGOs and social enterprises due to significant constraints encountered within the WF (Zhou, 2019). Discursively, WF and NGOs openly utilised gender equality, legitimised by the United Nations mandate of gender mainstreaming and embraced by the party-state, to pursue social justice when class discourse became taboo (Wang, 2017). Building on this concept, WF feminists collaborated with NGO counterparts to establish gender training programs in rural regions and combat domestic violence in urban China (Zheng & Zhang, 2010).

Despite these achievements, the WF faced criticism for its reliance on Party-state resources and international funding permissions, compounded by neoliberal influences that transformed state feminist leaders into career-focused bureaucrats (Zhou, 2023). Unlike Western liberal feminism(s), the WF embraced capitalist consumerism, commodified women, and promoted gender differences and feminine virtues (Wang, 2017). This, with the erasure of class discourse, signalled a state market feminism orchestrated by the CCP to consolidate its rule (Stewart *et al.*, 2024; Wang, 2021b). Unlike the view of gender as a social construction, this gender mainstreaming with Chinese characteristics posed challenges in translation, neo-colonial theorisation, and intersectional analysis of class and gender (Yin, 2022). Wang (2017) attributes state feminists' preference for using gender over feminism to the legacy of politics of concealment, while Yin (2022) views their continuous disengagement from feminist discourse as a limitation resulting from dependency on the CCP. Since the 2015 mass organisational reforms in Xi's presidency, ACWF has implemented descriptive methods to address its representation deficit of women in China, yet the CCP's re-politicisation has replaced gender mainstreaming with the ideology of "being the party's good daughter," further limiting women's interests (Zhou, 2019). Zhou (2019) attributes the representation crisis to the dilemma between reform logic rejecting class politics and the socialist legacy of representing women's interests.

The representation crisis set the stage for the rise of a second generation of Chinese feminism in 2010, spearheaded by grassroots women, including domestic and diasporic activists, and university students advocating structural change to the patriarchal system (Shen, 2016; Yin, 2022). Unlike the first generation's politics of concealment using terms like gender and *nǚxìng zhǔyì*<sup>13</sup>, young activists openly adopt *nǚquan zhuyì*<sup>14</sup> to explicitly challenge heteropatriarchal power and advocate for women's rights, employing performance art, volunteerism, and cyberspace to attract public attention, raise consciousness, and advocate bottom-up initiatives outside the government (Hong-Fincher, 2019; Li & Li, 2017; Wang, 2017). They express their individuality and call for collective actions to counteract mainstreamed market feminism and its advocacy of gender differences and feminine virtues (Shen, 2016; Yin, 2022). By politicising everyday life and engaging the public in feminist and queer discussions, they have influenced policy changes such as legislation against domestic violence and sexual harassment (Hong-Fincher, 2019; Mao, 2020; Wang, 2021b).

However, these activists are predominantly urban educated women, with limited connections to rural and working-class women, especially less privileged queer women (Yin, 2022). For instance, the MeToo movement in China demonstrates its outreach to the general public (Dong, 2023) but also highlights its inability to confront the intersecting injustice of patriarchy, capitalism, and the rural-urban dichotomy, with disadvantaged women marginalised or overlooked in feminist online discussions (Yin & Sun, 2021). Furthermore, grassroots activism for migrant women workers primarily takes the form of community organising facilitated by grassroots NGOs, but recent antagonistic government policies towards NGOs have restricted their funding, posing significant challenges to their survival (Yin, 2022).

This second generation of young feminists differs from the NGO generation in terms of political resources, mobilisation models, and relationships with the media, all significantly influenced by their relationship with the party-state (Li & Li, 2017). The party-state's censorship and violent crackdown on bottom-up feminist activism have shaped public perceptions, fostering nationalistic and

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<sup>13</sup> Female or feminine-ism – this translation centers on femininity.

<sup>14</sup> Women's rights-ism – this translation centers on rights.

misogynistic hostility towards feminists (Huang, 2023b). Hong-Fincher (2019) extensively documents the state's arrest of the Feminist Five for planning to distribute anti-sexual harassment stickers on International Women's Day in 2015, highlighting the government's crackdown and violence against feminist activists. While the arrests marked a worsening of state suppression and intolerance towards bottom-up activism, further limiting street campaigns, they also spurred domestic and diaspora feminist solidarity online (Hong-Fincher, 2019; Yin & Sun, 2021).

Despite the differences between inner and outer systems in Chinese feminist operations, Li and Li (2017) argue that the distinction between them may not be clear-cut. Indeed, Wang (2017) unveils the coalition of ACWF leaders in advocating for the release of the Feminist Five, a story unknown to many due to the ACWF members' strategy of concealment in navigating the patriarchal authoritarian party-state. Additionally, feminist efforts from both the inner and outer systems contributed to China's first legislation against domestic violence in 2015 (Mao, 2020; Stewart *et al.*, 2024). However, Wang and Zhang (2010) express concern about the adverse consequences of the blurred lines between NGOs and state feminism, citing potential issues like state co-option of spontaneous feminists. Dong (2023), analysing the latest Outline in the Development of Women (2021-30), highlights the paradox where the state stifles feminist movements outside the system while simultaneously appropriating their achievements. Consequently, the state reasserts its control over women's affairs, exerts authority over civil society activists, and claims credit for their efforts (Dong, 2023).

### **2.3.2.2 *Controversial popular feminism(s)***

Besides the two generations of feminism(s) often discussed in the literature, scholars have begun examining contentious feminism(s) perceived by the public in contemporary China. The combination of the socialist-neoliberal regime, marketisation and revived patriarchal values (Hong-Fincher, 2019; Spakowski, 2018) have created a sexist marriage market characterised by hypergamy, institutionally capitalising on women's sexuality (Wu & Dong, 2019). Faced with emerging power structures and institutionalised marriage markets, many women are critiquing revived patriarchal norms confining them to child-rearing and family caregiving, highlighted by the recent two-child policy in 2016 and three-child

policy in 2022 (Tatum, 2021), and the Xi-led campaign ‘holding your mother’s hand’ (Koetse, 2018). These critiques have been specifically aimed, combined, and labelled as Chinese “feminism” (Li & Li, 2017; Zheng, 2020). Although their individual viewpoints and absence of a distinct political agenda may challenge alignment with Western feminist definitions, their daily acts of defiance sustain the vibrancy of Chinese women’s activism within a restrictive political climate (Dong, 2023; Mao, 2020).

“*Zhōnghuá tiányuán nǚquán*”<sup>15</sup> is often considered the most widely discussed feminism-related term on social media, carrying negative undertones (Mao, 2020; Yin, 2022). Discussions typically revolve around marriage and family issues like dowry, daughters’ inheritance rights, and women’s reproductive labour (Bao, 2023; Liu, 2023). Female internet users heatedly criticise men for their privilege and women for embracing traditional housewife roles (Shi, 2023). These views are labelled ‘pastoral feminism’, suggesting self-centred women exploiting their gender without responsibilities (Liu, 2023).

Wu and Dong (2019), framing it as “made-in-China feminism”, specify two types with contrasting attitudes to the marriage market and different implications for power relations. The entrepreneurial type encourages women to reject traditional feminine obligations and make autonomous choices in the marriage market to increase their financial gains (Dong, 2023; Wu & Dong, 2019). This type, while challenging some hegemonic family beliefs (Wu & Dong, 2019), still reinforces “emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 2020). The non-cooperative type rejects societal norms around marriage and reproduction, prioritising professional advancement and financial independence to liberate themselves from the constraints of marriage markets (Dong, 2023; Wu & Dong, 2019). While it exhibits a class-based manner by stressing meritocracy and women’s earned positions in class stratification, its growing popularity effectively challenges state coercion of women’s reproduction and caretaking labour, resisting the inner logic of the existing system in both economic and cultural domains (Dong, 2023; Wu & Dong, 2019). Nonetheless, both types are primarily

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<sup>15</sup> Chinese pastoral feminism.

accessible to urban middle-class women with more cultural and social capital than rural and working-class women (Dong, 2023).

Scholars have analysed the escalating backlash against feminism, particularly stigmatisation and intersectional power relations embedded in these common feminist discourses. Voices advocating for women's rights are often conveniently dismissed as pastoral feminism, troublemakers, and men-haters, leading many women to disavow feminist identities despite their support for gender justice (Bao, 2023; Zheng, 2016, 2020). Nonetheless, Mao (2020) interprets this as a tacit dedication to gender equality without the feminist label, akin to Wang's analysis of state feminists' politics of concealment (2017). Huang (2023a) identifies four methods used to stigmatise feminists and depoliticise feminism, portraying them as gender and national traitors, fake feminists, and associating them with Islamists. Wang (2021b) criticises the ACWF's claim that feminists are influenced by 'Western hostile forces,' inciting nationalist antagonism to undermine young feminists' achievements. Fostering conflicts between feminists and anti-feminists diminishes feminist political engagement, shifts attention from systematic gender injustices, and limits discussions on intersectional oppressions affecting women (Huang, 2023a; Wang, 2021b).

For example, Wu and Dong (2019) reveal how anti-feminist sentiments in China reframe the non-cooperative type as entrepreneurial, effectively channelling latent class antagonism to suppress feminist movements. The absence of critical discourse on gender and sexuality, coupled with state suppression of class discussions in post-socialist China (Guo, 2009; Stewart *et al.*, 2024), compounds the entanglement of class and gender discourse (Wu & Dong, 2019). Specifically, the anxieties, despair, and hostility from class issues are absorbed into gender discourse, serving as both a sacrifice and a scapegoat (Wu & Dong, 2019). Huang (2023b) further analyses the interplay of misogyny, populism, and nationalism in the confrontation between feminists and anti-feminists.

Scholars note the emergence of "good feminists," shaped by the commodification of liberal feminism and mirroring Western white, middle-class feminists, to prevent stigmatisations (Zheng, 2016, 2020). Furthermore, Yang *et al.* (2023) reveal that popular anti-feminism celebrates Western liberal feminism and early

socialist feminism while rejecting current and localised movements to diminish feminist threats to men's interests. Thus, Yang *et al.* (2023) advocate for re-evaluating the challenges facing Chinese feminism, emphasising the complex interactions among misogyny, neoliberalism, post-feminism, anti-feminism, and multi-sited feminist articulations in China. Therefore, it's important for my research, which aims to contribute to Chinese feminism(s), to adopt a structural intersectionality analysis of women's struggles rooted in the public's comprehension of feminism(s).

### **2.3.2.3 Emerging feminist scholarship**

Recent years have witnessed a surge in literature on "Chinese feminism," often categorised into liberal and New Left strands (Liu, 2017c; Song, 2023). The liberal strand predominantly questions the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime but overlooks gender-related issues (Tatlow, 2016) and the entanglement of class struggle with gender discontent (Wu & Dong, 2019). The New Left in China aims to restore the "socialist legacy" and confront neoliberalism, while sometimes side-lining gender issues (Spakowski, 2018; Wesoky, 2015). Some even view feminism as part of the identity-based neoliberal agenda to conceal class hierarchy (Wu & Dong, 2019). Song (2023) challenges the assumption of contradictions between the state and neoliberalism held by both camps, while Wu and Dong (2019) criticise their neglect of the intricate interplay of class and gender conflicts, state power, and women's agency.

In response, critical socialist feminism has emerged since 2010, seeking to elucidate and contest complex power dynamics rooted in women's experiences and autonomy in China (Spakowski, 2018; Tian, 2022). Critical socialist feminism employs socialist feminist terminology, investigates productive and reproductive labour, and emphasises China's socialist history as a valuable resource for reimagining women's communal living, labour, and liberation while acknowledging its flaws (Spakowski, 2018; Tian, 2022). Below, I will elaborate on their main preoccupations: gender, neoliberalism, socialist legacy, and women's socialist experiences.



Gender, introduced to China in the 1990s, was adopted by state feminists through gender mainstreaming, normalised as the primary analytical approach, and facilitated the establishment of women's studies as an academic discipline (Spakowski, 2018; Xu, 2009). Critical socialist feminism, sceptical of the uncritical acceptance of gender, emphasises its implication of a rupture with China's socialist history and the neo-coloniality in theory production (Dong, 2016; Song, 2023; Zhu, 2011). Unlike trans-exclusive feminism and the right-wing anti-gender rhetoric, critical socialist feminism highlights and critiques the post-socialist interpretation of gender in China, where gender differences are seen as manifestations of suppressed differences rooted in biologically essentialised sexes (Li & Mills, 2021; Tian, 2022). The authority of gender theory stems from historical reinterpretations portraying gender differences as elements of human nature suppressed during the socialist era, advocating for the reclamation of femininity in post-socialist China (Dong, 2016; Song, 2023). Meanwhile, the translation of feminism shifted from *nǚquán zhǔyì*<sup>16</sup> to *nǚxìng zhǔyì*<sup>17</sup> to restore femininity and gender/sex differences, marking the transition to depoliticised feminism (Ko & Wang, 2007; Yu, 2015). Critical socialist feminism argues that the re-feminisation of women through gender mainstreaming exacerbates various inequalities stemming from economic reforms (Tian, 2022; Yu, 2020).

Song (2023) further critiques the alignment between gender, neoliberalism, and the state in China. The privatisation of both reproductive labour and the means of production evokes essentialised femininity, traditional familism, socialism, and patriotism to enforce a neoliberal perspective on minimal social services (Song, 2023; Tian, 2022; Zhou & Xie, 2022). This state-driven privatisation and appropriation of gender and tradition delineate the public sphere from the private, feminise housework, and disadvantage women in the market economy, erecting structural barriers for most women in China (Song, 2023; Zhou, 2015). Highlighting class taboo in post-socialist China, Zheng and Zhang (2010) explain state and grassroots feminists' strategic use of gender for social justice in the state neoliberal era, sidestepping the contentious issue of class, and revealing the state's political constraints on both generations of feminist operation. For critical

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<sup>16</sup> Women's rights-ism – this translation centers on rights.

<sup>17</sup> Feminine-ism – this translation centers on femininity.

socialist feminism scholars, gender facilitates the separation of women's liberation from Marxism, the state, and class (Dong, 2016; Zhu, 2011). While gender complements class as the main analytical category, it poses challenges in neo-colonial theorisation, translation, and intersectional analysis of class and gender, failing to fully elucidate complex injustices and advance gender-related justice in China (Song, 2023; Yin, 2022). Consequently, critical socialist feminism scholars interrogate the simultaneous rise of capitalism and Western feminism in China during the 1980s and advocate for a departure from gender and neo-liberalism (Dong, 2016; Yin, 2022).

Critical socialist feminism draws on the present state neoliberalism and the past state socialism to envision an alternative modernity (Song, 2023; Zhu & Xiao, 2021). Their call to reassess the socialist feminist legacy for contemporary Chinese feminism(s) diverges from state ideology, offering a critical and reflective perspective on China's historical and current political economy (Min, 2016; Tian, 2022). For example, Spakowski (2018) distinguishes critical socialist feminism from the New Left by highlighting the former's focus on gender/sex and critique of state socialism, contrasting with the latter's exclusive emphasis on class and alignment with the party-state. Critical socialist feminism references Nancy Fraser's framework to advocate for a Marxist feminist critique of neoliberalism centred on redistribution, recognition, and representation (e.g., Song, 2023).

Beyond critiquing neoliberalism's erosion of social connections, critical socialist feminism proposes reimagining and reconstructing social relationships, community democracy, and autonomy based on individual freedom and equality, fostered through civic spirit and community consciousness (Song, 2023; Zhu & Xiao, 2021). For example, Song (2023) advocates for a "community-based socialist feminism" that prioritises social existence and relationships, established through feminist organisations and NGOs independent of the party-state, characterised by internal democracy and a commitment to respecting differences. Critical socialist feminism shifts the focus away from the state to envisioning community, suggesting exploring Chinese women's autobiographies linked to socialism to reimagine and rebuild community dynamics (Spakowski, 2018; Tian, 2022).

Notwithstanding its marginalised position in Chinese feminist scholarship, Spakowski (2018) observes critical socialist feminism's departure from international liberal feminism as a local endeavour of anticolonial “epistemic disobedience” inspired by socialist feminism from North America and rooted in China's socialist genealogy and legacy. It draws from Chinese women’s experiences of global neoliberalism and transnational dialogue within the New Left in East Asia (Tian, 2022). Song (2023), a prominent critical socialist feminism scholar, advocates for situated knowledge as ontology, “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes” as epistemology and “the inner horizon of history” as a methodology to locate transnational feminist theory building in specific temporal, spatial, and ideational contexts, like the interplay of patriarchy, neoliberalism, party-state, colonialism, and imperialism in the past and present PRC (Wang, 2017; Yin, 2022). However, critical socialist feminism primarily focuses on the socialist experiences of Chinese Han majority women (Hae & Song, 2019), and its conceptual reimagining of communities lacks engagement with existing feminist organising.

### **2.3.3 Summary**

In tracing Chinese feminist histories from the early twentieth century, I highlighted the re-construction and masking of class, gender/sex, and race hierarchy in China from the late 1970s (Song, 2023; Stewart *et al.*, 2024; Yin, 2022). By analysing the multi-sited and complex feminism(s) in post-socialist China, I argue for the importance of adopting a structural intersectionality analysis of women’s struggles and resistance, such as the intricate interplay of class and gender conflicts, state power, and women’s agency (Wu & Dong, 2019). In examining emerging Chinese feminist scholarship, I underscored critical socialist feminism, which seeks to elucidate and contest complex power dynamics rooted in women's experiences and autonomy in China (e.g., Tian, 2022). This scholarship also aims to explore Chinese women’s socialist autobiographies to rebuild community and reimagine modernity (Song, 2023; Zhu & Xiao, 2021). Therefore, this critical socialist feminist agenda informs my research exploring Chinese women’s ways of being, aiming to contribute to the anticolonial feminist knowledge building.

## 2.4 Modern womanhood in post-socialist urban China

This section, bringing together the previous discussion of the modernisation of China and its citizens alongside the genealogy of women's struggles and resistance, examines the literature on modern womanhood in post-socialist urban China. The first subsection discusses the literature on the fashioning and modernisation of girlhood and womanhood in urban China and its implications for their lived realities. The second subsection examines its influence on subjectivity construction among Chinese women in post-socialist urban settings. These two subsections elucidate existing knowledge directly related to this research, which focuses on the lived realities and subjectivity construction of urban Chinese women from the one-child generations.

### 2.4.1 Modernisation of girlhood and womanhood in urban China

The one-child policy (1979-2015), a facet of the PRC's modernisation, gave rise to the one-child generations (Rodriguez, 2023) and unintentionally led parents to heavily invest in their only child's education, regardless of sex (Liu, 2006a). This notably expanded education opportunities for only-child girls in urban China (Xu & Yeung, 2013). Affluent parents aspire for their daughters to embody both masculinity and femininity, suggesting diverse and class-based articulations of femininity (Liu, 2006a). However, gender inequality under the one-child policy persists, evidenced by parental biases favouring male siblings, gendered expectations, children's gendered perceptions, and urban-rural discrepancies (Hu & Scott, 2016; Hu & Shi, 2020; Rodriguez, 2023). Amid the one-child policy, a market economy, legal reforms, and HE expansion, the participation and achievement of women in Chinese HE has made substantial strides in the last two decades (Liu, 2017d; Tian *et al.*, 2024).

Women still face disadvantages before, during, and after HE (Liu, 2018b; Tian *et al.*, 2024). For example, the proportion of female PhD students in China constituted only 36.4% in 2018, with societal misogynist biases labelling them as "the third gender" for challenging gendered assumptions about academic achievement (Shen, 2018; Zeng, 2020). Persistent issues like sexual harassment (Zhong & Guo, 2017), gender-biased academic environments (Wallis, 2015), and

disproportionate funding for STEM disciplines, where women are underrepresented, further exacerbate the situation (Zhang & Tsang, 2015). Research attributes the STEM gender gap in China to entrenched gender stereotypes or stereotype threats (Xu & Yeung, 2013) and the institutionalised segregation between male-dominated STEM fields and female-dominated Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts (SHAPE), alongside the institutionalised preference for STEM disciplines (Hsiao-Chin & Chia-Ling, 2014). Additionally, women encounter significant hurdles in post-HE employment, evident in instances of unemployment, hiring biases, wage disparities, limited career mobility, industrial segregation, and the sexual objectification of women (Liu, 2017d; Tian *et al.*, 2024).

Alongside the one-child policy and market economy, the restoration of gender differences has affected the modernisation of girlhood and womanhood (Attané, 2012; Liu, 2014). Pro-reform elites in the post-Mao era accused the “iron girls” of emasculating China’s men and masculinising its women (Wang, 2017). In response, they used gender mainstreaming and Confucian-style discourses to naturalise biologically essentialist sex differences (Evans, 1995; Liu, 2017c). Alongside the state, commercialism and mass media promoted these naturalised differences and encouraged women’s desires for femininity (Evans, 2002; Sun & Chen, 2015). Since the 1990s, prevalent information and merchandise related to beauty, fashion, and middle-class lifestyles have encouraged Chinese women to indulge in the pleasures of feminine expressions under the illusion of greater freedom and individuality (Sun & Chen, 2015; Wang, 2021b). The state-led refeminisation, marketisation, and gender mainstreaming often invoke liberal rhetoric to appeal to young women, but these practices also objectify women’s bodies by emphasising essentialist biological differences and sexualising women through the male gaze (Dong, 2023; Wang, 2021b).

Besides emphasising femininity, state policies and mainstream discourse also revitalised the image of the supportive wife and caring mother, urging women to leave the workplace for domestic responsibilities (Shen, 2016; Song, 2023). Women in urban areas experienced higher rates of layoffs from state enterprises during the 1990s economic restructuring (Dong, 2023). The privatisation of modes

of production and reproductive labour separated the family and public domains (Song, 2023). Reproductive labour like childcare shifted from the state to families, predominantly to working women, compromising their positions in progressively competitive job markets (Connelly *et al.*, 2018; Sun & Chen, 2015). The unprecedented significance and prioritisation of education (Liu, 2016b) indicated that one of the parents often had to sacrifice their career to provide for the increasingly demanding needs of their children's education (Meng, 2020). Meanwhile, the state openly encouraged Confucianist values, like benevolent authority and hierarchies based on sex and age, to cultivate loyalty to both family and the state (Hong-Fincher, 2019).

Consequently, the state's privatisation of production and reproduction, along with the revitalisation of patriarchal familial norms, reaffirmed and strengthened the connection between womanhood and domestic life (Song, 2023; Zhou, 2015). Facing the dilemma between private and public life, the revival of traditional womanhood encouraged a growing number of Chinese women to leave the workplace for the interests of their families and the country (Hong-Fincher, 2018; McMillan, 2006; Song, 2016). Notwithstanding strides in reducing gender disparities in education, urban gender gaps in employment rates and wages in China have significantly widened over the past three decades (Dong, 2023; Xie, 2021).

Facing the dilemma, an increasing number of well-educated and financially independent Chinese women choose to remain single into their late twenties or early thirties. However, they are often stigmatised as 'leftover women', likening them to leftover food (Tatlow, 2016; To, 2015). This label frames them as societal issues necessitating resolution, as they challenge the family norm of male superiority and domination, as well as the universal norm of marriage to fulfil familial and national duties in China (Hong-Fincher, 2023; Xie, 2021). Meanwhile, legal changes regarding private property rights restrict women's post-divorce access to home ownership, perpetuating male privileges within marriage (Hong-Fincher, 2023).

In post-Mao urban China, Chinese women are expected to excel academically and professionally like their male counterparts while also fulfilling domestic duties,

shouldering a disproportionate burden of reproductive labour (Connelly *et al.*, 2018; Liu, 2014). This double burden leads women striving for liberation to unexpected hardships, with some feeling their lives are more challenging than before they advocated for their rights (Lian, 2011; Xie, 2021). Forced to balance career and family, urban Chinese women struggle to achieve an ideal balance, with many experiencing painful consequences of their advocacy for rights, as the modernisation of Chinese society requires both highly skilled employees and quality child-rearing (Dong, 2023; Shen, 2015; Yang, 2016).

#### **2.4.2 Construction of modern womanhood in urban China**

The modernisation of womanhood affects not only lived realities but also the construction of subjectivity among women in urban post-socialist China (e.g., Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021). Studies on women of the one-child generations in urban China typically show two co-existing constructions: autonomous modern womanhood, indicating the defeminisation of female subjectivity, and dependent modern womanhood, illustrating the refeminisation of female subjectivity (Liu, 2014, 2016b; Xie, 2021; Zheng, 2016).

On one hand, urban women perceive themselves as autonomous, modern, and enthusiastic about self-expression and self-realisation, adopting neoliberal individualism to defeminise (Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021; Zheng, 2016). They pursue the state-idealised middle-class lifestyle of material wealth and personal freedom, engaging in intense competition, delayed gratification, and self-denial for individual success (Attané, 2012; Liu, 2008b, 2011). They see HE, often a master's degree, as essential, with some aspiring to study abroad (Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021). Supported by their families and driven by a sense of self-determination, they prioritise academic achievement and competitiveness (Liu, 2017d; Zhang & Tsang, 2015). Like their men counterparts, their lives revolve around rankings, ambitions, competition, hard work, and self-discipline, often feeling pressured to succeed due to their role as the only child or substitute son for their parents (Xu & Yeung, 2013; Zheng, 2016). Despite their efforts, they constantly feel they have not worked hard enough (Liu, 2014).

Scholars refer to these traits as neoliberal individualism (Liu, 2014; 2008a; Zheng, 2016) or middle-class subjectivity (Xie, 2021). Literature on neoliberal subjectification documents similar psychosocial impacts, including the need for constant self-improvement (de Lissovoy, 2018; Ibled, 2023), academic and professional competitiveness (Scharff, 2016), entrepreneurial subjectivity (Foucault *et al.*, 2008; Scharff, 2016), individual responsibilities (Xie, 2021), anxious autonomy as a way of being (de Lissovoy, 2018; Read, 2009), and consumerist economic power (Carr & Kelan, 2023). Specifically, de Lissovoy (2018) argues for a shift from the oppressed and objectified self (Freire, 2020) to fragmented and anxious selves that drive fanatical entrepreneurialism in current neoliberal governmentality. De Lissovoy (2018) considers Freire's conscientisation and problem-posing unable to address the proliferating selves in neoliberal governmentality, proposing the pedagogy of betraying anxious autonomy.

Berlant (2011) introduces the concept of cruel optimism in a neoliberal system, describing an encouragement to invest emotionally in idealised visions of a "good life" that may ultimately prove unattainable or detrimental, leading to exhaustion and disillusionment. Meng's research on motherhood in China supports this, suggesting that "middle-class privilege intensifies the cruel optimism of neoliberal fantasies" (2020, p. 183). Notably, while both Chinese and Western women focus on educational and career achievements, Chinese women do not pursue hedonistic pleasure and sexual freedom like their Western counterparts, potentially because the party-state invokes traditional culture in promoting academic and career pursuits, ultimately to maintain existing power structures, including Party leadership, patriarchy, and social classes (Liu, 2014, 2018a; Xie, 2021).

Chinese young women, especially those who excel academically, also adopt deliberate masculinisation to defeminise (Liu, 2014; Hu, 2017). They perceive toughness, empowerment, and individuality as masculinity, while the opposite as femininity (Lee, 2012; Liu, 2014). Their admiration for masculinity and rejection of femininity reflects both traditional, essentialist views of gender, and a neoliberal and socially constructed perspective, as masculinity aligns with the demands of modernisation (Liu, 2014; Hu, 2017). Self-empowerment and individual expression are crucial elements in successful identity formation within



global neoliberalism, reflecting structural shifts towards viewing men and women as equal competitors without dismantling patriarchy (Liu, 2014; Hu & Scott, 2016).

Beyond China, Ueno and Suzuki (2022) discuss elite women's aversion to weakness, manifested in their reluctance to be labelled as victims and their inability to tolerate feelings of weakness. This phenomenon, critiqued for its masculinist characteristics (Bruni *et al.*, 2004), is seen as a product of neoliberalism (Binkley, 2011; Layton, 2010), particularly among young women professionals (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Scharff, 2016). While masculinisation and self-empowerment may contribute to de-essentialising gender differences, this isn't the case for Chinese women, who assert autonomous modern womanhood based on the belief in natural gender differences and deliberate masculinisation (Liu, 2014; Xu & Yeung, 2013). Furthermore, alongside defeminisation, Chinese women exhibit a strong inclination to uphold certain gendered roles within patriarchal societies, evidenced by their belief that, compared to men, they are the “luckier sex” in Chinese patriarchy (Evans, 2010; Xie, 2021).

On the other hand, young Chinese women assert innate differences between genders, citing “scientific” evidence to support men’s inherent strength and superiority (Hu & Scott, 2016; Liu, 2014; Sun & Chen, 2015). Consequently, they hold stronger expectations for men’s career and financial success and for women’s marriage and familial happiness (Xie, 2021). They find it unacceptable for wives to surpass their husbands professionally or financially, believing it disrupts marital harmony (Evans, 2008). Thus, women are neither born nor supposed to be families’ breadwinners (Evans, 2010; Xie, 2021).

Despite both sexes sharing career and household responsibilities, ideal womanhood involves balancing work and family, while men prioritise career advancement and contribute to housework and childcare if possible (Evans, 2010; Xie, 2021). Chinese young women justify these gendered expectations as gender equity realised through natural differences, where men and women complementarily share family responsibilities (Attané, 2012; Li *et al.*, 2010). They don’t consider women’s roles as oppressive, but complementary and gender-specific (Li *et al.*, 2010; Liu, 2018a). Unlike Maoist state feminism(s) or Western

feminism(s), Chinese young women see gender “equality” as men and women fulfilling different, complementary roles dictated by nature (Hu & Yucel, 2018).

Contrary to de Beauvoir’s “second sex” concept (2010), they believe this benefits women as the luckier sex with less pressure to succeed (Hu & Scott, 2016; Liu, 2014). Notably, they don’t consider this contradictory to their modern independent identity since women are also expected to succeed, but the expectation of success is stronger for men (Liu, 2018a; Xie, 2021). One way to enjoy their “privilege” as women is to openly celebrate femininity through active consumption (Evans, 2008; Lee, 2012). With growing purchasing power, urban Chinese women seek self-expression and realisation through consumption, falling into traps of empowerment through consumption and freedom through consumer choices (Chen, 2016).

Post-feminist consumerism idealises women’s bodies as youthful, thin, and beautiful (Ma, 2023; Yang, 2023). Women across different classes are drawn to beauty consumerism in urban China (Lei, 2024; Wang, 2021b), shifting masculinist objectification into an internalised self-surveillance and self-discipline under neoliberal governance (Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2011). While some discourse highlights privileges like choice and empowerment, the prevailing discourses of women as the luckier sex mask their continued subjugation as the “second sex” and may reinforce patriarchal structures (Liu, 2014; Wu & Dong, 2019).

### **2.4.3 Summary**

By examining the literature on the modernisation of womanhood, I highlighted the revival of gender differences and traditional womanhood, which created dilemmas for Chinese women balancing private and public life in China (Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021). In reviewing the literature on women’s lived realities, I argued that many Chinese women were forced to balance career and family (e.g., Sun & Chen, 2015). Through analysing literature on their subjectivities, I depicted two co-existing constructions: autonomous modern womanhood and dependent modern womanhood (Liu, 2014, 2016b; Xie, 2021; Zheng, 2016).

The modernisation of Chinese women shapes their paradoxical lived realities and subjectivities in urban post-socialist China. Therefore, I situate my research, which explores Chinese women's ways of being in the context of crossing borders for higher education, within these paradoxes to further investigate: what are the paradoxes? Why do they exist? In what ways do the political-economic and socio-cultural factors influence them? What do these paradoxes mean for Chinese women's life paths and subjectivities? Are there alternative ways of being for Chinese women beyond paradoxes?

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter explores the unique blend of neoliberal rationalities and socialist principles in the PRC's Socialism with Chinese characteristics (Sigley, 2006), *sùzhi* as the fashioning of citizens (Liu, 2008b, 2011; Sigley, 2009), urban women's dilemma between private and public life (Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021), and their construction of modern and traditional womanhood in post-socialist China (Liu, 2014, 2016b; Xie, 2021; Zheng, 2016). While sharing some aspects of neoliberal individualism with Western counterparts, Chinese young women diverge by not pursuing hedonistic pleasure and sexual freedom, instead embracing essentialist gender views and a unique perspective on gender equity (Evans, 2008; Liu, 2014, 2018a). Although Western women also negotiate contradictory expectations, Chinese young women's construction of modern and traditional womanhood mirrors a particular duality in China's modernity (Liu, 2014), evident in the country's neoliberal-socialist ideology (Sigley, 2006), comprehensive *sùzhi* as the fashioning of citizens (Kipnis, 2006, 2007), parents' expectations for daughters to embody masculinity and femininity (Liu, 2006a), and women's life experience of dual burden (Xie, 2021).

Consistent with yin-yang as "complementary oppositions," some view contrasting characteristics as complementary constituents of a harmonious balance to negotiate womanhood (Liu, 2011; Liu, 2017b, 2017c). While Western feminists may see post-feminist discourses like hedonism and heterosexual monogamy as conflicting (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006), a Chinese perspective may reconcile and even harmonise these views (Liu, 2014). The portrayal of women in post-socialist

China has shifted from working-class, respected political subjects to empowered, individualistic, urban, middle-class, sexualised consumers, reinforcing urban, class, and gender hierarchies (e.g., Zheng & Zhang, 2010).

My research brings together the paradoxes in China's political economy, the fashioning of citizens, and Chinese women's lived realities and subjectivities to investigate how different political-economic and socio-cultural factors influence Chinese women's ways of being. This focus on political economic ideology co-exists with my emphasis on women's autonomy from an anticolonial lens. I traced Chinese feminist histories and the multi-sited and complex feminism(s) in post-socialist China. Through reviewing this literature, particularly critical socialist feminism, I argue for the need to centre on complex and intersecting power dynamics rooted in women's experiences and autonomy in China (e.g., Tian, 2022), and the possibilities of rebuilding community and reimagining modernity through exploring Chinese women's socialist autobiographies (Song, 2023; Zhu & Xiao, 2021). Yin (2022) further urges feminists to establish new possibilities of subjectivities and mobilise collective action to dismantle unjust intersecting structures in China. Following Yin's call, my research examines Chinese womanhood as expressed by urban women of the one-child generations, focusing on both their autonomy and intersecting power relations.

### 3 Chapter 3 Literature Review: Chinese (Women) Students in International Higher Education (IHE)

*In my impression, physically demanding jobs are typically male-dominated. In China, roles such as engineers, delivery drivers, and mail carriers are mostly performed by men. However, in the UK, I've observed many women in these roles. They seem to choose jobs without imposing many restrictions on themselves and don't think that certain jobs are unsuitable for women. In China, there used to be stereotypes that girls should choose certain professions, like teachers. Here, girls feel, 'I can do it, and if it makes me happy, I'll do it.' They don't feel as constrained by these stereotypes. (Wei)*

#### 3.1 Introduction

As Wei's observation illustrates, Chinese women studying abroad may experience some distance from the ways of being women discussed in China's context and encounter alternative ways of being women in new contexts, so their construction of Chinese womanhood can potentially provide alternative subjectivities. Thus, this chapter reviews literature on Chinese students, with a particular focus on women students, in IHE. First, I will provide an overview of the Internationalisation of Higher Education (IoHE) and international students in the Global North and discuss conceptual approaches. Following this, I will review literature concerning the experiences of Chinese students in International Higher Education (IHE), Chinese women students in IHE, and Chinese international students during the pandemic. Each section summarises and then critiques the primary focuses of existing literature. The final section summarises the chapter, discusses the implications of the two literature review chapters on my research questions, and reflects on the epistemic journey of conducting this literature review.

#### 3.2 IoHE and international students in the Global North: moving beyond deficit narratives

Knight (2004, p. 11) defines IoHE as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education". Although internationalisation has various normative

functions, like international students' economic, academic, and socio-cultural contributions to host countries (Gu, 2011; Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022; Yu & Moskal, 2019), policies are often preoccupied with international student recruitment (Knight, 2004) due to the economic rationale. This is because quasi-marketised Western HE heavily depends on international tuition fees (Hunt & Boliver, 2021; UUK, 2017).

Over the past two decades, the global population of international students has approximately tripled (OECD, 2021), with mobility directed towards both the Global North and emerging regional hubs in the Global South (Van Mol *et al.*, 2024). For instance, amidst Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, Lomer *et al.* (2023) highlight the predominance of economic rationales behind the dramatic increase in international students in UKHE. Non-EU students made up around 20% of the student population in UKHE in the 2022-2023 academic year, with a notable 32% increase in first-year enrolments from non-EU countries compared to the 2021-2022 academic year, largely driven by a rise in Postgraduate Taught (PGT) courses (HESA, 2023b). Non-EU students accounted for 59% of full-time postgraduate students, a 10% increase from the previous year, with China as the leading source (HESA, 2023a).

International students refer to “students who left their country of origin and moved to another country for purpose of study” (OECD, 2018, p. 225). Unlike long-term sojourners such as immigrants, who largely seek full acculturation, most international students are seen as short-term sojourners (Brown & Holloway, 2008), concentrating on academic success (Wu & Hammond, 2011). However, growing scholarship identifies a prevalent deficit conceptualisation of international students in internationalisation practice and research, focusing on their lack of certain skills, like English capability, critical thinking, and collaboration, and the adaptation or acculturation approach to supporting their necessary improvement through Western HE (Mittelmeier, 2021; Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022; Page, 2021).

Scholars further associate this deficit framing of international students with the neoliberal ideology of the HE sector (Radice, 2015), particularly in UKHE, where the survival of departments, faculties, and institutions heavily depends on

international student recruitment (Lomer *et al.*, 2023). This leads to a narrow focus on internationalisation defined primarily by student numbers rather than encompassing broader aspects like internationalised pedagogy or curricula (Hunt & Boliver, 2021). Investigating 132 UK Higher Education Institutions (UKHEIs), Lomer *et al.* (2023) find predominantly neoliberal strategies to enhance institutions' competitiveness, like improving rankings, within the existing framework of global elitism, with scant evidence of alternative approaches to internationalisation. Bamberger *et al.* (2019) further analyse how IoHE often advocates progressive humanistic views, like cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and diversity, while also pursuing them via neoliberal practices like markets, competition, and rational choices. For instance, internationalisation's propagation of diversity often creates "a meritocratic global knowledge economy" that restricts diversity to those who can afford to compete, perpetuating inequalities (Bamberger *et al.*, 2019, p. 208). Students and faculty frequently find their non-elite diversities devalued and their ways of knowing underappreciated, being required to undergo 're-education' to conform to the norms of their new academic environments (Stockfelt, 2018).

Bamberger *et al.* (2019, p. 208) argue that the entanglement of neoliberalism and progressive ideals in IoHE "normalize weakened neoliberal states, while disregarding the role of authoritarian states." Progressive neoliberalism, co-opting neoliberal rationalities with progressive values (Fraser, 2017), uses IoHE to normalise and sustain inequity and is unable to explain the complex states' roles in IoHE, like China's authoritarian state and the UK's neoliberal state in UKHE branch campuses in China (Bamberger *et al.*, 2019). In the wider contexts, research also finds that meritocratic rhetoric is used to obscure the xenophobic, racist, classist and Islamophobic attitudes of some British citizens towards immigrants (Keating & Janmaat, 2020).

These critiques reflect the growing attention on critical internationalisation studies mainly in conceptual work (Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022), like the discussion of (neo)coloniality and neoliberalism in IHE (Stein, 2017, 2021). For instance, Stein (2017) analyses that the "thin inclusion" of epistemic diversity in HE adds often tokenistic aspects of "diverse" knowledge into the mainstream curriculum to

manage differences. This often results in investigating “global issues” from a Western epistemology that perpetuates Euro-supremacy, positioning people of European descent as the knowers and non-European descent as the subjects of knowledge (Stein, 2022). The violence of the Western episteme arises not merely from a lack of knowledge but is rooted in its mode of knowledge production and the instrumental aspect of knowledge, so an additive method that merely “celebrates” diversity without challenging the existing framework may be insufficient (Bhabra, 2013; Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2017). Thus, Stein (2022) argues that the persistent Euro-supremacy in curricula may turn loHE into another vehicle for economic expansion and epistemic erasure.

Similarly, Gyamera and Burke (2018) reveal that African universities are pressured to prioritise Western values and adhere to neo-colonial logic to align with the global knowledge economy, thus arguing for challenging the norm of instrumental knowledge and its marginalisation of local episteme. Moreover, Chatterjee and Barber (2021), conceptualising the marketisation and loHE as a Western reaction to the rising Asia-driven global economy, highlight the complex and unstable interactions of the West’s ongoing colonial ties with Asia, and the postcolonial Asian states’ pursuit of Western knowledge and modernity. Besides ways of knowing, a few scholars discuss the implications of neoliberal ideology in UKHE, aggressive immigration policy discourse and racial stereotyping on international students’ ways of being, highlighting their subjectification as income sources, consumers, and inferior others (Lomer, 2018; Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2023).

Against this backdrop of critiques, alternative approaches to loHE are rising in discussions of concepts, research, and practices. Unlike the narrow approach focusing on international student recruitment, comprehensive internationalisation encompasses HE institutions’ complex and individualised methods to integrate internationalisation throughout their research, teaching, learning, and service (Hudzik, 2015; Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022), like the holistic and ongoing approach of institutional support for Chinese international students (Dai, 2023; Montgomery, 2019). Compared to symbolic internationalisation, transformative internationalisation emphasises cooperation, knowledge exchange, institutional internationalisation, and high-quality education (de Wit, 2011a, 2011b; Turner &



Robson, 2008). Similarly, unlike the assimilationist model, academic hospitality aims at building a reciprocal relationship between academic hosts and guests (Ploner, 2018). Some scholars highlight the central role of decolonisation in the internationalisation of pedagogy (Lomer *et al.*, 2023), curriculum (Stein, 2017), assessment, support provisions, and extracurricular activities (Mittelmeier *et al.*, 2022). These approaches appreciate but do not essentialise differences, consider both intersectionality and individuality and equally value diverse knowledge(s) and ways of knowing (Lomer *et al.*, 2023; Page, 2021; Scudamore, 2013), as evidenced by projects engaging students as partners in the internationalisation of curriculum in Australia (Green, 2019; Stanway *et al.*, 2019), and teaching home students about internationalisation in UKHE (Heffernan *et al.*, 2019).

### **3.3 Chinese students' experiences in IHE: moving beyond challenges and adjustments**

Chinese students remained the largest group of international students in UKHE, totalling 151,690 in 2021/22, a 41% increase from 2017/18 (HESA, 2023b; UUK, 2023). Their main motivations for studying include improving English proficiency, exploring new horizons, and enhancing career prospects (Bamber, 2014; Huang, 2013; Huang & Turner, 2018). Short-term programs in UKHE are particularly appealing to them (Zhu & Reeves, 2019), with PGT students often prioritising new horizons (Manns & Swift, 2016). While academic pursuits are important, they are more attracted to the overall experience of living abroad, engaging with diverse cultures, attending local events, and embracing Western and British lifestyles (Cebolla-Boado *et al.*, 2018; Zhang, 2020). Despite the considerable Chinese student population in IHE, both students and faculty encounter various dissatisfactions and challenges (Clarke, 2018; Quan *et al.*, 2016).

Existing studies on Chinese international students primarily focus on their experiences of challenges and adjustments in IHE. They encounter interconnected challenges in academic, linguistic, socio-cultural, and psychological aspects (e.g., Liu *et al.*, 2022; Zhou *et al.*, 2017). Specifically, linguistic challenges persist throughout their studies in IHE (Huang & Turner, 2018), significantly influencing their academic performance, socio-cultural adaptation, and psychological well-

being (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Tu, 2018). While Chinese students prioritise academic success, they experience diverse academic challenges (Jin & Schneider, 2019), including academic writing (Zhang, 2016b), assessment (Dai, 2023), classroom interaction (Freeman & Li, 2019), negative stereotypes, and cultural and educational differences (Wang, 2018; Wang *et al.*, 2015). These challenges arise from cultural and academic disparities between China and host countries (Heng, 2018b), personal attitudes and past experiences (Arambewela & Hall, 2013), and pedagogical practices and institutional support (Liu, 2016a).

Chinese students also face psychological struggles, intertwined with linguistic, academic, and socio-cultural challenges, forming an overall psychological and physical struggle of living a life significantly different from that they are familiar with (Clarke, 2018; Li *et al.*, 2019). Despite these struggles, they rarely seek professional help (Chen *et al.*, 2015). Social challenges, such as insufficient opportunities for intercultural interaction, language barriers, and cultural differences, are also prominent (Cao *et al.*, 2017; Spencer-Oatey *et al.*, 2017; Zhang, 2020). These interconnected challenges are particularly pronounced among PGT students, who pursue short-term courses with considerable compatriots and have limited time to adapt to the host country while aiming for high academic standards (Iannelli & Huang, 2014; Zhang, 2020). Despite these challenges, Chinese students demonstrate resilience by continuously developing their social networks, which can alleviate intercultural, linguistic, academic, and mental health challenges (Heng, 2018b; Spencer-Oatey *et al.*, 2017; Wang, 2018).

Most Chinese students enjoy their experience in IHE and report academic improvement over time, particularly their increased independence and autonomy in managing their learning (Huang & Turner, 2018; Wang, 2018; Wu *et al.*, 2015). They also experience increased academic confidence, collaboration, and classroom engagement (Heng, 2019; Thompson, 2018; Zhang, 2020), and enhanced English proficiency and academic writing skills, like criticality (Dai, 2023; Wu *et al.*, 2015). Heng (2019) attributes Chinese students' successful academic adaptation to their motivation, sound teacher-student relationships, culturally relevant pedagogy, and inclusive curriculum.

Beyond academic progress, Chinese students develop their intercultural capacity, intercultural identity, interpersonal communication, independent living, and maturity (Gill, 2007; Gu, 2009; Gu & Maley, 2008; Gu *et al.*, 2010). Short-term sojourners may gain a deeper appreciation of Chinese culture (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015), while long-term students navigate identity conflicts and negotiations between Western and Chinese cultures (Scally & Jiang, 2020; Wang, 2018). Independent living abroad is particularly significant for those students who are “only children” (i.e. without siblings), fostering pride in newfound skills (Gu, 2009; Thompson, 2018). Besides learning autonomy, Xu (2021) explores Chinese international students’ temporal autonomy, which refers to one’s ability to make choices and take actions regarding the use of one’s time (Eriksson, 2008). Employing a Bourdieusian framework, Xu (2021) investigates how temporality and class intersect to influence the career aspirations of Chinese international students in UKHE. They challenge hegemonic temporal structures and seek temporal autonomy through career strategies like delaying gratification and deconstructing temporality (Xu, 2021). Xu (2021, p. 25) argues that their fluid career aspirations are influenced by their unique personal and familial situations and “alternative temporal structures” encountered in the UK.

Furthermore, a longitudinal study with 652 Chinese graduates examines how their UKHE experience influences their identity and professional and personal lives upon returning to China over three decades (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Most believed their time in the UK cultivated transnational capabilities, worldviews, cosmopolitan identities, and diverse connections, contributing to their personal and professional development in China (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Thus, despite various challenges, most Chinese students and graduates enjoy the IHE experience and report improvements in English proficiency, academic achievement, intercultural capacity, intercultural identity, interpersonal communication, independent living, maturity, and temporal autonomy, contributing to their long-term personal and professional development (e.g., Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Wang, 2018).

Chinese international students’ experiences of challenges and adaption, despite being a main focus of the field, are increasingly critiqued for their deficit

narratives and assimilationist ideologies (e.g., Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022). Specifically, partial misconceptions of Chinese education and culture reproduce stereotypes of Chinese students as passive, rote learners, uncritical thinkers with poor English skills, and Chinese education as merely hierarchical and collectivist, contradicting modern Western HE characterised by criticality, learner agency, and active participation (Dovchin, 2020; Freeman & Li, 2019; Montgomery, 2019). These views oversimplify the Confucian Heritage Culture, which also values in-depth understanding, reflective thinking, and mutual care between teachers and learners (Dai & Garcia, 2019; Dai, 2023; Xu *et al.*, 2021). Heng (2017, 2019) cautions against stereotyping, noting its negative impact on Chinese students' self-perception, sense of belonging, academic confidence, and achievement. Ploner (2018) argues that issues stem more from teaching strategies than from student learning strategies. Similarly, Freeman and Li (2019) showcase positive international student identities through effectively managing disciplinary requirements, but their transition was impeded by insufficient opportunities for meaningful classroom interactions and feedback from teachers.

The framing of Chinese students' silence in classrooms has shifted from passivity (Huntley, 1993) to risk management and complex negotiation (Zhang, 2016b), categorising it as 'intentional' or 'unintentional' to better grasp their agency and power and rethink classroom silence (Wang *et al.*, 2022). Rather than focusing on students' linguistic and social barriers, Cheng *et al.* (2018) critique that homogenous grouping in Scotland and Australia HEIs structurally marginalises Chinese students, fostering a sense of otherisation that leads them to retreat into national groups and strengthens their national identity. Xu (2022) uses a post-colonial lens to review articles in both Chinese and English, highlighting the joint oppression of Chinese students by Chinese and foreign states, HE providers, media, and some scholars, as well as students' active roles in (re)producing global elitism and inequalities. These growing critiques challenge the assumed universal superiority of 'Westernised' criticality, highlighting Chinese students' epistemic contributions and diverse agencies, and legitimating their pedagogic needs (Xu, 2022).

### 3.4 Chinese women students in IHE: moving beyond vulnerabilities

Chinese women constituted the largest group of women international students in UKHE in 2022, potentially due to an increase in Chinese international students overall, a higher proportion of female than male students in UKHE (HESA, 2023b), and cultural factors (Bamber, 2014; Zhang, 2020). Urban middle-class women from China's one-child generations increasingly study abroad (Zhang & Tang, 2021) to enhance career prospects and navigate gendered risks in post-socialist China (Bamber, 2014; Kim, 2010; Martin, 2017). Many strategically opt for one-year PGT programs in UKHE to balance their academic and professional ambitions with the gendered challenges in China's marriage and job markets, which often disadvantage women with prolonged education (Bamber, 2014; Hsieh, 2006; Kuttig Yan, 2012).

Kim (2010) finds that international women students from China, Japan, and Korea use IHE as a temporary solution to reconcile "female individualisation" with traditional gender expectations in their home countries, deviating from the gendered life trajectory. Similarly, Martin (2017) argues that the aspirations of Chinese women studying in Australia reflect their complex negotiations between "modern" self-entrepreneurship and "traditional" gendered family roles and filial duties within the context of China's post-socialist revival of gender and class relations. Zhang and Tang (2021) highlight that middle-class Chinese women tend to select "feminine" subjects in UKHE to boost their job market competitiveness, whereas working-class Chinese women prefer STEM subjects to improve their career prospects and achieve class mobility.

Existing studies on Chinese women students primarily focus on their experiences of challenges, vulnerabilities, and adjustments in IHE. Generally, studies suggest that women international students find adaptation to a new environment more challenging than men students due to the gendered domestic roles (Marville, 1981). Among growing research focusing on Chinese international women students, most focus on their adaptation-related struggles, such as academic challenges (Cheng & Xie, 2000), mental health and socialisation (Ge *et al.*, 2019; Le *et al.*, 2016), identity adaptation and negotiation (Hsieh, 2006), and concerns

about gendered discrimination in future careers (Ge *et al.*, 2019; Huang, 2013). Studies also explore challenges related to gendered and patriarchal roles in China (Chan, 2006; Fong & Peskin, 1969) and host countries (Ge *et al.*, 2019), indicating the assumed dichotomy between women's education and caregiving roles (Huang & Khan, 2024). Hsieh (2006) finds that Chinese women students encounter significant challenges adapting to American culture as their subtle and less confrontational negotiation of identities was often overlooked within the non-inclusive American cultural hegemony. Chang *et al.* (2021) suggest that Chinese women students' low tendency to report experiences of sexual harassment in the US could be related to cultural factors like saving face and filiality.

Moreover, Liu (2017a) finds that Chinese international students in Canada experienced discrimination in socialisation, academic adjustment, and accessing university services due to their gender, race, and perceived class, advocating for an intersectional perspective. Ge *et al.* (2019) reveals that most Chinese women experienced institutional discrimination based on their gender, ethnicity and culture in Canada, alongside concurrent sexism and patriarchy in their home country, leading to negative emotions. While a few studies also highlight their adjustment over time (e.g., Chan, 2006), Huang and Khan (2024) critique the deficit framing of Chinese women international students focusing on their adaptation-related struggles. Thus, Zhang and Mittelmeier (2023) advocate for a research perspective that sees beyond the vulnerabilities of international women students, who frequently challenge patriarchal norms in both host and home nations.

Beyond deficit framing, some scholars position Chinese international women students' experiences in the transnational political-economic contexts, examining both social structures and their agencies. Similar to studies about Chinese womanhood, these critical discussions often highlight contradictions. For instance, Matsui (1995) and Shu (2008) find that while Chinese women students' successful academic experiences in the US bolster their self-confidence and self-esteem, they do not perceive nor challenge patriarchy in either country. These proud intellectuals often believe that the socialist revolution resolved gender equity for urban women (Matsui, 1995) or that they can do better than their male

peers, so there are no significant differences between them (Shu, 2008). Matsui (1995) argues that young Chinese women's strong self-esteem and concurrent commitment to gendered family responsibilities align with China's economic reform and the simultaneous revival of traditional gender roles. Additionally, their ages and close interaction with American gender culture, rather than the length of stay in the US, significantly impact their perceptions of gender roles (Matsui, 1995).

Qin and Lykes (2006) explore Chinese women's complex self-(re)construction in the US, highlighting the more significant transformation of their ways of being and the complex power relations in these processes. They first construct their selves in the "webs of relationships" within China's collectivist society, such as leaving for the US to distance themselves from gender inequity and corrupt politics; then deconstruct fragmented, contradictory and marginalised selves in the American social relations concerning race, nationality, gender and class; finally, they reconstruct innovative, complex and diverse selves in different contexts, for example, their development of critical consciousness and their re-consideration of Chinese-ness (Qin & Lykes, 2006).

Martin's (2022) more recent ethnography (2012-2020) embeds the critical discussion of Chinese women's transnational self-(re)construction in China's current political economy and Australian IHE. Mobility among fifty-six urban middle-class women likely enhances their identification with mobile self-entrepreneurship and reduces their attachment to revived feminine roles (Martin, 2022). Neoliberalism promotes re-feminisation through the state and private enterprise but challenges it through young middle-class women who emphasise women's independence, with IHE intensifying this tension by reinforcing women's identification with mobile self-entrepreneurship (Martin, 2022). However, while neoliberal selfhood can provide some gendered benefits, this progress is paradoxically entwined with regressive implications of class relations (Martin, 2022). Martin (2022) also highlights their experiences as racialised and excluded others, resulting from their mobility, and their othering of "refugees" and "Africans" through transnational media interactions.

Martin's (2022) longitudinal research aligns with and summarises smaller-scale research on Chinese women international students, including intersections of gender, class, race, nationality and culture in their pursuit of global elitism (Goff & Carolan, 2013; Kajanus, 2016; Zhang & Xu, 2020), positive impacts of their autonomous self-fashioning on challenging traditional gender roles (Kajanus, 2016), their creation of complex identities (Huang & Khan, 2024), and the role of media consumption and transnational regimes of identification in constructing neoliberal selfhood (Kim, 2010). While these critical discussions focus on transnational contexts and Chinese women's agency, their knowledge construction largely relies on established Western scholarship, such as intersectionality (e.g., Collins, 2019), Bourdieu's capital theory, and Foucauldian schools of thought. One exception is Tsai and Wei's (2018) research on experiences of racism, where they find that Chinese women who internalise such experiences tended to focus on self-improvement and relationship harmony, reflecting the influence of gender roles and yin-yang philosophy on their approach to conflict resolution and their search for the positive in the existence of the negative.

### **3.5 Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic**

My research occurs during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period of global disruption for IHE and students worldwide (Ge, 2021). Studies on Chinese international students during the pandemic primarily focus on their vulnerabilities, particularly in mental health. For example, Lin *et al.* (2022) survey 1881 Chinese international students in the US, reporting high rates of depression and anxiety linked to COVID-related financial struggles, traumatic incidents, increased workload, lack of social support, online learning difficulties, and poor sleep quality. Similarly, Feng *et al.* (2021) find that international students, compared to their peers in mainland China and Hong Kong, face a higher risk of developing anxiety during the pandemic. Tan *et al.* (2022) highlight that younger students from megacities in China with low social support and poor online learning experiences are particularly vulnerable to anxiety.

Several studies detail the increased risks Chinese international students face regarding racist and xenophobic experiences, academic and mental challenges,



physical challenges (Ge, 2021; Lai *et al.*, 2021b), and heightened substance abuse (Li *et al.*, 2021), with significant sex/gender differences. Specifically, the global pandemic has escalated incidents of anti-Asian racism and anti-Chinese sentiments in Western countries, including physical violence and verbal harassment, impacting their sense of fear and anxiety about continuing their studies abroad, ultimately contributing to lower well-being, self-acceptance, and increased depression (Ge, 2021; Mbous *et al.*, 2024; Qi *et al.*, 2020). Ge (2021) highlights that Chinese women students are particularly vulnerable to mental issues and racial discrimination during their IHE at this time of crisis, while their internal resilience, such as emotional regulation, seems to be less effective than their male counterparts. Similarly, Lai *et al.* (2021a) find that more than 70% of Chinese women and about 45% of men reported discrimination while wearing facemasks in the UK in 2020. Li *et al.* (2021) also emphasise that Chinese women international students are particularly susceptible to anxiety issues related to drug and cigarette use.

Some studies highlight Chinese international students' experiences of "transnational double exclusion" (Hu *et al.*, 2022, p. 72), where they feel excluded by both Chinese and American authorities. Those facing this dual exclusion tend to prioritise individualistic values over collectivist and nationalistic viewpoints in their identification (Jin & Wang, 2022). Ma and Miller (2021) further attribute Chinese international students' anxiety to discriminatory media narratives, COVID-related fears, and a double-bind situation. Specifically, they receive conflicting messages from family urging them to return home and Chinese authorities asking them to stay abroad due to their high chances of bringing COVID-19 to China, creating high anxiety levels further compounded by discrimination and prejudice abroad, resulting in negative outcomes regardless of their choice (Ma & Miller, 2021).

Some research focuses on the role of state response and media in Chinese international students' heightened vulnerabilities during the pandemic. For example, Mittelmeier and Cockayne (2023) highlight the racist depiction of international students as disease carriers in Twitter posts in 2020. Some critiques focus on neoliberal and nationalist policies in host countries during collective

crises, such as Australia's statement that international students unable to support themselves should return home (Martin, 2022; Qi & Ma, 2021), and the increasing difficulty for international graduates to secure work visas in the US (Mbous *et al.*, 2024). These policies have led to international students' disillusionment with some Western countries (Martin, 2022; Yu, 2021) and the growing popularity of East Asian regions as study destinations (Mok *et al.*, 2021). A few studies highlight the positive side of this crisis, such as families' resilience and mobilisation of various resources to bring students back to China despite immobile infrastructure (Hu *et al.*, 2022), and students' personal and relationship growth from managing the crisis (Lai *et al.*, 2021b; Lin *et al.*, 2022).

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter reviews the literature on IoHE and international students in the Global North, Chinese students' experiences in IHE, Chinese women students in IHE, and Chinese international students during the pandemic.

While much of the existing scholarship discusses the challenges faced by Chinese (women) international students (e.g., Liu *et al.*, 2022; Zhou *et al.*, 2017), I also highlighted their improvements in areas such as academic achievement (particularly learning autonomy), intercultural capacity, identity, interpersonal communication, independent living, maturity, and temporal autonomy, all contributing to their long-term development (e.g., Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Wang, 2018; Xu, 2021). Moving beyond a deficit framing, some scholars situate Chinese international women students' experiences within the transnational political-economic contexts, examining both social structures and their agencies.

These critical discussions often underscore contradictions, such as young Chinese women's strong self-esteem and concurrent commitment to gendered family responsibilities (Matsui, 1995), similar to research on Chinese young women's construction of modern and traditional womanhood (e.g., Liu, 2014). More recent studies focus on the transformations experienced by Chinese women international students. I would like to highlight their complex subjectivity (re)construction (Huang & Khan, 2024; Qin & Lykes, 2006), their construction of neoliberal selfhood (Kim, 2010), and the positive impacts of their autonomous self-fashioning in

challenging traditional gender roles (Kajanus, 2016; Martin, 2022). These explorations on transformations differ from the previous studies that examine contradictions from a more static perspective. Some scholars further complicate the understanding of Chinese women international students' pursuit of global elitism by highlighting the intersections of gender, class, race, nationality and culture (e.g., Goff & Carolan, 2013; Zhang & Xu, 2020).

By bringing together scholarship on both Chinese womanhood and Chinese international students' experiences, I have become interested in exploring whether, and how, their autonomous self-fashioning and complex intersections through IHE influence the paradoxes in autonomous and dependent Chinese womanhood, the PRC's fashioning of citizens, and the broader neoliberal-socialist political economy. Furthermore, while research increasingly focuses on Chinese women international students' complex negotiations of subjectivity, little is known about the role of IHE in these negotiations. My research aims to explore that role.

Recent scholarship has linked the deficit conceptualisation of international students and the adaptation approach to IHE with its neoliberal ideology (e.g., Lomer *et al.*, 2023), such as progressive neoliberalism (Bamberger *et al.*, 2019). (Neo)coloniality and neoliberalism in IHE can marginalise international students' ways of knowing and being (Lomer, 2018; Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2023). Therefore, I aim to examine in what ways complex ideologies and power relations in IHE influence Chinese women in (re)constructing their ways of being.

Given the considerable population of Chinese women in UKHE (HESA, 2023b), the prevailing concerns about their vulnerabilities (e.g., Ge *et al.*, 2019) and the significance of moving beyond these narratives (Huang & Khan, 2024), my research focuses on Chinese women with experiences in UKHE. As most Chinese international students return to China after their IHE, some scholars call for investigating the long-term impacts of IHE on Chinese returnees' lives and their potential socio-political implications for Chinese society (e.g., Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). My research answers this call by including both Chinese women students and graduates with experiences in UKHE. My inquiry into Chinese women's construction of ways of being through UKHE can further the understanding of

UKHE's impacts on the lives of its largest group of international students beyond employability. This may, in turn, have implications for how these international students and UKIHE are conceptualised and should be conceptualised.

Building on existing literature on Chinese womanhood and IHE, I ask these two research questions:

1. In what ways did participants construct Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings and wider transnational intersectional contexts?
2. What is the role of UKHE in participants' construction of Chinese womanhood?

To conclude this chapter, I'd like to reflect on my epistemic journey while conducting this literature review. In my first year of PhD study, I wrote three chapters of literature review. One focused on Western feminism(s), particularly structural feminism and intersectionality; another on Chinese international students in UKHE, examining their challenges, strategies, growth, and institutional support; and the third on Chinese womanhood and feminism. After drafting findings and discussion, I made structural changes to the literature review, reflecting my journey of discovering feminism(s). This journey began just before my PhD with an immersion in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, followed by a fascination with intersectionality, particularly the works of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, and postcolonial scholarship such as transnational feminism during the first two years of my PhD. However, it wasn't until the third year of my PhD that I finally found, appreciated, and connected with Chinese feminist scholarship. Analysing participants' data and feeling at home in a Chinese feminist reading group played significant roles in this transformation.

The discovery of the vast knowledge of Chinese feminism(s) shifted my thesis discussion and compelled me to rewrite the original version of the literature review, which, to my newer self, represented the very hegemony of Western knowledge in the field of feminism(s) and IHE. Thus, I shifted my focus from Western feminism(s) and deficit narratives of Chinese international students to Chinese womanhood embedded in China's political economy and feminist

histories. Many peers doing feminist research in majority-world countries shared similar journeys with me: starting with liberal feminism and struggling to find feminist scholarship embedded in their intellectual, political, economic, cultural genealogies, expressed in their local languages or authored by people from their contexts. Therefore, I find it important to openly reflect on this epistemic journey to reveal the iterative process of suturing this literature review, the intellectual and emotional labour involved in contesting the global hegemony of Western scholarship, and the significance of doing so.

## 4 Chapter 4 Theoretical Framework

*Back in high school, I never thought about the issue of womanhood because I felt there was no significant difference between boys and girls, aside from physical differences. I just accepted what my parents and teachers said about gender differences without questioning it further. When I came to the UK for university and chose to study Art History, my family said it was a great choice for a girl. That's when I started to question whether I genuinely liked the subject or if it was just considered a "girl's" major. Now that I'm in my fourth year, I realise I hadn't fully understood how much society was shaping my choices. I hadn't even realised it was a problem back then.*  
(Qian)

### 4.1 Introduction

As Qian's excerpt shows, the perspective one takes can shape one's understanding of womanhood. Building on my reflection above, this underscores the importance of explicitly defining the theoretical framework guiding this research. Thus, this chapter explains how the scholarship on Chinese feminism(s) and loHE informs the theoretical framework I have constructed. Section 4.2 bridges the literature review and theoretical framework. Section 4.3 discusses the chosen research paradigm, and Section 4.4 details how I draw on various theories to construct a theoretical framework that guides my research.

### 4.2 Bridging the literature review and theoretical framework

In Chapter 2, I highlighted the paradoxes in China's political economy, the fashioning of citizens, and Chinese womanhood. I also traced Chinese feminist histories and the multi-sited and complex feminism(s) in post-socialist China. Given the intricate ideologies at play, scholarship on Chinese womanhood and feminism advocates examining the intersecting structures of injustice, such as the interplay of patriarchy, neoliberalism, the party-state, colonialism, and imperialism, both in the past and present PRC (e.g., Wang, 2017). Drawing from critical socialist feminism, I argued for centering on the complex and intersecting power dynamics rooted in women's experiences and autonomy in China (e.g., Tian, 2022).

In the field of IHE, growing research on international students' ways of being, such as their experiences and identities, adopts an intersectional approach, such as intersectionality (e.g., Nichols & Stahl, 2019) and critical race feminism (e.g., Vaccaro, 2017). Studies using intersectionality often focus on the roles of people's multiple identities in various oppression and marginalisation (e.g., Nguyen *et al.*, 2017), although some scholars see beyond categorical identities and discrimination. For example, Nichols and Stahl (2019) examine how power relations and dynamics constantly form non-essentialist and complex differences in IHE, problematising both barriers and privilege and emphasising individuals. Similarly, for some, the decolonisation of pedagogy in IHE appreciates differences without essentialising them, considers intersectionality and individuality, and values diverse knowledge and ways of knowing equally (Lomer *et al.*, 2023; Page, 2021; Scudamore, 2013). An intersectional approach that focuses on power relations and individual students in IHE aligns with the call for highlighting structural intersectionality and women's agencies in Chinese feminism(s).

Therefore, a structural intersectional approach that considers both structural power relations and individual women's agencies suits my research on Chinese women's transnational construction of ways of being. Martin's (2022) research on Chinese women students' negotiation of selves adopts an intersectional lens and analyses transnational contexts, focusing on categorical identities and transnational mobility. My research aims to examine the structural intersectionality of power relations and explore the transnationality of intersectional power relations and women's agencies, ultimately discerning their implications for decolonial knowledge construction.

Additionally, scholarships in both feminism(s) and IoHE emphasise the significance of decolonial knowledge-building. Mohanty (2003b), for example, critiques feminist scholarship's tendency to reduce "Third World" women's experiences to a singular, ahistorical narrative of oppression. In the context of Chinese feminism(s), the post-socialist interpretation of gender poses challenges in neo-colonial theorisation, translation, and intersectional analysis of class and gender, failing to fully elucidate complex injustices and advance gender-related justice (Song, 2023; Yin, 2022). Additionally, (neo)coloniality and neoliberalism in IHE can

marginalise international students' ways of knowing and being (Lomer, 2018; Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2023). My research, therefore, seeks to contribute to decolonial knowledge construction.

Specifically, I ground my inquiry in existing knowledge of Chinese womanhood within China's political-economic history and critical analysis of IHE, while introducing locally meaningful concepts and scholarship. Attentive to the complex and changing construction of gender across borders, Zhang and Mittelmeier (2023) emphasise the conflicts within research between diverse interpretations of gender and feminism in different socio-cultural contexts and the problematic presumption of universal Eurocentric concepts. They argue that conducting gender research from a feminist perspective with international students raises critical questions "of whose feminism and why?" (2023, p. 128). For example, Chen (2007) criticises the portrayal of Asian women through the 'Western' lens, stereotyping them as embodying certain Confucian virtues and labelling them as submissive and reserved. My research, with a socialist agenda, employs a critical feminist lens from and for Chinese women. Specifically, I introduced critical socialist feminism, which departs from international liberal feminism as a local endeavour of anticolonial "epistemic disobedience" (Spakowski, 2018).

In conclusion, after reviewing the literature on Chinese feminism(s) and IHE, my research adopts a decolonial lens to intersectionality – one that considers both structural power relations and individual women's agency. Below I will explain the research paradigm chosen before detailing my decolonial lens to intersectionality.

### **4.3 A critical paradigm**

I adopt a critical paradigm due to its ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological compatibility with my research. A research paradigm refers to the philosophical beliefs that direct the entire research decision-making process (Crotty, 2020), incorporating elements of ontology, which is concerned with "the nature of reality" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37); epistemology, which addresses the nature of knowledge and its justification (Cohen *et al.*, 2002), methodology, which involves proper methods of systematic



inquiry (Choy, 2014) and axiology, which pertains to values in ethics (Josselson, 2007).

Aiming to challenge the status quo for social justice, critical paradigms address equity and power dynamics within social systems (Mertens, 2008). Originating from the Frankfurt School, it relates to various theories, such as feminism(s) (e.g., Bohman, 2005). Ontologically, critical paradigms assert that injustice is widespread and question “whose reality is privileged” (Mertens, 2007, p. 224), aiming to expose and disrupt power imbalances and injustice by recognising and reducing discrimination. This perspective aligns with my research investigating Chinese women’s experiences of inequities and privileges in transnational contexts and exploring potential social changes.

Epistemologically, critical paradigms view knowledge as subjectively constructed and (re)produced through political and power relations, prioritising cultural sensitivity, participant engagement/partnerships, and reflexivity (Humphries *et al.*, 2020). This aligns with my research, focusing on participants' interpretations of their lived experiences for decolonial knowledge constructions of feminism and loHE. Methodologically, critical paradigm research tends to be participatory, collective, and democratic, targeting empowerment and social actions while being sensitive to power relations and cultural complexity (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2016). Similarly, my research adopts diverse, collective, creative, culturally sensitive, and power-reflexive methods. I will discuss axiological concerns at the end of Chapter 5 (see p.114). Using this critical paradigm, I approached and engaged participants with a vision that values and critically examines their lived experiences to rethink Chinese womanhood in transnational contexts.

#### **4.4 A decolonial lens to intersectionality**

Within a critical paradigm, my research adopts a decolonial lens to intersectionality. A decolonial feminist lens critiques categorical ways of knowing (Bellingham, 2022) because their separability, determinacy, and sequentiality co-construct an ontological basis for violence in modernity (Da Silva, 2016). Separability and determinacy distinguish nature from humans, which consist of further separable and determinable elements, like race, nationality, gender,

sexuality, and other categories that form the basis of our 'knowledge' (Da Silva, 2016). Sequentiality, the idea that events occur in a linear, one-directional sequence, is based on a linear conception of time and relies on separability and determinacy (Da Silva, 2016). Among “inherently distinct” groups, natural selection functions as intense battles for survival and competition, leading to increased differentiation and hierarchies, underpinning colonialism and capitalism as rarely challenged natural principles in modernity (Bellingham, 2022). Thus, knowing through essentialist categorisation is critiqued as violent conquests, creating the known object and knowing subject (Da Silva, 2016). In response, Da Silva (2016) reimagines differences as manifestations of entanglement, arguing for de-categorisation and re-entanglement to construct resistant knowledge(s). My research approaches de-categorisation and entanglement through intersectionality.

Responding to criticism that second-wave feminism primarily serves white, heterosexual, middle-class women, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1993) coins the term intersectionality, suggesting that women experience layers of oppression with a multiplicative, rather than additive, impact. bell hooks (1992, 2014a, 2014b) and Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1989) advocate for redefining power and privilege to foster feminist unity by using an intersectional approach that recognises and values the diverse experiences of women. In my research, intersectionality refers to the critical idea that interlocking systems, such as those of race, gender, sexuality, and class, shape complex social injustice, incorporating individual identities, group culture and institutional structures (Collins, 2015; Dill & Kohlman, 2012).

In response to calls for researchers of intersectionality to make their assumptions explicit (Choo & Ferree, 2010), I will outline my assumptions and explain their alignment with my decolonial lens. Specifically, I will address three focal points in intersectionality research: inclusion, process, and system.

First, the inclusive approach emphasises intersectional identities and the voices of the marginalised (Choo & Ferree, 2010). However, Zinn and Dill (1996) caution against overstressing differences of the marginalised group, and Choo and Ferree (2010) call for problematising how the more privileged are seen as the mainstream

norm defining marginalised differences. Thus, in focusing on Chinese women's intersectional subjectivities, I endeavour to approach their perspectives of differences as starting points for interrogating the conceptualisation of norms.

Second, the process approach shifts the focus from categories to categorisation, such as from race and gender to racialisation and gendering, emphasising power relations across time and space (Yuval-Davis, 2006). However, this approach tends to prioritise certain injustices, with other injustices added as “main effects” (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Informed by both inclusive and process approaches, my research interrogates the formation of norms and examines categorisation to contribute to knowledge(s) that de-categorise differences.

Third, a systematic approach understands analytical concepts as a combination of representation, social structures, and power dimensions (Ferguson, 2013), viewing intersectionality as a multi-level system of interactions at a specific time and place (Bowleg, 2021). Comparing and contrasting the process and systematic approaches, Choo and Ferree (2010) call for shifting focus towards unmarked categories, hidden power operations, and interactions focusing on the intersection of processes, which can contribute to producing knowledge(s) that re-entangle differences.

Thus, a non-hegemonic, process-focused, and systematic approach to intersectionality, which can investigate the (re)production and transformation of injustice over time (Abrams *et al.*, 2020; Choo & Ferree, 2010) and across national contexts (Bowleg, 2008; Ferguson, 2013), benefits my research on the construction of Chinese womanhood across time and borders. Additionally, this approach interrogates normalisation and categorisation and systematically examines the intersectional power operations across time and space. In doing so, it can challenge separability, determinacy, and sequentiality of categorical thinking (Da Silva, 2016) and contribute to decolonial knowledge building<sup>18</sup>. I will

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<sup>18</sup> Sections 5.4.1 and 5.4.6 elaborate on how I approach this in data analysis.

discuss my approach to non-hegemonic and systematic intersectionality below and explain my focus on process through temporality in data analysis (see p.99)<sup>19</sup>.

#### 4.4.1 The matrix of domination and relational autonomy

Regarding systematic intersectionality, Collins (2000) coins the concept of the matrix of domination to analyse how structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains of power operate differently and interrelatedly to sustain the status quo and shape group identities and individual lives. The structural domain arranges social oppression through institutions, so structural empowerment happens by transforming these institutions (Collins, 2000; Harding, 1989). The disciplinary domain focuses on how oppression operates through policymaking and enactment, with empowerment occurring through resistance within institutions (Collins, 2000). The hegemonic domain explains how systems of ideas normalise the practices of the privileged group through ideology, culture, and symbolic categories, with empowerment coming from cultivating critical consciousness and self-definitions to resist hegemony (Collins, 2000; Collins & Bilge, 2020). The interpersonal domain investigates how individual consciousness perpetuates domination and subordination via daily activities, with empowerment arising from the political consciousness of individuals choosing to contest oppression in the opportunity contexts of structural, disciplinary and hegemonic domains, stressing the role of a sociological imagination (Collins, 1986; Lorde, 1984). These interrelated domains of power guide my research in conducting a systematic analysis that considers both structural power relations and women's agencies, as well as avoids hegemonic and essentialist categories.

Additionally, I draw on relational autonomy to highlight Chinese women's autonomy within the layered power relations for decolonial knowledge-building. Liu (2017b) underscores that gender's relational characteristic in China, evident in Yin-yang, Confucian familism and role orientations, grants women indirect power that they can utilise during interactions with men, potentially reshaping gender dynamics. Liu (2017b) highlights women's autonomy in inner space, despite

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<sup>19</sup> This is because my approach to non-hegemonic and systematic intersectionality guided the entire research design, whereas I only became aware of and applied temporality as a framework after the data generation phase of this research.

the hierarchy between the inner and outer space. This necessitates considering the relational nature of gender in understanding women's autonomy in some countries, such as China, India, and some regions in Africa (Hae & Song, 2019; Liu, 2007). Relational autonomy, as a feminist remaking of autonomy, explores the complex interplay between women's autonomy and social (in)justice (Stoljar, 2022).

Mackenzie (2021) conceptualises relational autonomy through a multidimensional and scalar lens, including self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorisation as distinct but interacting dimensions. Self-determination, entailing having the authority and power to control significant aspects of one's life, explores the interplay between autonomy and freedom (Mackenzie, 2021; Oshana, 2014). Self-governance, involving making decisions that align with one's practical identity, values, and commitments, highlights the connections between autonomy, authenticity, and competence (Friedman, 2003; Meyers, 2005; Stoljar, 2022). Self-authorisation, meaning viewing oneself as normatively authorised to take ownership and accountability of one's values and decisions, focuses on the links between autonomy, self-reflective attitudes, and social recognition (Benson, 2014). The distinctiveness and intersectionality of these dimensions assist in analysing various ways social oppression can weaken autonomy, while also minimising paternalistic re-presentation and recognising people's different degrees of autonomy in different dimensions (Stoljar, 2022). This seems particularly important in understanding women's autonomy in majority-world countries to contest the oversimplified and ahistorical portrayal of them as oppressed (Mohanty, 2003b). Therefore, I adopt this multidimensional and scalar lens of relational autonomy (Mackenzie, 2021) and the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000) to approach non-hegemonic and systematic intersectionality, as well as to contribute to decolonial knowledge building.

#### **4.4.2 Transnational intersectionality**

The construction of Chinese womanhood in my research involves both intersectional and transnational dimensions. Feminism in the East and transnational feminism highlight that intersectionality originated from Western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic countries and can universalise women's

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experiences as the same type of gender and racial oppression (Narayan *et al.*, 2000; Swarr & Nagar, 2012). Transnational feminists reject static and monolithic feminist reality and knowledge production (Sandoval, 2004), emphasising that political and economic structures, immigration policies, and geographic locations shape the knowledge of gender (e.g., Mohanty, 2003a). For instance, Chow *et al.* (2011) point out that patriarchal views of gender and families continue to affect the everyday experiences of Chinese diasporas, highlighting the role of nationality and immigration in intersectional analysis within transnational contexts.

To revise the Western notion, Shelly Grabe coins the term transnational intersectionality, further developed by transnational feminism (e.g., Swarr & Nagar, 2012). This concept examines how globalisation and capitalism influence people of diverse genders, ethnicities/races, classes, sexualities and other social relations, unravelling varied womanhood in the global fight against patriarchal and capitalist power (Amelina & Lutz, 2018; Purkayastha, 2012). Additionally, Anthias introduces the concept of translocation to integrate intersectionality with transnationalism, encompassing diaspora, hybridity, and cosmopolitanism (2008, 2013, 2020). Translocation expands the understanding of transnationalism beyond mere physical relocations to encompass the complexity of multiple locations across time and space and the connections between past, present, and future. It conceptualises lives as situated within multiple and interconnected social spaces where various social categories and hierarchies intersect. As Anthias (2008, p. 15) explains, “a translocational positionality is one structured by the interplay of different locations relating to gender, ethnicity, race and class (amongst others), and their at times contradictory effects”.

My research employs transnational intersectionality to integrate intersectionality and transnationalism. This approach broadens intersectionality studies to incorporate nationality and extends intersectionality to transnational movements and multi-sited experiences between the UK and China, both physically and virtually. This framework helps me unpack the complexity of intersecting categories and attend to the multiplicity of locations, such as participants’ various and contradictory constructions of womanhood across times, histories, contexts, and ideologies. Moreover, some transnational feminists emphasise the importance

of interrogating intersections of “gender, ethnicity, sexuality, economic exploitation, and other social hierarchies” (Grabe & Else-Quest, 2012, p. 159) in the “transnational power-laden processes such as European imperialism and colonialism, neoliberal globalisation” (Patil, 2013, p. 848). Thus, I attend to the transnational intersectionality of power relations in participants’ construction of Chinese womanhood. This form of “structural intersectionality” (Cho *et al.*, 2013) helps me interrogate the local and global domains of power in participants’ construction and imagine alternative womanhood beyond these axes of domination.

Transnational intersectionality, with its ability to capture the interplay of the product and the process of social relations in multiple locations and temporalities, helps me understand the layers of complexity of participants’ transnational construction of Chinese womanhood.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

To conclude, through reviewing the literature on Chinese feminism(s) and loHE, my research adopts a decolonial lens to intersectionality that considers both structural power relations and individual women’s agency. Within a critical paradigm, specifically, a non-hegemonic, process-focused, and systematic approach to intersectionality holds the potential to answer my research questions and contribute to decolonial knowledge building. I develop a theoretical framework that integrates various theories to meet these requirements. My research employs transnational intersectionality, drawing on the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000), relational autonomy (Mackenzie, 2021) and temporality (Adam, 1994, 1995, 2022) (see p.99) to examine the transnationality of intersectional power relations and women’s agencies across time and space for decolonial knowledge-building.

## 5 Chapter 5 Methodology

*This sharing is certainly very important, such as my participation in this [research] event. I was very moved just now because you would analyse the data and make it visible to more people. For me, simply being part of this process is already very significant. It has given me the chance to reflect, communicate, learn a lot, and feel a lot...There is truly a lack of opportunities for such exchanges. If we can continue this type of communication, I think it would be an incredibly valuable opportunity. (Jia)*

### 5.1 Introduction

Building on the theoretical framework constructed in Chapter 4, this chapter systematically discusses the methodology used to address the two research questions concerning Chinese womanhood through UKHE and transnational intersectional contexts. Section 5.2 examines the compatibility of a qualitative approach, particularly life history research and arts-based research methods, with the research questions and paradigm. Section 5.3 focuses on data generation methods and processes, including participant recruitment and management, the two-stage data generation process, and pilot studies. As shown in Jia's quote above, data generation went beyond its intended purpose of answering research questions, becoming a valuable experience in which many participants and I "*felt a lot*". Therefore, in this section, I integrate the justification for the chosen data generation methods with the explanation of what actually happened during the process. Section 5.4 elaborates on data analysis, covering analytical frameworks, transcription, pre-coding preparation, two rounds of data coding and analysis, as well as translation and language considerations. Section 5.5, drawing on Tracy's (2010) criteria, discusses the quality of this research, including rich rigour, credibility, ethics, sincerity, resonance, coherence, and contributions. Using a visualisation, I will summarise this chapter and introduce the next chapters at the end.

### 5.2 A qualitative approach

I adopted qualitative methodology due to its compatibility with the research questions and alignment with the research paradigm. Qualitative research



emphasises participants' viewpoints, uses broad, open questions, collects/generates data in the form of words and meanings from smaller groups (Geertz, 2008), values subjectivity, and aims to understand participants' meanings in context (Hesse-Biber, 2010). It describes social context and processes, enabling an in-depth comprehension of events and how individuals make sense of them (Hesse-Biber, 2010). For this research, Chinese women experience changes in social contexts when they leave China to study in the UK and return afterwards. Thus, qualitative research's focus on contexts and processes is crucial to exploring how these women make sense of their experiences and how this understanding changes over time in transnational contexts.

Additionally, qualitative research acknowledges the complexity of realities, emphasising flexibility and open-mindedness in research (Ochieng, 2009). This flexibility can benefit my study due to the complexity of Chinese women's construction of ways of being in transnational and intersectional contexts. Consistent with this research, qualitative methodology is not concerned with generalising research findings from the sample to a greater population or another context (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Aligned with the critical feminist paradigm, qualitative research tends to be productive in understanding cultural complexity, valuing different knowledge systems, reflecting on power issues, building trust, and engaging participants (Bell *et al.*, 2018; Ochieng, 2009). Therefore, while quantitative methodology, which tends to be reductive, inflexible, positivist, and neglects contexts and processes (Punch, 2013), is unsuitable for my research questions and orientation, qualitative methodology is fit for capturing the complex construction of Chinese womanhood and exploring the relatively unknown role of UKHE.

### **5.2.1 Life history research**

I selected Life History Research (LHR) due to its strong alignment with the research questions and its coherence with the research paradigm. Life history, commonly situated in qualitative methodology, involves recounting life events (Bertaux, 1981), or providing extensive autobiographical narratives (Atkinson, 2012). LHR collects and analyses stories or data on significant life aspects, such as schooling, or turning points like interventions (e.g., Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame, 1981). LHR

enables researchers to explore narrators' past experiences and their development over time (Brown, 2001), emphasising narrators' interpretations of significant chronological events (Curtis & Curtis, 2011). Participants engage with time both diachronically and synchronically, recalling and interpreting their past experiences from their current perspective.

LHR, often considered narrative research, focuses on representing individuals' lived experiences, offering insights into power structures and knowledge production (Jones & Aubrey, 2019). It's increasingly adopted in feminist research to understand the experiences of those "hidden from history" (Gluck & Patai, 2016), reflecting the "biographical turn in social science" from the 1980s (Rustin, 2002) and epistemological debates challenging positivism (e.g., Hubbard, 2000). Life histories are based on narrators' retrospective understanding of past events, with memorisation seen as an active and ongoing process of constructing meanings (Portelli, 2017). They often include repeated descriptions and justifications linked to ongoing identity construction (Richardson *et al.*, 2019). Thus, life histories are reflective and creative dialogues between past and present, where lived histories are viewed through the lens of the present, and current concerns influence what is remembered and forgotten (Plummer, 2001). This aligns with this research's goal of investigating participants' retrospective construction of Chinese womanhood.

Epistemologically, narrators' stories are viewed as authentic "truth" of their experiences (Linde, 1993), with researchers actively engaging in interpretation (Plummer, 1990). The final stories are researchers' interpretations of the narrator's retrospective account of life history (Luken & Vaughan, 1999). The co-production of life histories can be affected by methodological conventions, participant-researcher relationships, and sociocultural context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Linde, 1993). Regarding methodology, the process of narrating life histories produces meaning and becomes part of the meaning-making process, encouraging narrators to deconstruct and reconstruct pertinent social issues (Lincoln & Lanford, 2019). This potentially benefits this research by engaging participants in critically (re)constructing Chinese womanhood. Concerning participant-researcher

relationships, researchers often take an empathic rather than objective stance in LHR (Atkinson, 2012).

Feminist researchers argue that objectivity is an androcentric idea and often misrepresents womanhood (Haraway, 2020), while subjective life histories can better represent different experiences of womanhood. Consistent with the critical feminist paradigm, LHR embraces the partial, subjective, selective, contingent, contextual, and reflexive nature of situated and embodied knowledge. However, the imbalance of authority and power between narrators and researchers can affect data quality, as life histories are partially constructed during LHR where researchers hold significant power (Atkinson, 2012). Due to the shared concerns of power issues in the critical feminist paradigm and LHR, I emphasised positionality, reflexivity, empathy, flexibility, participants' engagement, and thick description throughout this research.

Regarding sociocultural contexts, LHR situates narrators' biographic narratives within their socio-cultural context using secondary information and triangulation. This contextualisation is crucial for this research, as participants experience changes in the broader social contexts between China and the UK, potentially influencing their construction of Chinese womanhood. This triangulation is not used to check the narrators' authentic accounts (Linde, 1993) but to construct contextualised knowledge(s). For instance, I gathered and analysed secondary information from extensive literature before, during and after data generation to better formulate questions when interacting with narrators and understand their narrated experiences and subjectivities in layered contexts. LHR, as contextualised and theorised biography (Connell, 1992), may centre on individual experiences but does not exclude the investigation of social structure.

My research adopts both a "portal" approach to understand wider social-cultural narratives from individual lived experiences (Harrison, 2009) and a "process" approach, emphasising thick description and contextual information. Through triangulation and a focus on contexts and processes, LHR demonstrates prowess in exploring the interplay between structure and agency grounded in narrators' lived experiences, particularly at significant turning points in their lives (Söderström, 2020). This aligns with my research's approaches to

intersectionality, covering the matrix of domination and relational autonomy, and potentially helps investigate UKHE's roles in participants' construction of Chinese womanhood. Therefore, I adopt LHR as it benefits this research on retrospective and critical (re)construction of Chinese womanhood across time and contexts, aligns with the critical, intersectional, and transnational paradigm, and highlights UKHE's roles.

### **5.2.2 Arts-based research methods**

Together with LHR, I adopted Arts-Based Research (ABR) methods due to their methodological consistency and potential to address my research questions. Humans understand and represent experiences in ways beyond words, so art broadens perception and deepens understanding by providing various means to access experiences (Eisner, 2008). ABR posits that meanings can be created and represented in multiple forms beyond discourse (Barone & Eisner, 2011), so various forms, like visuals, music, dance, and poetry, enable researchers to explore what may not be known in text alone (Eisner, 2008). ABR's ability to unsettle and extend knowledge and research (Leavy, 2020) aligns with my critical paradigm, helping investigate participants' complex meaning-making of lived experiences.

The dual standpoints of audience and creator of arts in ABR (Eisner, 2008) offer participants opportunities to defamiliarise and refamiliarise their experiences as Chinese women in transnational contexts. Rather than merely producing non-verbal data and using art for art's sake, reflexive research processes and strong research paradigms give ABR the potential to be critical, emancipatory, and feminist methods (Leigh, 2020). Both ABR and my critical, intersectional, and transnational framework advocate a power-and-culture-sensitive co-research process. For instance, creativity is valued in decolonial feminist knowledge-building (Collins, 2000) and Chinese young feminists' activism (Hong-Fincher, 2019). Additionally, ABR can explore important life moments that may not emerge in interviews but that are meaningful in building participants' life histories (Ncube, 2006). Thus, ABR methods align with my critical paradigm and can assist this LHR in exploring participants' complex construction of womanhood.

### 5.3 Data generation

The critical research paradigm and qualitative approach guided my decisions on specific research methods. This section begins with a discussion of participant recruitment and management, followed by an elaboration on data generation methods and processes. This includes collage-facilitated, culturally responsive focus groups and timeline-facilitated life history interviews, which will contextualise the subsequent discussion of pilot studies. Finally, I will provide a summary of data generation in this research.

#### 5.3.1 Participant recruitment and management

Participant recruitment criteria included a) mainland Chinese women, b) over eighteen years old, and c) with experience studying in UKHE. Mainland Chinese was defined by nationality. While distinctions between biological sex and self-identified gender are common in Western contexts, I didn't specify women this way here due to considerations of participants' discursive environment, anticolonial knowledge-building, and research questions. Specifically, Xie (2021) critiques that *xingbié* in Chinese conflated gender and sex in legislation, public discourses, and common perceptions. Spakowski (2021) problematises the widely adopted translation of *xingbié* as gender and discusses plural translations of gender into Chinese. Interpretations of gender and sex within the Chinese population vary across generations, geographic locations, ethnicities, and personal experiences (Du, 2002; Martin, 2022). An uncritical differentiation before data generation could be insensitive to Chinese discourses and complexities. Critical socialist feminism scholars critique gender's failure to challenge patriarchy in China (e.g., Song, 2023). Thus, a static and predetermined definition of women may not suit this research, which studies participants' (re)construction of Chinese womanhood in transnational contexts.

Consistent with a critical paradigm, I used purposive sampling to recruit participants, selecting samples that incorporate participants of research interest and purpose (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). To answer open-ended research questions, I aimed to recruit diverse participants across dimensions potentially related to this research, incorporating ages, academic status in relation to UKHE (student,

alumni, or both), UKHEIs, subjects and levels of study, and duration in UKHE. I shared E-posters, containing key information about the research, participant recruitment criteria and contact details, on social media platforms like WeChat and Twitter.

Initially, I recruited 46 participants who all studied in the UK physically, most in SHAPE (n=40). However, first-stage data generation revealed potential differences in constructions of Chinese womanhood between those in SHAPE and those in STEM<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, some who studied online from mainland China during the pandemic contacted me for participation. Therefore, I recruited more participants and added two extra focus groups: one with participants in STEM and one with participants experiencing UKHE online from China.

In total, 56 Chinese women with experience in UKHE participated in the first stage. I included participant profiles in [Appendix 1](#), including pseudonyms, academic status, levels, subjects, duration in the UK, age, sibling status, and interview status. I collected this information mainly from participants' demographic questionnaires on Microsoft Forms (GDPR-compliant). At the time of recruitment, participants ranged in age from 19 to 39 with an average age of 27, and most aged between 21 to 30 (n=47) (see Figure 5-1). They were students (n=27), alumnae (n=23) and both (6), indicating they had completed and returned to UKHE (see Figure 5-2). They had lived in the UK for 0-11 years with an average of 2.5 years, and no more than a year for many (n=34) (see Figure 5-3). Participants studied SHAPE (n=45), STEM (n=9) and both (2) (see Figure 5-4). Most only studied at PGT levels (n=32) and others had experience at Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate Research (PGR) levels in UKHE (see Figure 5-5). Many only studied at the University of Glasgow (n=29), while others studied at 13 institutions across Scotland, England, and Wales. Most were only children (i.e. Without siblings) (n=41) (see Figure 5-6), and their regions of origin were across mainland China.

Out of 56 participants, I invited 30 to participate in second-stage research, purposively including those expressing typical and atypical views, and selecting

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<sup>20</sup> STEM participants often emphasised no gender injustice and sometimes highlighted women's greater achievement compared to men. Chapter 6 details this (see Section 6.7).

diverse participants across dimensions potentially related to this research. Participants who studied in STEM seemed to express different views on Chinese womanhood compared to those who studied only in SHAPE, so I invited most of those who studied in STEM. Other characteristics generally resembled those of the first-stage participants.

Figure 5-1 Participants by age groups

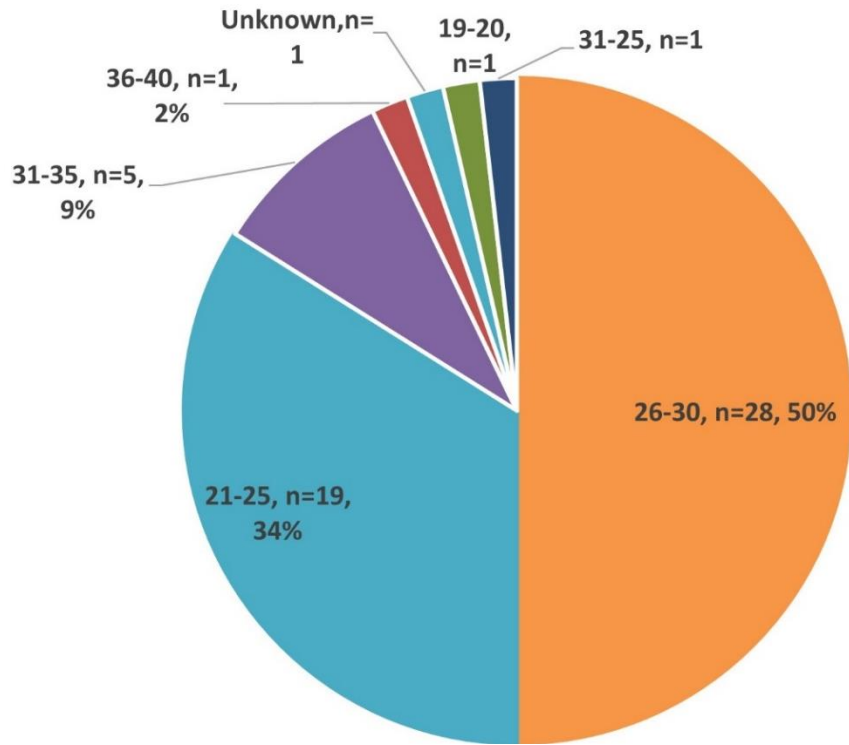


Figure 5-2 Participants by academic status

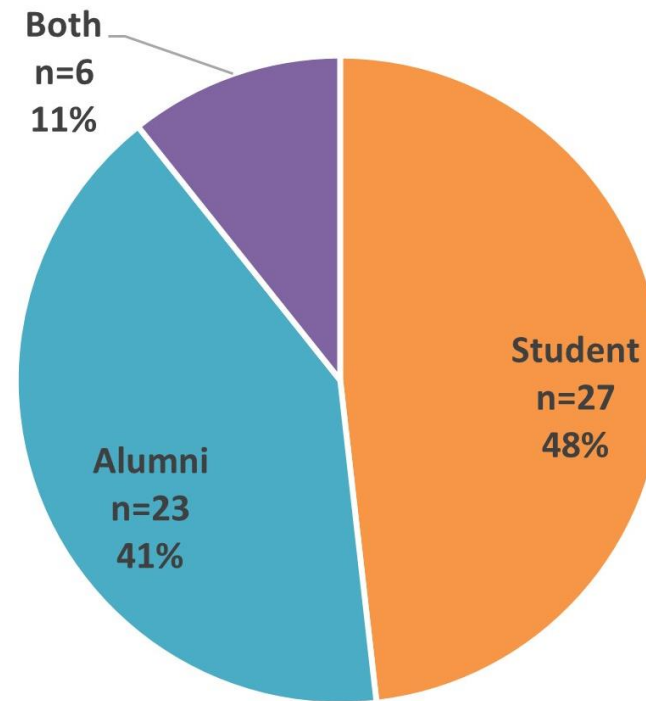




Figure 5-3 Participants by duration in the UK

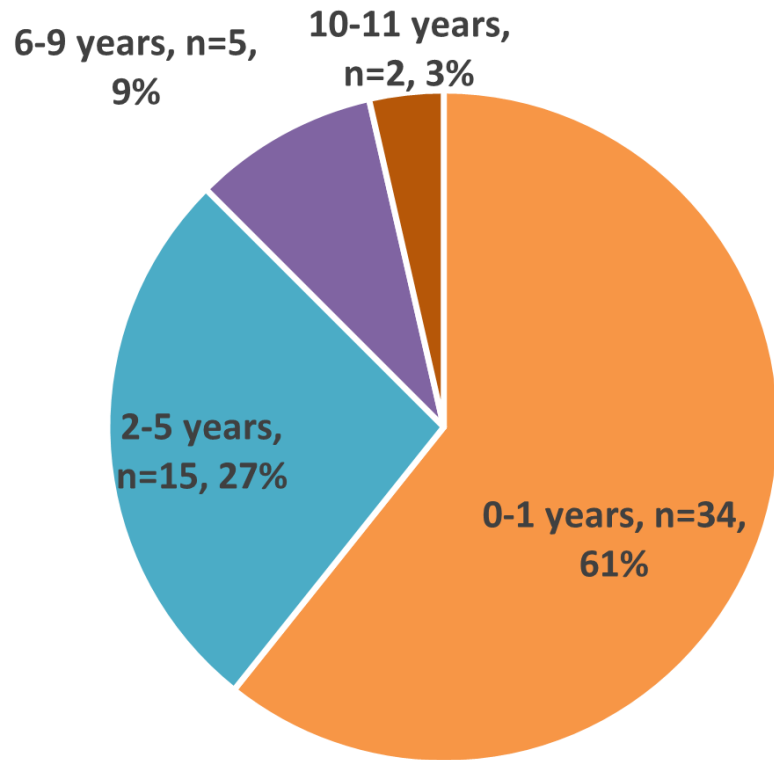


Figure 5-4 Participants by subjects of study

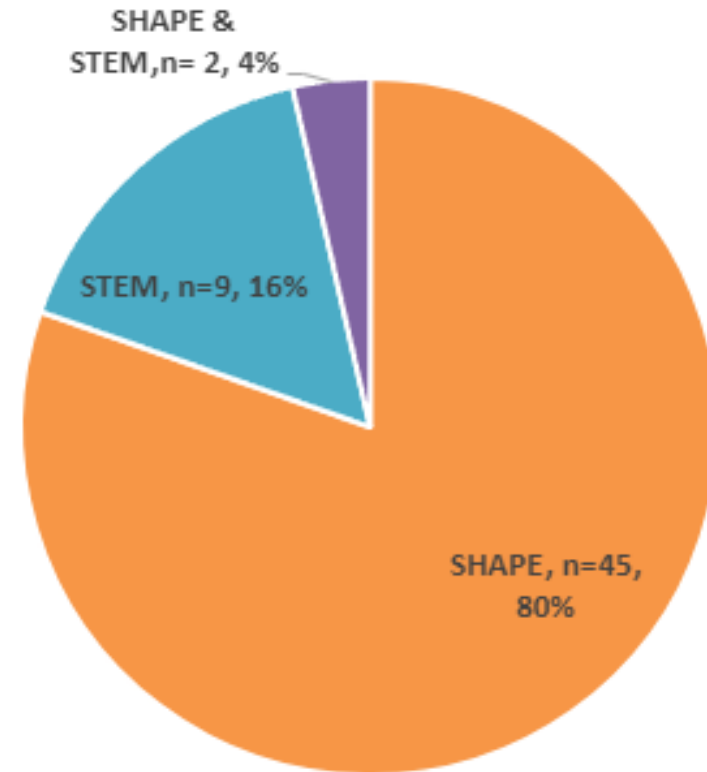


Figure 5-5 Participants by levels of study

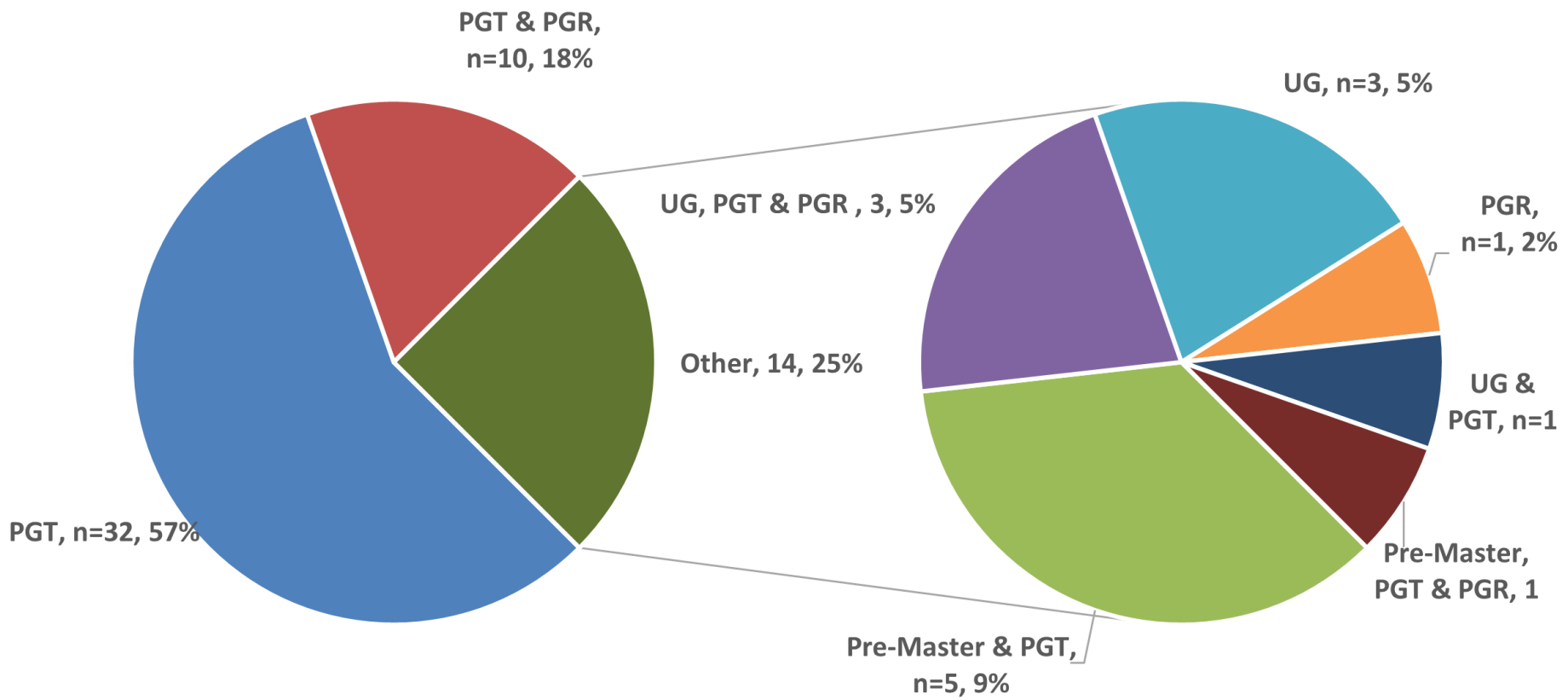
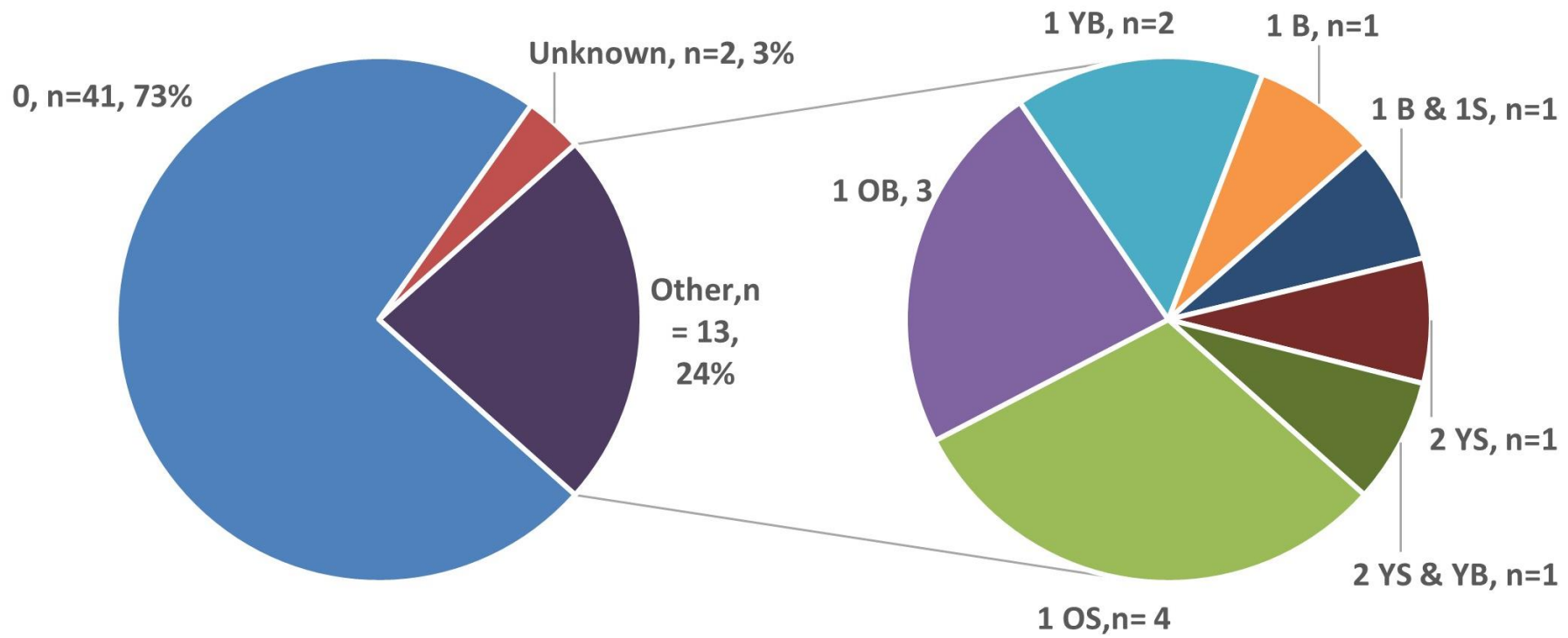


Figure 5-6 Participants by sibling status<sup>21</sup>



<sup>21</sup> Older Sister (OS), Younger Sister (YS), Sister (S), Older Brother (OB), Younger Brother (YB), Brother (B)

Maintaining records of participant contact can enhance communication, particularly in longitudinal research (Farrall *et al.*, 2016). In this two-phase study, I maintained an encrypted Excel spreadsheet containing participants' contact details, contact outcomes, meeting times, and demographic information. This aided in both managing meetings and recruiting diverse participants. I utilised participants' preferred WeChat messaging platform to introduce the research, build rapport and schedule meetings. For instance, I utilised the availability information participants provided in demographic questionnaires to identify approximately five individuals with similar availability for the first-stage research (collage-facilitated focus groups). I then messaged them to coordinate a mutually convenient date and time. One day before each data generation session, I provided comprehensive participation information to all participants, incorporating activity details, device requirements, local time, Zoom meeting links, encrypted PowerPoint slides for collage creation, and reassurance that no prior artistic experience was necessary. I encouraged participants to join 5 minutes early to test microphones, facilitating rapport building among participants. I sent gentle reminders half an hour before each session, which all participants attended promptly. The next section elaborates on my choices and utilisation of data generation methods.

### **5.3.2 Data generation methods and procedures**

As discussed in Section 5.2, ABR methods align with my critical paradigm and can assist this LHR in exploring participants' complex construction of womanhood. ABR methods are often used to complement conventional data generation methods, producing rich data and challenging the linearity of textual representations (Mitchell *et al.*, 2011). In my two-stage research, I first used collage-facilitated, culturally responsive focus groups to explore participants' construction of Chinese womanhood. Then, I adopted timeline-facilitated life history (LH) interviews to investigate these constructions across time and borders and to examine UKHEI's roles. The initial exploration in the first stage informed and contextualised the more in-depth discussion in the second stage. I provided participants with all materials in both Chinese and English and conducted the data generation in Mandarin due to their preferences.

### **5.3.2.1 Collage-facilitated culturally responsive focus groups**

Collage, an ABR method, creates meanings on given topics by collocating pictures, artefacts, objects, narratives, sounds, and textiles, and can be applied throughout research processes in diverse disciplines (Barton, 2015; Butler-Kisber, 2008). Researchers and/or participants take resources out of original contexts from various sources to build new collections (Culshaw, 2019). Collage serves as effective elicitation tools, facilitating reflection and discussion of significant experiences (Lahman *et al.*, 2020), and as conveyers of meaning in its own right, conceptualising ideas and valuing participants' meaning-making process (Roberts & Woods, 2018). Collage allows holistic, nuanced, metaphorical, and creative expression of experiences (Tracey & Allen, 2016). Its diverse forms of expression can reduce participants' perceived risk of providing "wrong" answers (Butler-Kisber, 2008). These non-linear and non-linguistic capabilities of collage can aid in the elicitation, de-familiarisation, re-familiarisation and conceptualisation of abstract topics (Given, 2008), like Chinese womanhood. Participants often discuss visual metaphors in collages (Vacchelli, 2018), so I used collage alongside focus groups to gain a broader understanding of Chinese womanhood.

Focus groups are social constructions where participants with similar experiences and researchers co-construct meanings on certain topics (Cohen *et al.*, 2002), whereas individual interviews tend to focus more on researchers eliciting information (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2011). When designing the methodology in early 2021, I found limited literature on Chinese women's subjectivity construction across time and borders, especially using transnational intersectionality framework. This scarcity and the value of individual specificity in LHR motivated me to use focus groups to gain an initial understanding of participants' construction of Chinese womanhood and their layered contexts, which would better inform later interviews. Focus groups enable investigators to generate collective data not easily accessible in individual interviews (Green, 2017). Group discussions may help participants recall past events that may have been missed in interviews, better contextualising participants' construction (Tierney & Lanford, 2020) of Chinese womanhood in later LH interviews. Rich interactions and flexible discussion in focus groups (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013) may provide more

comprehensive, nuanced, and unexpected insights into Chinese womanhood. Initially, interviews may not be suitable since limited knowledge and two-person interactions can restrict critical discussion.

This research draws from culturally responsive focus groups, which validate participants' shared experiences and identities based on ethnicity/race, class, and gender/sex (Green, 2017; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2011). This aligns with my research on participants' critical construction of subjectivities in broader UKHE and transnational contexts. Culturally responsive focus groups appreciate collective communication styles. "For many women, collective story-telling about their experiences can feel more natural than traditional one-to-one setting", making it both a culturally responsive data-generation method and valuable data source (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2011, p. 411). Given the relational characteristics of Chinese societies (Liu, 2017c), group discussions may be conducive to exploring Chinese women's shared transnational experiences and subjectivities. In supportive groups, participants may feel more comfortable engaging in potentially unfamiliar discussions of subjectivities related to gender/sex, ethnicity/race, nationality, and sexuality.

Therefore, I adopted collage-facilitated, culturally responsive focus groups for their potential to explore participants' complex and creative construction of Chinese womanhood across time and layered contexts and to empower them to validate their creation of truths. However, some participants may feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable with using ABR methods (Burge *et al.*, 2016) and discussing the research topics in focus groups. Thus, I piloted and adopted a sensitive design where participants used public domain pictures on Microsoft PowerPoint as a whiteboard to co-create collages within supportive focus groups online. I conducted these focus groups online between November 2021 and January 2022 mainly due to restrictions and concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The online format allowed participants from different UKHEIs to join group discussions via Zoom. Offering video or audio calls potentially made some participants more comfortable sharing their thoughts. Collage could free them from the challenge of drawing and allow them to express themselves in ways that don't depend on perceived artistic ability (Roberts & Woods, 2018). Using public domain pictures

instead of their personal photos potentially helped reduce participants' discomfort, time commitment, and privacy concerns and addressed copyright issues.

In total, 11 focus groups comprising 56 participants engaged in collage-facilitated discussions about their understanding of Chinese womanhood. These included 5 groups of students and 6 groups of alumnae, with 4-6 participants per group. Students who had previous experiences of UKHE and returned to China were classified as alumnae for this research, as they would continue the discussion to the period after UKHE. While the planned duration was 90 minutes, the actual focus groups' duration ranged from 90 minutes to over 3 hours due to participants' strong interest.

Focus groups included an introduction, collective collage-making, group discussion, and concluding remarks. The introduction covered self-introductions and clarifications of the research purpose, ethics, process, tools, and expectations. I introduced PowerPoint and public domain images as collage-making tools. Online PowerPoint slides functioned as the shared whiteboard, where I explained how to add text, images, and shapes to co-create collages. Student groups used three slides to create collages, covering their understanding of Chinese womanhood before UKHE, during UKHE, and their understanding of other womanhood during UKHE. Alumnae extended the discussion to a fourth slide, exploring their understanding of Chinese womanhood after UKHE. The slide on other womanhood explored participants' construction of Chinese womanhood in relation to other womanhood during UKHE, but not before or after, to avoid encouraging stereotypes.

I provided three websites where participants could find public domain images, incorporating Pexels, Pixabay and Unsplash, and encouraged them to use other public domain sources. I introduced expectations to help participants feel more comfortable with various ways of expressing themselves, non-linear ways of recalling and sense-making, and respecting different views in supportive group discussions, ultimately benefiting from the designed virtues of collage-facilitated, culturally responsive focus groups. Participants spent around 20 minutes creating collages online before delving into the collage-facilitated group discussion.

Finally, I shared the slides-sorter view on PowerPoint<sup>22</sup> with participants and invited them to observe all the collages they had made and summarise their construction of Chinese womanhood over time. I reiterated research ethics, thanked them for their participation, and reminded them of future contacts regarding potential interviews. Throughout these processes, I primarily served as a facilitator, allowing space for participants' interactions and co-constructions, meanwhile noting down important topics and my questions. See [Appendix 2](#) for the screenshots of the slides I used, shown in the slides-sorter view in PowerPoint.

These processes allowed many participants to feel comfortable while being challenged and supported to go beyond the taken-for-granted understanding of Chinese womanhood, assisting in their critical (re)construction. Participants questioned and reconstructed common conceptions, exemplified by one participant asking others, "*What is gender equality?*". Therefore, I examined both the generated data and participants' collective meaning-making process. The collage-facilitated focus groups, as non-linear and non-linguistic ways of collective sense-making and imagining of Chinese womanhood, potentially told different stories from individual interviews and facilitated the elicitation, de-familiarisation, re-familiarisation and conceptualisation of shared experiences and subjectivity (re)construction. Many participants appreciated this research for providing a platform to critically discuss their experiences as Chinese women in wider UKHE contexts, fostering a sense of community and empowerment. Many formed lasting connections, exemplified by a group of six alumnae who created a WeChat group to continue their discussions.

I analysed data from collage-facilitated focus groups to inform timeline-facilitated LH interviews. Participants in focus groups discussed social and personal contexts uniquely relevant to these groups of Chinese women with experiences of UKHE at this particular time. Thus, I performed initial coding and thematic analysis of all focus group data to identify recurring and significant contextual topics shared among participants, as well as some contexts specific to certain groups and individuals. Then, I synthesised these with contexts informed by my literature

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<sup>22</sup>It allows for the display of all presentation slides in a grid format, providing an overview of the entire presentation.



review. These synthesised contexts were classified into women-related social environments in China, challenges, individual strategies and institutional support during UKHE, diverse and new experiences in broader UKHE contexts, and exploration of womanhood through wider UKHE settings.

In LHR, contexts can be brought by researchers and/or participants during and/or after the timeline-facilitated interviews to help participants understand their lived experiences (Rimkeviciene *et al.*, 2016). I introduced these contexts as potential topics for interview participants to engage with, so the structure of LH interviews was informed by relevant literature, and participants' shared and individual-specific contexts from focus group data. I designed LH interviews to further investigate participants' constructions of Chinese womanhood across time and in layered contexts. By introducing these contexts in interviews, I aimed to further engage participants in critically examining the interplay between agency and structure grounded in their subjectivity construction and lived experiences, sharing some analytical power with them.

### **5.3.2.2 *Timeline-facilitated life history interviews***

I adopted LH interviews to further investigate participants' constructions of Chinese womanhood across time and borders and to explore UKHE's roles. In LHR, data can be gathered via various methods, such as interviews, observations, and (digital) artefacts (Jackson & Russell, 2010). An individual interview refers to a process where a participant and a researcher have a dialogue centred around research questions (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2003). Unlike focus groups, individual interviews can offer narrators a private and comfortable space to reflect on, talk and be heard about their stories (Crotty, 2020) and help researchers build rapport with participants and nurture openness in sharing their lived experiences (Gray, 2021).

LH interviews, typically lasting 1-2 hours, often are unstructured or semi-structured (Shahram *et al.*, 2017). Researchers often ask broad and open-ended questions with minimal direction so narrators can reflect on their lived experiences, identify important life events, direct the line of inquiry, and apply meanings from their life history to answer questions (Jackson & Russell, 2010;

Richardson *et al.*, 2019). These potentials align with my critical paradigm and LHR and may help investigate participants' personal and complex subjectivities. Besides, LH interviews are often combined with visual representation and secondary information to reveal more about the contexts of life histories (Portelli, 2017).

I adopted timelines alongside LH interviews. As an ABR method and graphic elicitation technique, timelines refer to collaboratively constructed visual representations of life events in chronological order, with a visual indication of the importance or meaning of highlighted events (Goodson & Sikes, 2016; Jackson, 2013). Timelines are flexible in participant engagement and interest (who), timing of using timelines in interviews (when), forms (how), content and research topics (what), theoretical frameworks, and epistemological stances (why), allowing diverse data analysis approaches and combination with other methods like interviews and focus groups (Goodson & Sikes, 2016; Kolar *et al.*, 2015). For instance, participants may create timelines themselves or edit researcher-prepared ones (Marshall, 2019).

The most widely adopted format is the classic straight line, with key events marked along with it (McKenna & Todd, 1997). Other styles can incorporate life grids where a matrix of rows and columns is used to signify time and events respectively (Nelson, 2010), and non-linear drawing kind of timelines (Jackson, 2013), like the life tree designed by Saarelainen (2015). The forms can be practically infinite, depending on researchers' stances, research purposes, participant interests, available time and resources etc. (Van der Vaart, 2004), and the forms can influence research findings (Marshall, 2019).

Timeline activities can allow participants to navigate the interview space through reflection and boundary setting around their experiences, such as shifting away from challenging subjects when needed, thus facilitating rapport building and participant engagement towards more collaborative interview processes (Mazzetti, 2014; Rimkeviciene *et al.*, 2016). This aligns with the co-research focus in critical paradigm and LHR and potentially allows participants to direct their sharing of personal experiences and subjectivities. High participant engagement in timeline-facilitated interviews may also generate better quality and more

complete data (Dash & Pattnaik, 2020) and multiple data sources can represent diverse facets of the same experiences in different ways for further analysis (Saarelainen, 2015). Specifically, visual representation of stories can highlight patterns and inconsistencies of the narratives and capture the timings of important events, sense-making processes, and emotional fluctuations (Patterson *et al.*, 2012), contributing to a more complete sense of narrators' lived experiences (Kolar *et al.*, 2015). This aligns with my research's commitment to thick description and may potentially aid in the investigation of UKHE's roles.

Additionally, timelines can help participants recall memories at both thematic and temporal levels (Kolar *et al.*, 2015) and may stimulate individuals to re-make sense of significant events (Goodson & Sikes, 2016). These potentials may benefit participants' recall and (re)construction of Chinese womanhood and significant events during UKHE. Together with narrative interviews, this visualisation allows researchers to examine trajectories of events and experiences and capture changes, particularly in cross-cultural settings (Kolar *et al.*, 2015). Thus, I adopted timeline-facilitated LH interviews as participants' high engagement and comprehensive data align with my methodology and may help investigate participants' complex construction of Chinese womanhood through wider UKHE settings and transnational contexts and the roles of UKHE.

I conducted LH interviews with 30 participants online via Zoom between February and April 2022 mainly due to pandemic-related concerns. The online format facilitated long-distance interviews (Tierney & Lanford, 2020), and allowed choices of video or audio calls, which potentially made some more comfortable sharing their personal experiences and subjectivities. I used interview guides to focus on research questions, meanwhile allowing tailored inquiries of emergent topics. After getting participants' approval to record interviews, I briefly talked about research purposes and ethics. LH interviews included three consecutive parts: clarification of focus groups, introduction of contextual information, and timeline-facilitated interviews. Many participants found this sequence helpful for drawing timelines.

To aid the LH interviews, I designed slides for participants, containing research information, focus group collages for clarification, contexts, and instructions for

drawing timelines. Despite the significance of introducing contexts, I emphasised flexibility throughout to avoid limiting participants' sharing. Although seeing full suspension of judgment in phenomenology as unachievable, I used techniques of Husserl's epoché or Merleau-Ponty's childish naivety (Smith, 2018) as they could help engage participants in defamiliarising and refamiliarising their experiences as Chinese women in transnational contexts. I explained to participants I might ask some seemingly naïve questions as I didn't want to assume my interpretation to be their understanding. This clarification made later interviews natural, and many were very willing to give clarifications when I prompted them. I asked questions to clarify some focus group data with them. Considering social desirability and potentially lacking details in focus group discussion (Geertz, 2008), I showed participants collages of their group and asked if there was anything they didn't fully agree with and anything they wanted to elaborate on. I then introduced shared, group, and individual contexts followed by an explanation of instructions for creating timelines.

Timelines can be seen as life history visualisations of intersections of individual experience and social structure (Rimkeviciene *et al.*, 2016). I introduced contexts in LH interviews to engage participants in critically examining the interplay between their agencies and various contexts. Thus, I invited participants to draw timelines on papers from the start of UKHE to the current time, signifying the development of their constructions of Chinese womanhood on one side of timelines and showing relevant contextualised lived experiences on the other side of timelines, followed by connecting these two sides of timelines to represent their interplay. Throughout the interviews, I emphasised the flexibility of what and how to draw timelines. Specifically, in response to the potential tendency for participants to draw linear timelines (Marshall, 2009), I encouraged non-linear formats and stressed their flexibility and the priority of participants' perceived significant events over precise times. Additionally, I encouraged them to draw and discuss anything not mentioned in the introduced contexts.

Timelines can be applied parallel to or sequential with the interview (Mazzetti, 2014). This research adopts a parallel design, where participants can use timelines as a map to direct researchers through their life histories, encouraging high-

participant engagement during interviews and allowing researchers' support if needed (Mazzetti, 2014). After about 15 minutes of drawing, I invited participants to take a picture of their timelines and share it with me before narrating their timelines of the interaction between their construction of Chinese womanhood and lived experiences through broader UKHE settings. Meanwhile, I actively listened and took notes for follow-up questions. When inquiring for clarifications after participants narrated their timelines, I already had a contextualised understanding of their lived experiences, and the flow and completeness of their storytelling were not interrupted. Most participants willingly talked about their stories for an extended period, but a few preferred following-up questions immediately after they shared individual life events, so I used my judgement, asked, and followed their preferred way of interviewing.

Timelines, which might seem to oversimplify lived experiences, can help make participants' narratives less linear by capturing diverse stories, their development, and contexts (Goodson & Sikes, 2016; Rimkeviciene *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, participants and I used timelines to jump between stories, contexts and topics during initial sharing and follow-up inquiries, thus making the storytelling less linear and more flexible. We also used timelines to shift topics so interviews could focus on research questions, minimise potential emotional distress by redirecting focus from challenging topics, and move the interview along to meet time constraints. Finally, I invited participants to observe timelines and to identify any patterns or stages of their construction of Chinese womanhood through wider UKHE settings before reiterating research ethics and expressing appreciation for their participation. See [Appendix 3](#) for the templates I used to customise the slides for each participant.

### **5.3.3 Pilot study**

I utilised pilot studies as small-scale versions to prepare for the aforementioned main data generation (Malmqvist *et al.*, 2019) and assess online ABR instruments. I used the two-stage research design myself before proposing possible designs to receive feedback from participants. Using convenience sampling, 4 Chinese women from mainland China with HE experiences in France, Malaysia and Hong Kong participated in collage-facilitated focus groups online, and 2 of them

participated in timeline-facilitated interviews in November 2021. The pilot studies were not recorded or analysed. Participants generally enjoyed creating collages and timelines and the design showed great potential to answer research questions.

I made necessary changes based on the participants' feedback and my reflection. The pilot studies highlighted the challenge of balancing research focus with the emergence of unexpected topics within time constraints, prompting me to revise the research design's structure. Initially, both focus groups and interviews were vaguely defined as semi-structured with some predetermined topics and questions. However, the explorative potential of focus groups motivated me to shift them towards a more unstructured format with predetermined research topics only, allowing more group navigation. First-stage research data could then help structure LH interviews. Additionally, I originally planned to use Microsoft Whiteboard for creating collages and timelines but switched to PowerPoint for ease of co-creation of collages and pen and paper for participants' greater privacy and comfort in creating timelines. Considering time constraints in in-depth interviews, I extended LH interviews from 1 to 1.5 hours and provided participation information in advance so participants could prepare before interviews. These changes were approved by the Ethics Committee. I also refined timing, clarity, and language in communication and facilitation.

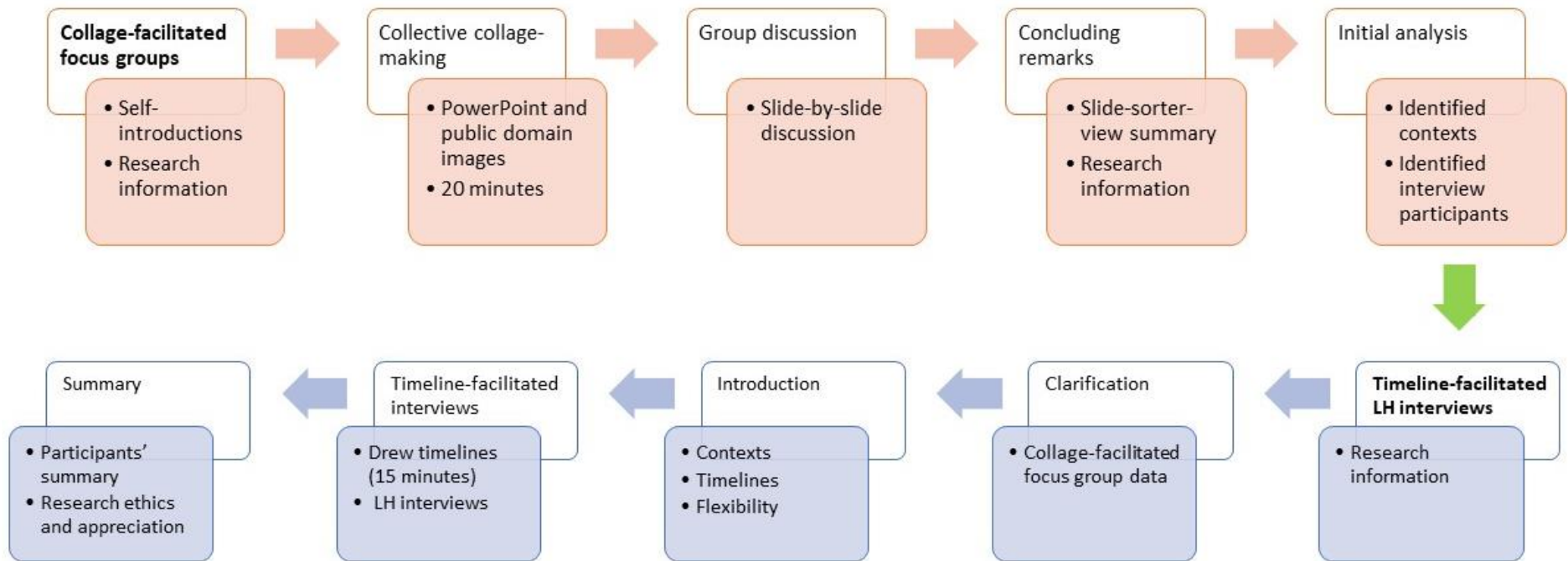
#### **5.3.4 Summary**

I conducted pilot studies before employing purposive sampling to recruit diverse participants for the main data generation. The two-stage data generation, which took place online via Zoom between November 2021 and April 2022, is visualised in Figure 5-7. Initially, 56 Chinese women with UKHE experience participated in the first stage. From this group, I invited 30 participants to engage in the second-stage research.

I facilitated 11 online collage-facilitated, culturally responsive focus groups to examine the construction of Chinese womanhood among 56 participants. Collage-facilitated focus groups, as non-linear and non-linguistic methods of collective sense-making, potentially told different stories from individual interviews. They fostered elicitation, de-familiarisation, re-familiarisation, and conceptualisation

of participants' shared experiences and subjectivity (re)construction. Building upon insights from the first stage, I tailored the second-stage data generation, selecting 30 participants for timeline-facilitated LH interviews. This method, aligning with my methodology, could shed light on participants' complex construction of Chinese womanhood through transnational contexts and the roles of UKHE. The structure of LH interviews drew upon relevant literature and participants' shared and individual-specific contexts from the first-stage data. By integrating these elements into the interviews, I aimed to further engage participants in critically examining the interplay between their agencies and layered contexts and to share some analytical power with them.

Figure 5-7 A visualisation of data generation





## 5.4 Data analysis

While I discussed some initial data analysis that occurred before and during the LH interviews in the previous section, this section elaborates on data analysis. First, I will clarify the analytical frameworks guiding the data analysis, followed by a brief account of transcription and pre-coding preparation. Then, I will detail two rounds of data coding and analysis, before discussing translation and language in this research. Finally, I will conclude the data analysis through a decolonial feminist lens.

### 5.4.1 Dialectical, intersectional, and temporal frameworks

A combination of dialectical, intersectional, and temporal frameworks guided data analysis in this research. Dialectical thinking aims to revolutionise and radically disrupt the status quo by unearthing tensions and dichotomies and investigating frictions for change (Freeman, 2017). This approach helps understand the dichotomous construction of modern and traditional womanhood among Chinese women, as suggested in the literature (e.g., Liu, 2014), and my initial impressions of the dataset. The potential of continuous change in dialects offers possibilities of “non-dialectical freedom” (Freeman, 2017, p. 49). This demands researchers remain open to vulnerability and transformation, learning to sit with and understand tensions rather than hastening to resolve conflicts (Freeman, 2017). This guided my data analysis, explaining tensions while minimising risks of offending and oppressing participants’ narratives.

Facing the challenge of working with and against tensions posed by dialectical thinking (Freeman, 2017), “working the hyphens” (Mitchell *et al.*, 2005, p. 72) shifts the focus from the categories of those who are othered to examining the social struggles and structures of othering. This encourages open dialogue and avoids definitive conclusions, informing my data analysis. Feminists (e.g., hooks, 2014b) caution that categorising oppositional differences in dualistic thinking suggests domination and subordination. Thus, while this research employs dialectical thinking for its congruence with the critical paradigm, data, and analytical needs, it departs from essentialist dualism by using dialectical thinking to anchor dichotomies, which are then challenged by intersectional lenses. In

Section 4.4, I argued that non-hegemonic, process-focused, and systematic intersectional analysis can investigate the (re)production and transformation of injustice over time (Abrams *et al.*, 2020) and across national contexts (Ferguson, 2013). This benefits this study of the construction of Chinese womanhood across time and borders. Specifically, I discussed how the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000), relational autonomy (Mackenzie, 2021) and transnational intersectionality support this systematic and process-focused analysis.

I also found the non-hegemonic, process-oriented, context-focused and systematic underpinnings of intersectional analysis in the focus on time in social sciences. Adam (1995) reconceptualises time to incorporate social time and time in nature (physics and biology), arguing for a multidimensional and interconnected analysis of time. A temporal lens challenges dualistic and hierarchical thinking, embracing “the contextual, temporal and partial nature of knowledge” (Adam, 1994, p. 161) to construct a non-hegemonic, relative, and always contestable episteme through an approach of systematic implication (Freeman, 2022). This approach acknowledges the interconnected nature of society, like time, and focuses on specific aspects of the study, like tempo, explicating the partial process of these focused aspects while implicating the understanding of other interdependent aspects (Adam, 1995; Manathunga *et al.*, 2023).

The focus on time and implication shifts the study of change from de-temporalised before-and-after comparisons to the embeddedness and creation of future and past in the present (Neale *et al.*, 2012). Thus, Adam (2022) calls for a mixture of social analysis, diagnosis and prognosis, and approaches of change in social sciences to contribute to knowledge(s) and actions towards desired changes. This temporal lens aligns with my use of dialectical and intersectional frameworks, resisting dualisms and constructing partial, contextual, dynamic, ongoing, and future-making knowledge(s). For instance, a mixture of social analysis, diagnosis and prognosis may facilitate a vision grounded in, but also transcending, the tensions Chinese women experience.

With a critical, intersectional, and transnational framework, this LHR aims to study participants’ construction of Chinese womanhood within broader UKHE settings and the roles of UKHE. A combination of dialectical, intersectional, and

temporal frameworks can effectively guide the data analysis due to their congruence with research purposes, data, and methodology. Specifically, my research used dialectical thinking to anchor dichotomies, which were then challenged and transcended by systematic and dynamic intersectionality and a lens of temporality. Furthermore, I believe that all thinking is naturally a mixture of bottom-up induction and top-down deduction (Lipscomb, 2012). Thus, I used abduction, primarily inductive thinking that critiques the deductive framework (Lipscomb, 2012), to combine both data and literature to produce new knowledge(s).

#### **5.4.2 Transcription and pre-coding preparation**

Transcription decisions depend on research paradigms, purposes, and analytical goals, influencing the knowledge produced (Lapadat, 2000). Aligned with the critical paradigm, my research views transcription as interpretive, iterative, and political (Seibert, 2022). Transcription can range from naturalism, focusing on detailed speech description, to de-naturalism, emphasising written language features (Oliver *et al.*, 2005). My transcription, while prioritising content, also captured distinct features of oral language, like pauses, as part of participants' meaning-making process. Transcription can capture diverse data layers, and the researcher's analytical purposes influence which layers to focus on (Bucholtz, 2007). For instance, considering focus-group interaction as part of participants' subjectivity construction, I detailed the dynamics of turn-taking. Images and written language can be combined in transcription, and various transcription rounds can focus on different data layers (Bucholtz, 2007). Thus, I performed three transcription rounds of all recordings after they were auto-transcribed by online software. In the first round, I used audio recordings to revise auto-generated transcripts and add verbal and nonverbal data layers as well as collages and timelines. The second round involved refining consistent conventions and adding contextual and embodied layers from video recordings. The third round applied de-identifiers and familiarised me with the data.

The generated data includes 11 focus group transcripts with 38 collages, 30 interview transcripts with 29 timelines, and reflexivity data from 41 immediate

reflection sessions and my self-piloted collage and timeline<sup>23</sup>. Given the data types, research questions, theoretical framework, and methodological and analytical needs (Saldaña, 2016), I used a combination of coding methods to address the research's various needs, paying close attention to the compatibility and evolving characteristics of the chosen methods. Analytical memo writing during (re)coding can help researchers better understand the complexity, specificity, and processes of participants' lived experiences (Saldaña, 2016). Thus, I wrote extensive memos throughout the data analysis.

I chose NVivo as the primary tool for coding and analysing data because it effectively manages the large and varied dataset of my research. NVivo functions, like attributes, cases, queries, framework matrices, memos, and see-also links, assisted in data management and analysis. Inspired by phenomenological analysis, I familiarised myself with the data dialogically by reading individual participants' data as a whole and horizontalising their experiences, while analytically probing deeper with preliminary jottings and highlighting (Marshall, 2009). Following the initial familiarisation, my first-round coding aimed at thoroughness to ensure confidence in the second-round coding, which became more analytical.

### **5.4.3 First-round coding and analysis**

Similar to a reversed narrative data analysis (Gee, 2015), I approached visual data by writing memos before coding them, as this comprehensive approach helps in understanding visual data as a contextualised whole (Saldaña, 2016). Collage data comprise texts and images. For each image, I wrote analytical memos using three-layer analysis and strategic questions from the literature. The three-layer analysis included examining the "actual appearance (colour, position and so on), their symbolic placement and notion of meaning beyond the visual" (Culshaw, 2019, p. 275). Strategic questions considered the initial, holistic and detailed impressions of images, creators' personalities and values, aesthetic accomplishment (Saldaña, 2016), sociocultural contexts, obvious and alternative readings of images (Freeman & Mathison, 2009), and (in)visible emotional tone (Culshaw, 2019). Spencer (2010) recommends an abductive balance of "thick description" to allow

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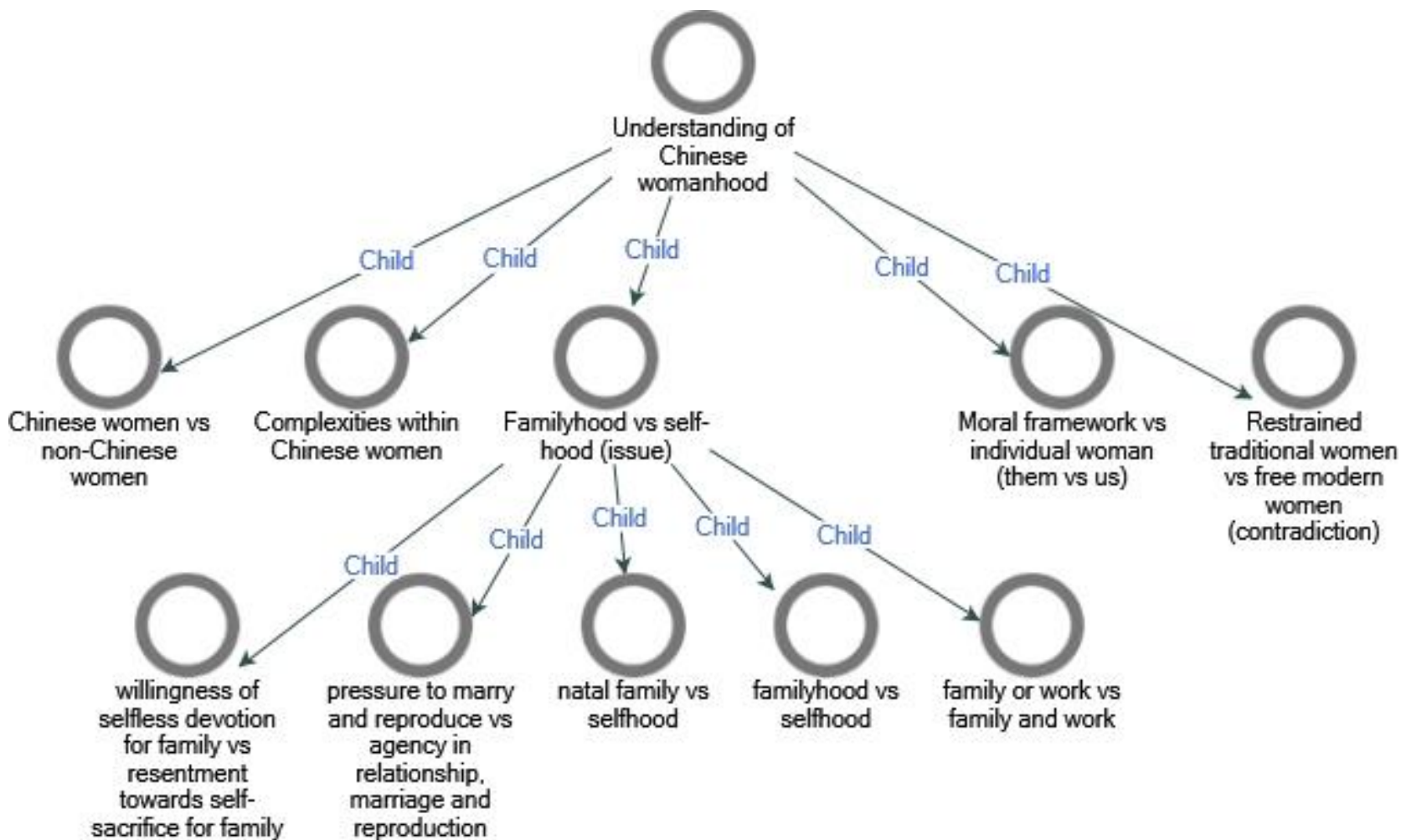
<sup>23</sup> Section 5.5.3 elaborates on reflexivity in this research.

visual data's agency and sociological readings, so I used dialectical thinking and intersectionality to assist in analysing collage. Finally, inspired by theming the data (Saldaña, 2016), I captioned images to capture their essence, starting with "Chinese womanhood means...". I trusted my "intuitive, holistic impressions" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 65), while considering what creators wanted to convey and viewing their collages as processes (Clark, 2010). For example, when captioning participants' images, I referred to their concluding remarks in transcripts.

Next, I mainly used versus coding to analyse data from collage-facilitated focus groups. Versus coding, an affective coding method that examines subjective human experiences, is often used to identify imbalanced power relations in dichotomies by identifying moieties in opposition to each other in the forms of X VS Y codes (Saldaña, 2016). I considered it suitable because it's widely used in critical, gender, and cross-cultural studies (Handwerker, 2015), aligns with dialectical thinking to anchor dichotomies, and the first-stage data suggested strong conflicts. I particularly appreciate versus coding's ability to "make evident the power issues at hand as humans often perceive them - as binaries or dichotomies" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 160), so it functions as analytical heuristics in this research.

Sitting with tensions was one of my commitments in dialectical thinking, so I identified dichotomies to prioritise understanding their dichotomous forms and analysing the power relations behind them over examining conflict resolutions. This led to a systematic, dynamic, and rich understanding of how and why people perceived these dichotomies. Consistent with versus coding, analytical memo writing was inspired by dilemma analysis, stating conflicts using "on the one hand" and "on the other hand" (Wolcott *et al.*, 1977), force field analysis examining conflicts between the status quo and change (Fox *et al.*, 2007), and categorising codes into stakeholders, perceptions/actions, or issues (Saldaña, 2016). I visualised part of the versus codes in Figure 5-8.

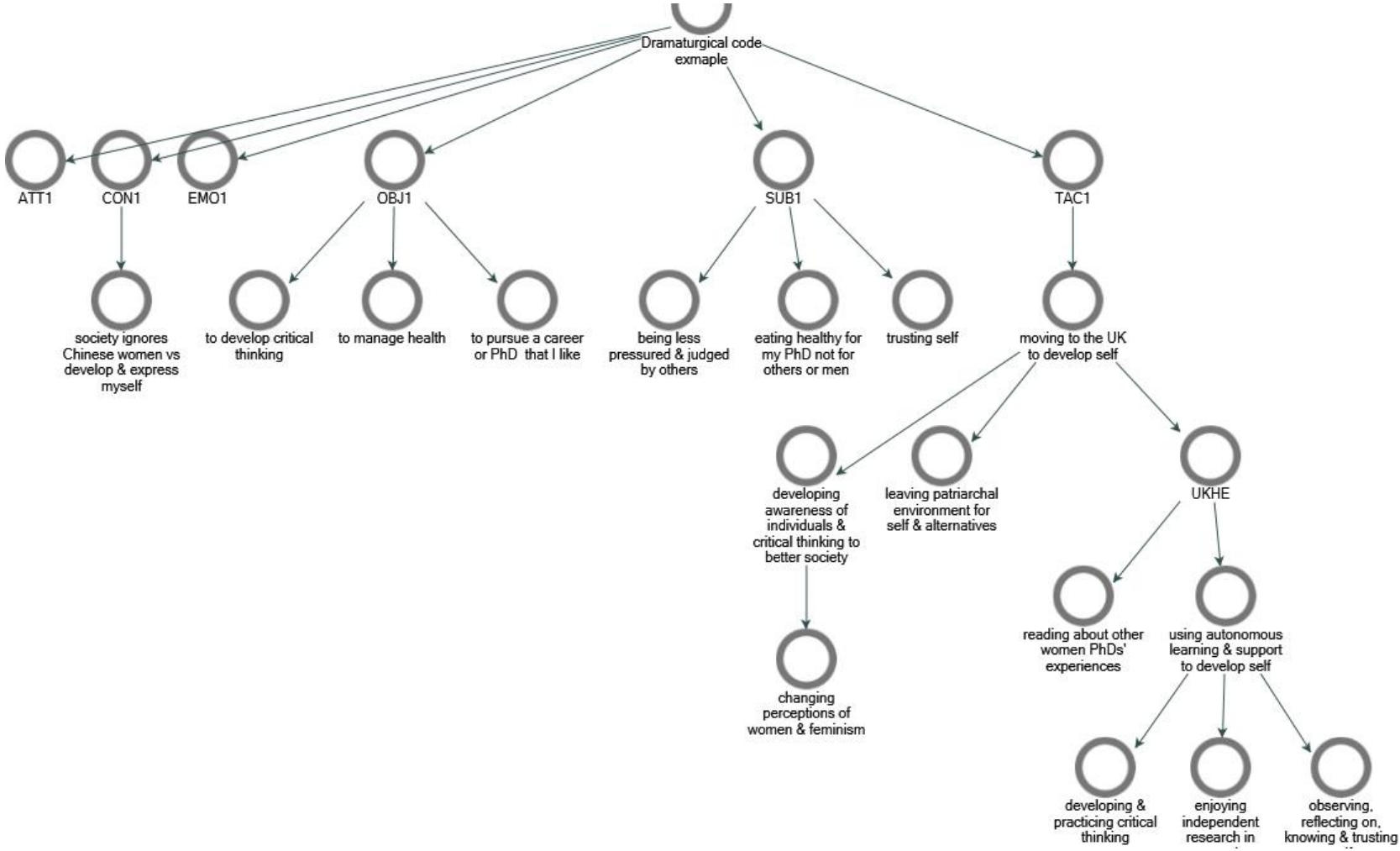
Figure 5-8 An example of versus codes



Following similar principles as collage, timeline analysis included writing descriptions and interpretation of timeline shapes and trajectories (Söderström, 2020) and was intermingled with dramaturgical coding of interview transcripts. Dramaturgical coding approaches narratives as a social drama, utilising vocabularies and principles of character portrayal, scriptwriting, and performance evaluation to analyse qualitative data (Saldaña, 2016). Codes were often classified into seven types: participants' aims, super-objectives, conflicts preventing aims, participants' tactics/strategies to manage conflicts, their attitudes, emotions, and subtext (Saldaña, 2016). I found dramaturgical coding suitable as it provides a comprehensive account of internal and external experiences and actions in case studies (Saldaña, 2016), assisting in understanding participants' complex and dynamic subjectivity construction in timeline-facilitated interviews. Figure 5-9 represents part of the dramaturgical codes from one interview transcript.

After dramaturgical coding, I followed the suggested analysis (Saldaña, 2016) in writing a story for each interview participant, focusing on how they perceive, feel about, and manage conflicts. This helped in understanding participants' convoluted and dynamic construction of subjectivities across time and borders and enriched previous versus coding and analysis. Its focus on conflict continued my examination of opposing power structures in versus coding, while its focus on individual objectives, inner worlds and tactics highlighted individual agency and potentially challenged the dichotomised power relations. Finally, drawing on participants' explanation of timelines, I wrote through-lines to capture "the essence and essentials of a participant's journey and change (if any) through time" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 256).

Figure 5-9 An example of dramaturgical codes





In summary, after writing memos, I primarily used versus coding to analyse collage-facilitated focus group data, followed by dramaturgical coding for timeline-facilitated interview data. Versus coding highlighted power dichotomies, while dramaturgical coding returned individual agency to their experienced conflicts within power dichotomies. I was committed to examining, questioning, and challenging identified dichotomies as dialectical thinking, intersectionality, and the principle of being grounded in and transcending data guided the analysis. Additionally, I coded all memos and data into cases for individual participants with attribute codes to better manage data, provide context, and explore potential interrelationships and longitudinal trends.

#### **5.4.4 Second-round coding and analysis**

The second-round coding and analysis focus on time, including chronological, life history and temporal analyses. For chronological coding, I categorised data and memos related to collage-facilitated focus groups into three chronological codes: before, during, and after UKHE, aligning with the structure of focus group discussions. Then, I ran a matrix query<sup>24</sup> in NVivo to see the intersections between versus codes and chronological codes. While this offered a dialectic overview of potential changes, participants' intricate subjectivity construction challenged the clear-cut linear time frame of before, during, and after UKHE. Therefore, I conducted a life history analysis of interview participants' data to better understand these complexities.

Saldaña (2003) designs a matrix (Figure 5-10) as analytical heuristics to help longitudinal and life history researchers identify, understand, and analyse changes across time in the dataset. I made significant changes to the original matrix due to its many incompatibilities with this research after trials, revisions, consultations, and reflections. The updated tool (Figure 5-11), moving away from categorical and thematic cross-case comparisons, focuses on understanding contextualised individual processes with analytical frameworks. Building on the first-round analysis, I used this tool to analyse all data and memos related to 30 interview participants, resulting in 30 life history mini-case profiles. I only briefly

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<sup>24</sup> Matrix queries allow researchers to cross-tabulate and compare different criteria within their coded data to explore patterns, relationships, and intersections.

discussed life history analyses as they were rarely used in representing research findings in this thesis. I will explain this decision in research quality (see p.120).

I adopted temporal analysis to highlight the complexity of time (Adam, 2008), concretise my temporal lens, enrich intersectionality and challenge dualisms. Drawing on the Timescape initiative (Adam, 2022), I shifted the conceptualisation of change from the before-during-after comparisons to a processual understanding via multifaceted and multidimensional analysis of time(s). First, my research focuses on biographical time, referring to individual lifetimes, generational time, examining relationships of temporal needs across generations, and historical time, contextualising individual and generational lifetimes in external events. My multifaceted focus of time “seeks to understand micro-processes of social change in their biographical, familial and historical contexts” (Adam, 2008, p. 7).

I also adopted the multidimensional analysis of the mutually implicating elements of time (Adam, 2008). Specifically, I mainly analysed timing, tempo, temporal modalities, and time frame, with implications for other elements such as duration and sequence. For example, timing, which examines the conceptualisation of good and bad timing, synchronisation, and coordination in social contexts (Adam, 1995), seems particularly pertinent to participants’ narrated life histories. Tempo, focusing on the speed and pace of change, seems very relevant due to the “speed fetish” (Adam, 2004) in Chinese contexts (Xu, 2021). Temporal modalities, examining the past, present and future in time (Adam, 1995), can highlight participants’ non-linear changes. After re-reading interview participants’ data with this temporal lens, I wrote a temporal analysis in their individual life history profiles. Analysis of historical time lends itself to cross-case analysis without de-contextualising and de-temporalising data. So, I coded all data into shared historical time developed from data and contexts provided in interviews, before running matrix queries and framework matrices<sup>25</sup> in NVivo to examine their subjectivity construction in historical time and the roles of UKHE.

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<sup>25</sup> Framework matrices organise data into a grid format, where rows typically represent cases, columns represent themes, and cells contain summarised data, allowing for systematic comparison and interpretation.

Figure 5-10 Longitudinal qualitative data summary matrix (Saldaña, 2016, p. 261)

LONGITUDINAL QUALITATIVE DATA SUMMARY MATRIX						
DATA TIME POOL/POND: FROM ___ / ___ / ___ THROUGH ___ / ___ / ___						
STUDY: _____						
RESEARCHER(S): _____						
(when possible or if relevant, note specific days, dates, times, periods, etc. below; use appropriate DYNAMIC descriptors)						
INCREASE/ EMERGE	CUMULATIVE	SURGE/EPIPH/ TURN POINT	DECREASE/ CEASE	CONSTANT/ CONSISTENT	IDIOSYN- CRATIC	MISSING
DIFFERENCES ABOVE FROM PREVIOUS DATA SUMMARIES						
CONTEXTUAL/INTERVENING CONDITIONS INFLUENCING/AFFECTING CHANGES ABOVE						
INTERRELATIONSHIPS	CHANGES THAT OPPOSE/ HARMONIZE WITH HUMAN DEV/SOCIAL PROCESSES			PARTIC/CONCEPT RHYTHMS (phases, stages, cycles, etc. in progress)		
PRELIMINARY ASSERTIONS AS DATA ANALYSIS PROGRESSES (refer to previous matrices)						
						THROUGH-LINE (in progress)

Figure 5-11 Updated life history analysis tool

<b>Life history analysis</b> Participant code:    Time in the UK:	
Background:	
<b>Trajectories</b>	
Rhythms and preliminary assertions: beginning, middle, end	
Intersectionality: Domains of power: Dynamic relations with neoliberalism-patriarchy:	Through-line: Temporal through-line:

#### 5.4.5 Translation and language

I conducted the translation myself from Mandarin Chinese (most research data) to English due to the alignment of research topics and my linguistic and cultural competencies. Translation is an interpretive process where meanings are constructed in both languages mediated by power relations, particularly in cross-cultural research (Wong & Poon, 2010). Translators' linguistic and cultural competencies affect translation (Seibert, 2022), especially for my research where language constructs subjectivities in transnational contexts. As a native Chinese speaker studying at a UKHEI, my knowledge of Chinese women's subjectivities from both Chinese and English literature helped me critically examine common translations. For instance, the complexity of translating *gender* into Chinese (Spakowski, 2011) problematises the common translation between *Xingbié* and gender, so I adopted a case-by-case and contextual approach when translating what participants meant by *Xingbié*. Additionally, the politics of translation emphasises understanding peoples' cultures and ways of being via their first languages, challenging the notion of English as the benchmark for meaning (Seibert, 2022). Therefore, I postponed translating data from Chinese to English until quoting them in representing findings, sometimes keeping the Chinese with English translations in footnotes.

My choices of languages in data analysis developed alongside the analysing process. Originally, I decided to use Chinese for more descriptive writing, like memos of collage and timelines, to be closer to participants' data and use English for more analytical writing, like codes and analytical memos, to prepare for writing the thesis in English. For example, after writing memos for timelines in Chinese, I wrote life history analyses in English while referring to the Chinese memos. This sequence potentially grounded my analysis in the original language and ways of knowing before further conceptualisations. However, various complexities during my analysis challenged this differentiation. For instance, while I initially assumed that some writing could be more descriptive and some more analytical, in practice, I found it difficult to identify a clear-cut point between description and analysis. I later firmly believed that writing itself is inherently value-laden, interpretive, and analytical. Additionally, like some

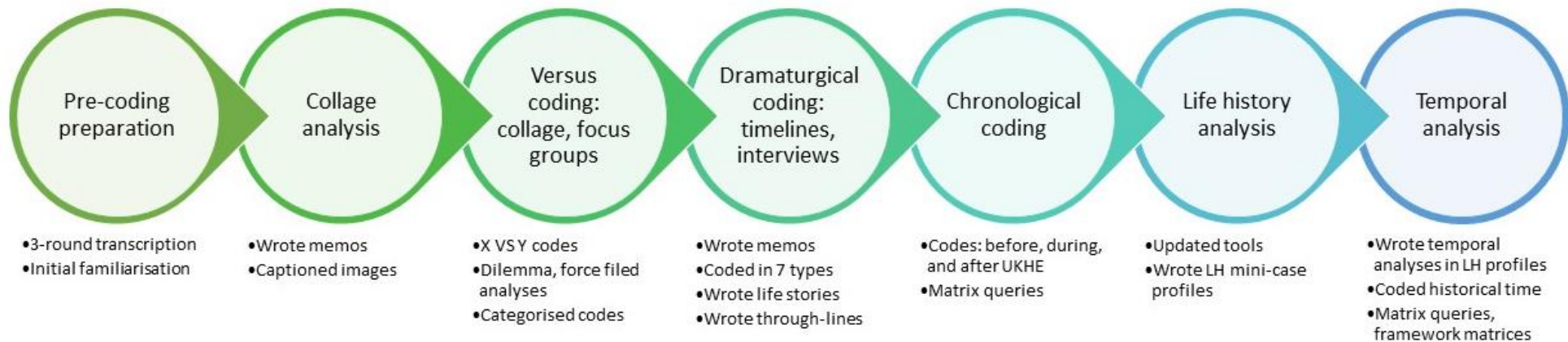
participants, sometimes I found it easy to use one language to express certain ideas but almost impossible to find an equivalence in another.

These developing and complex characteristics of language in data analysis drove me to allow more flexibility from the original plan. For example, while most memos of visual data are in Chinese and most memos of transcripts and codes are in English, some codes are in Chinese or both languages when I wasn't sure about the desirable translation. Eventually, I shifted my focus away from trying to unify languages towards understanding the implication of participants' language choices in their subjectivity construction and the impact of my language choice in the analysis. This developing, complex and flexible praxis of languages in data analysis aligns with my critical research paradigm and my recognition of this interactive research conducted in time.

#### **5.4.6 Summary**

Through a decolonial feminist lens, Da Silva (2016) advocates for de-categorisation and re-entanglement in constructing resistant knowledge(s) (see p.66). My research engaged in a decolonial process of revealing and countering the violence of categorical thinking by using dialectics, intersectionality, and temporality to guide the analysis. Dialectics revealed and interrogated dichotomous and hierarchical categorisation; intersectionality re-entangled categories and categorisation; temporality de-categorised and imagined by challenging "linear temporality and spatial separation" (Da Silva, 2016, p. 64). Figure 5-12 visualises the data analysis process. Following transcription and initial familiarisation, my first-round coding aimed at thoroughness to ensure confidence in the second-round coding, which became more analytical. In the first round, I primarily used versus coding to analyse all transcripts and memos from collage-facilitated focus groups, followed by dramaturgical coding for transcripts and memos from timeline-facilitated interviews. The second-round coding and analysis focus on time, using chronological, life history and temporal analyses to further study participants' complex subjectivity construction across time and borders. To further connect these analyses, I coded the timeline-facilitated interview data into versus and chronological codes and ran another matrix query in NVivo.

Figure 5-12 A visualisation of data analysis



## 5.5 Research quality

Validity, as a positivist research criterion about “a relation of correspondence between thought and its object” (Lather, 1993, p. 676), assumes a single, knowable, generalisable, and verifiable truth. This perspective is incongruent with my research’s exploration of multiple truths situated in diverse contexts of time and space (Adam, 1994) and risks homogenising Chinese womanhood. In contrast, Tracy (2010) proposes a model of excellent qualitative research with eight criteria as goals and various practices as means. This distinction allows emerging researchers like myself to learn while promoting flexibility, diversity, and innovation in qualitative research. Therefore, drawing on Tracy’s (2010) criteria and other literature, this section discusses the quality of my research, including rich rigour, credibility, ethics, sincerity, resonance, coherence, and contributions. The final subsection includes a summary of the methodology and an introduction to the findings and discussion.

### 5.5.1 Rich rigour and credibility

A rich complexity of theoretical concepts, data, participants, and contexts equips qualitative researchers to see the multi-faceted and intricate truths (Mays & Pope, 2020). Thus, I drew on transnational intersectionality in my critical research paradigm, adopted dialectics, intersectionality, and temporality in data analysis, and used various methods for a two-stage research process with 56 participants purposefully recruited for diversity. Rigour, related to the perceived appropriateness and reasonableness of research, demands that researchers demonstrate thoroughness by dedicating the necessary “time, effort, care” to go beyond simple solutions (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). I committed to finding and inventing a suitable research design throughout this study. For instance, I took time to learn, experiment and reflect on different epistemologies until I constructed a theoretical framework that could guide the research to best answer the questions. I also detailed and visualised the research process and tools to evidence the research’s rigour.

Credibility, which involves “the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings” (Tracy, 2010, p. 842), can be practised through thick



description, crystallisation, multiple voices, dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and partiality (Richardson, 2003). Thick description encourages researchers to show the complexity of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), though word count limits and degree requirements restrained my representation, compelling me to decide which parts to show and tell. Acknowledging my simplification of the rich complexities of data, I chose to *show* participants' complex construction of Chinese womanhood using pictures and quotes and *tell* about the power potentially affecting their construction.

Crystallisation discusses findings from multiple data generation methods and theoretical concepts, not to test the validity, but to encourage complex and reflexive understandings of data (Mays & Pope, 2020). I demonstrated this by adopting different frameworks and methods in research design and using both collage pictures and excerpts in representation. Similarly, multiple voices encourage participants' involvement in data analysis through practices like member reflections, providing opportunities for further elaboration rather than testing validity (Tracy, 2010). In the second stage of data generation, I introduced participants to relevant contexts from literature and initial analysis of first-stage data, aiming to share analytical power with them. Dependability primarily depends on the researcher being responsive to changes during research (Curtis & Curtis, 2011). For instance, while mainly using versus coding to code first-stage data in the first round of analysis, I occasionally employed other techniques to best serve the data, such as employing *in vivo* code to highlight participants' words (Saldaña, 2016). I also detailed my responses to research changes throughout this thesis and will explain partiality in sincerity.

### **5.5.2 Ethics**

A rights-based framework, which prioritises participants' dignity and rights (Mayne *et al.*, 2018), directs my ethical considerations throughout this research, "including procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Procedural ethics involve actions deemed universally essential by institutions, while situational ethics arise from the careful evaluation of specific situations (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). My practices of informed consent, no harm and privacy were informed by both. Before starting data generation, an ethics

application gained approval from the University of Glasgow's College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. To provide adequate information for participants to make informed decisions about research participation (Bell *et al.*, 2022), I used various methods to communicate research information. This included sending out the Plain Language Statement, Consent Form, and Privacy Notice in both languages, encouraging them to ask questions, and offering information sessions. Both participants and I signed, dated, and kept a copy of the consent form.

Considering procedural and situational ethics, I reminded participants of their rights throughout data generation, such as completely voluntary participation and withdrawal at any time, and sought their consent before, during and after each data generation session in written and verbal formats. Additionally, complex ethical issues can emerge in the co-research process (Ackerly & True, 2008), so researchers should prioritise participants' well-being over publishing their life histories (Moriña, 2020). In this research, one participant had concerns about potential impacts on herself after voicing some beliefs, so I deleted them from the transcript to avoid harm. Besides, confidentiality and data handling are crucial ethical considerations for protecting participants' privacy (Lanford *et al.*, 2019). I informed participants about data handling procedures and the potential limitations of guaranteeing full confidentiality due to the sample size. I securely encrypted and stored all data on Office 365 behind password-protected logins. I de-identified research data by assigning participants pseudonyms, stored personal data separately and securely and will destroy them at the project's end.

Relational ethics centres on interpersonal relationships and care to analyse power relations and research ethically (Brannelly & Boulton, 2017). Considering my online data generation during a global crisis, I researched available support services before data generation, so I could refer participants when needed. When designing the research, I tried to minimise possible causes of distress, like adopting public domain pictures to protect participants' privacy. During data generation, I used various strategies to protect participants' well-being, incorporating using timelines to change topics and reduce potential distress, finishing on a positive note, and following participants' preferences. Exit ethics

extend beyond data generation to include ethics about how researchers leave the field and disseminate their findings (Tracy, 2010). Publishing individual timelines might render participants identifiable (Adriansen, 2012), and I became concerned about the impacts of publishing life histories with thick descriptions. I struggled with the representation of life histories, eventually deciding not to publish participants' timelines or life histories in this thesis to protect their privacy.

### **5.5.3 Sincerity and resonance**

Sincerity involves researchers being open and truthful about their biases, objectives, and imperfections, and how these factors affect their research methods, strengths, and weaknesses (Tracy, 2010). Self-reflexivity and transparency are the primary means to achieving sincerity (Tracy, 2010). Reflexivity involves sensitivity to the roles of researchers and research processes in knowledge production, such as data generation, analysis, and representation (Sultana, 2007). Transparency involves honesty about research's challenges and unexpected changes over time (Tracy, 2010). This critical research believes in partial, situated, and temporal knowledge(s), so below I will engage in an honest discussion about reflexivity, while also acknowledging its limits.

I adopted systematic reflexivity, such as research diaries, self-piloted collages and timelines, research tips, immediate reflexive sessions, contextual secondary data, and theories in data analysis to explicate the potential impacts of my presumptions and highlight the imbalanced power. For instance, I developed facilitating tips to read before each data generation session to better actively listen, engage/facilitate, and understand participants' sharing. I engaged in a reflexive session after each data generation session to better understand the impact of my positionality, power relations and ethical judgments on data generation. The reflexive diary kept feeding back to and refining the focus group and interview guides and tips as an iterative process. Conscious of the imbalanced researcher-participant power in data analysis (Smith, 1989), I continued practising this reflexivity in later memo writing to understand how my lived experiences affected my interpretation of data.

Before explicating my biases and their impacts, I will discuss my positionality as a general background. Positionality means researchers' positioning relative to research institutions, communities and participants, incorporating the extent of researchers' similarity to participants regarding various demographic characteristics (Rowe, 2014). As a Chinese woman studying and living in the UK, my experiences of gender reconstruction motivated me to inquire whether and how Chinese women diaspora experience similar changes. Therefore, before data generation, I thought I would share with participants some similarities, like race/ethnicity, nationality, sex/gender, UKHE experiences, and language. To show, rather than tell, such positionality, I included an embroidered piece I made for a quilt (Figure 5-13) with some explanations (Figure 5-14). I created both in my second year of PhD, and the quilt has been standing on my desk ever since.

Figure 5-13 An embroidered piece

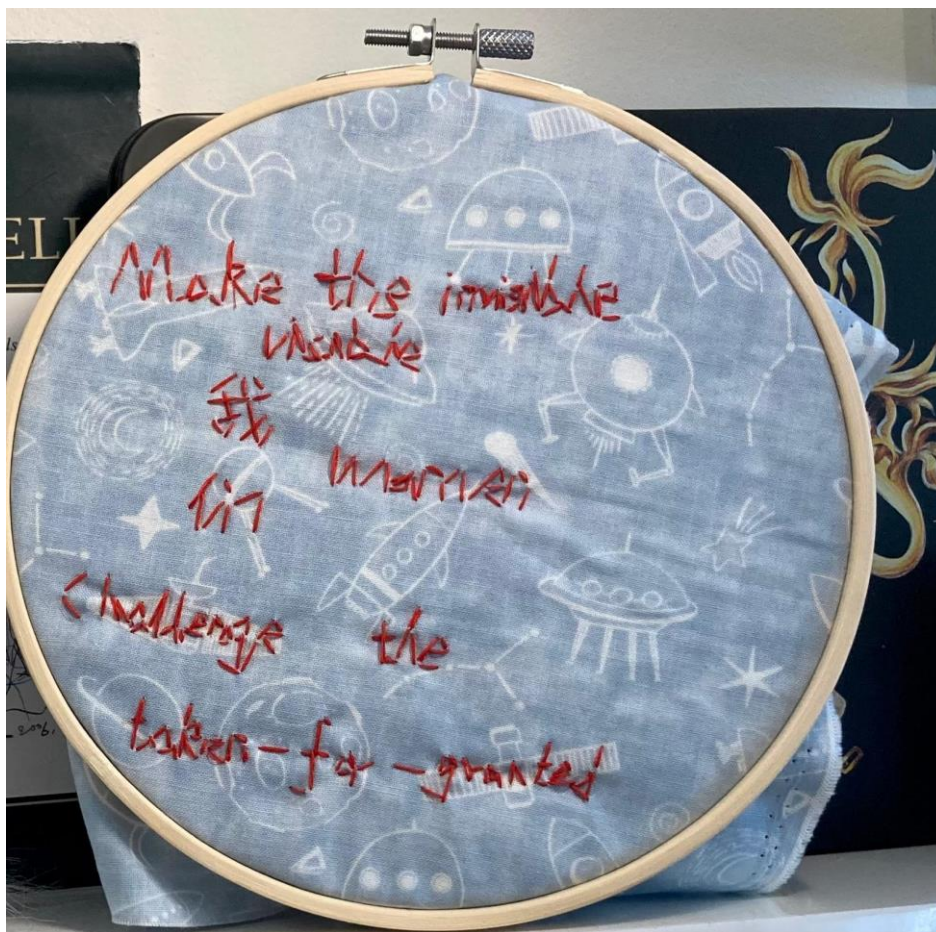


Figure 5-14 An explanation of the embroidered piece

**Please write here the quote or words you've chosen for your quilt square:**

Make the invisible visible

Challenge the taken-for-granted

我们 Women

**Please use this space to tell us about this quote or words, and why you chose it: (200 words)**

*Where do they come from? Do you know the origin of these words – when were they said, by whom, and where? Do you have a reference for these words? Why did you choose this quote or words for you quilt square?*

*It's just a couple of words I have been thinking about recently when I learn, research and teach.*

*The Chinese characters 我们 means us/we and their Pinyin (the official romanization system) is coincidentally women, yes, the exact English spelling of human female adult. So, for me, us women is a feminist perspective that we collectively fight for social justice for all. This includes anyone who believes in a non-hierarchical world and work against oppressions, barriers and hierarchies, not just women.*

*Born and bred in China, five years ago, I came to the UK to find alternatives for my life path and for my passion in education, and feminism has been lifechanging for how I envisage both education and my personal life. Rooted in and beyond women's rights, feminist scholarship and movements have taught me to make the invisible visible and challenge the taken-for-granted in my research in internationalization of HE and intersectionality, my teaching of criticality and my daily actions and interactions.*

During data generation, I increasingly realised the diverse, complex, contradictory, and dynamic characteristics of my positionality in relation to participants and this research. Because of our differences, I strived to place myself in a position to listen, understand and engage with participants' experiences and beliefs. This positionality helped us have open discussions and form new understanding, although I felt secondary emotional distress from engaging with participants' experiences. These changing positionalities impact knowledge construction, so it's important to investigate the shift from an "I" to "an eye that both inscribes and interrupts normalizing power/knowledge" (Lather, 1993, p. 678). My insider position, while providing me with easy access to participants,

cultural sensitivity in discourses and foundations for rapport-building, may lead to my presumptions about this group, acceptance of the very categorisation and unawareness of other perspectives.

Before first-stage data generation, I collected participants' relevant demographic information, which didn't include their ethnicities<sup>26</sup>, social classes, or sexualities. I didn't collect data about their ethnicity as I was unaware of its potential significance for participants' construction of Chinese womanhood. I chose not to collect demographic data on social classes and sexualities in advance because previous research on Chinese international students in Western HE typically didn't include this information, I aimed to minimise participant discomfort with potentially sensitive questions, and I was uncertain about categorising class due to its complexity in the PRC (Guo, 2009). Social classes and sexualities were discussed in focus groups and elaborated on in LH interviews, while ethnicity was not mentioned.

My experiences, identities, and privileges affected the data collected/generated and the knowledge produced in this research. My pansexuality and family background<sup>27</sup> sensitised me to the workings of sexuality and class, but my Han ethnicity blinded me to my complicity in the potential homogenisation and marginalisation of Chinese ethnic-minority women. My approach to class and sexuality, like that of gender/sex, indicated my cultural sensitivity and my early uncertainties about static categories. Thus, below I will use my reflexivity of categorisation, representation, and time to further exemplify my impacts on knowledge production.

This research is constrained by the research questions posed, the research methodology designed, and the representations of findings chosen, among others. I revised the research questions alongside the development of the research, myself, academia, and wider society. At the beginning of this PhD, I asked: what

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<sup>26</sup> There are 56 officially recognised ethnicities in China, with the Han Chinese ethnic group being the majority.

<sup>27</sup> My parents migrated from rural areas to a provincial city in China, where they worked as migrant workers. I grew up there and, as the first generation in my family to attend university, completing my bachelor's degree through self-study and passing the Self-Taught Higher Education Examinations in China.

are Chinese women's understandings of womanhood before, during, and after UKHE? However, this question assumes a linear construction that I currently cannot agree with, particularly in LHR. Participants showed me that memory is messy and inspired me to unlearn and relearn about time. I later incorporated this new understanding of time, such as the past-present-future co-existence (Adam, 2022), in rephrasing questions and analysing data. Initially, I was inspired by intersectionality and hoped to find differences in comparisons. Therefore, I also asked: what are Chinese women's understandings of non-Chinese womanhood during UKHE?

While I limited this inquiry to the time during UKHE to reduce potential stereotypes, the act of categorisation in this inquiry, especially in dichotomy, is questionable. For example, I structured the collage-facilitated focus groups into these parts: Chinese womanhood before UKHE, Chinese womanhood during UKHE, non-Chinese womanhood during UKHE, and Chinese womanhood after UKHE. My structure contributed to some participants' sometimes essentialist and hierarchical comparisons between these two groups. Later, data generation made me very uncomfortable with the essentialist and binary categorisation and potential violence via representation in my earlier inquiry. So, I changed the phrasing from Chinese women to participants in research questions, delved deeper into the complexities in the data, and prioritised understanding the power relations behind participants' sometimes dichotomous and hierarchal construction between Chinese womanhood and non-Chinese womanhood. An intersectional analysis of identity markers and versus coding are inclined to highlight (often binary) categories, so to minimise the damage done by categorisation and representation, I later focused on using intersectionality to analyse power relations behind the making of these categories (Cho *et al.*, 2013; Choo & Ferree, 2010) and used a more dynamic understanding of dialectical thinking (Freeman, 2017) to guide versus coding. These efforts informed my formulation of arguments in the next chapter.

My knowledge of time and attitudes to categorisation and representation underwent another significant change in the second-round data analysis, where I used life history analysis to unpack all interview participants' data and wrote

detailed vignettes for each of their stories. This process persuaded me to forego any desire to write life histories across participants. Their individually different lives with diverse layers of contexts, and their strong desire to imagine and build alternative life paths forbade me to make and represent their life stories within static boundaries. To do them justice, these life histories need to be represented in creative, free, and revolutionary ways, which would be largely restrained by the medium of a PhD thesis, my status, and experiences. Thus, while LHR guided my research design, my practices of LH analysis persuaded me not to represent participants' life histories in this thesis.

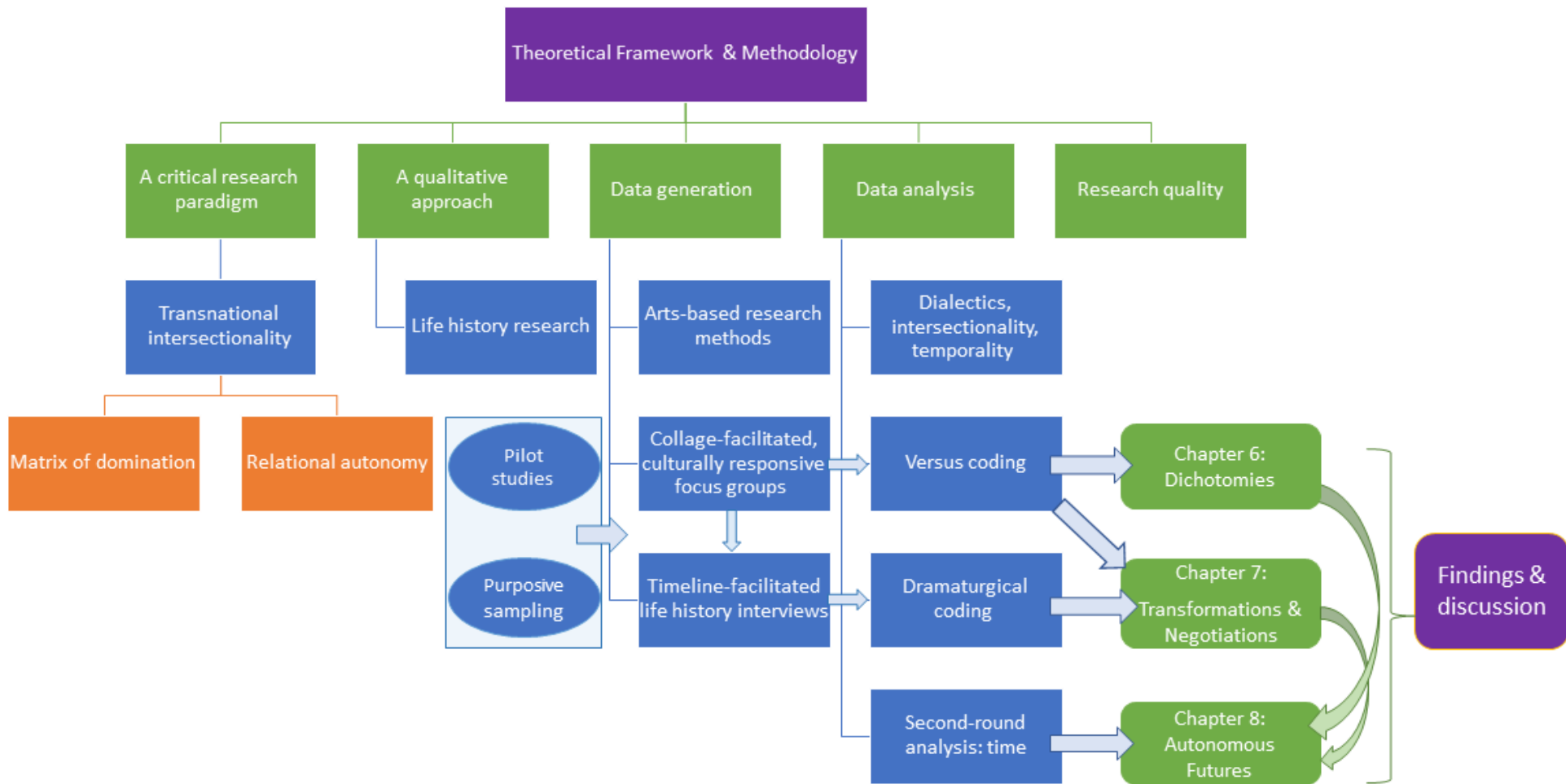
This reflexivity in representation practices signifies the “crisis of representation,” shifting the focus from depicting things as they are to illustrating the interconnectedness of social relations (Lather, 1993). Qualitative researchers often pursue resonance, the capacity to meaningfully resonate with and impact audiences, not to generalise across cases but within them (Tracy, 2010), which involves situating small instances within a larger context. Therefore, intersectional analysis of power relations in the making of categories, together with some detailed reading of individual life episodes, formed my representation of findings. Having negotiated representation and anonymity of participants' life histories, I verbally shared one LH vignette (with disguised information on place and people) in two small group discussions with postgraduate peers. Inspired by Richardson's creative plays at research conferences (2003), I used zines and tried some theatrical techniques in group sharing. Some audiences experienced emotional resonance, some gained new understanding, and some encouraged me to continue to tell these stories. So, moving forward, I wish to join communities to explore creative and ethical ways to represent these life histories.

#### **5.5.4 Coherence and contributions**

Research coherence focuses on the interrelationship between the literature review, research questions, methodology, and findings (Tracy, 2010). With the assistance of a visualisation (Figure 5-15), this section discusses the consistency and potential contributions of my research.



Figure 5-15 A visualisation of theoretical framework, methodology, findings, and discussion



I will first restate the research questions and methodology to show the consistency between them and within the methodology. Conducting research with Chinese women students and graduates of UKHE, I ask these two research questions: In what ways did participants construct Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings and wider transnational intersectional contexts (Research Question 1)? What is the role of UKHE in participants' construction of Chinese womanhood (Research Question 2)?

My research employs transnational intersectionality, drawing on the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000), relational autonomy (Mackenzie, 2021) and temporality (Adam, 1994, 1995, 2022) to examine the transnationality of intersectional power relations and women's agencies across time and space for decolonial knowledge-building. Within a qualitative approach, I adopted LHR and ABR methods, as they align with the research paradigm, benefit the (re)construction of Chinese womanhood, and highlight UKHE's roles. Specifically, collage-facilitated, culturally responsive focus groups fostered elicitation, de-familiarisation, re-familiarisation, and conceptualisation of participants' shared experiences and subjectivities. Building upon this, timeline-facilitated LH interviews further contributed to addressing both research questions. I integrated literature and first-stage data into second-stage data generation to share some analytical power with participants. Data analysis was guided by dialectics, intersectionality, and temporality to reveal and counter the violence of categorical thinking. In the first-round coding, I primarily used versus coding to analyse collage-facilitated focus groups, followed by dramaturgical coding for timeline-facilitated interviews. The second-round focused on time, using chronological, life history and temporal analyses to further study participants' complex (re)construction across time and borders.

Besides methodological coherence, research makes contributions through innovative and insightful methodologies (Barone & Eisner, 2011). Transnational intersectionality responds to the call for structural intersectional approaches that consider power relations and individual agencies in scholarships on Chinese feminism(s) and IoHE and further highlights the multiplicity of locations and temporalities. This framework extends an intersectionality approach to

incorporate more layers of complexity in knowledge construction. Regarding data generation, I explored, piloted, revised, and innovated a specific combination of narrative and ABR methods online, potentially contributing to the praxis of ABR and other creative methods, especially in research with international students and Chinese women. My choices of dialectics, intersectionality, and temporality may serve as one example to unveil and counter categorical thinking. By discussing why and how I used, revised, and developed coding and analysing methods, I wish to inspire more to learn, experiment and innovate data analysis methods to suit their research purposes and further relevant knowledge.

Focusing on findings, I will now discuss their consistency with methodology and research questions, as well as their significance. Research can contribute to theories by extending or challenging existing ones, offering innovative insights from data analysis that uniquely explain social life and can be applicable to other contexts (Tracy, 2010). While I didn't use many LH vignettes in this thesis due to methodological considerations, I used participants' individual stories to enter the political-economic contexts. I also adopted several of Lather's recommended practices, like embracing contradictions, nonlinearity, and multiple representations (1993) in three findings chapters.

The following three chapters aim to answer two research questions. I combine both findings and discussion in these chapters, each of which includes data, my interpretation, analysis, and discussion with literature. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 all contribute to answering Research Question 1(RQ1).

Chapter 6 is mainly informed by versus coding of collage-facilitated focus groups. It elaborates on participants' contradictory constructions of Chinese womanhood and situates these constructions within the intersectional power relations, particularly those in and from China. Chapter 7 is based on both versus coding of collage-facilitated focus groups and dramaturgical coding of timeline-facilitated LH interviews. It highlights participants' transformations in their construction of Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings, particularly focusing on autonomy, and explores the implications for intersectional power relations in and from China.

Chapter 8 builds on Chapters 6 and 7 and uses episodes of life stories from LH analysis to further explore the transnational power relations within participants' (re)construction of Chinese womanhood. Specifically, I engage in conceptual discussions to situate participants' development of autonomy within their transnational intersectional contexts. While Chapters 6 and 7 sometimes discuss the role of UKHE, Chapter 8 aims to address Research Question 2 (RQ2) by situating UKHE within participants' transformations and transnational power relations. Additionally, Chapter 8 develops heuristic concepts that are contestable and need to be contested in future research.

The data from all 56 participants inform the discussions in Chapters 6 and 7, while a more detailed examination of data from 30 interview participants forms the basis of Chapter 8. Chapters 6 and 7 use collage pictures and excerpts to provide an overview of the research findings. Chapter 8 only utilises participants' excerpts and life stories for conceptualisation. In Chapters 6 and 7, quotes and images from the same participants are sometimes juxtaposed to *show* different truths. I refer to these pictures and excerpts as specific figures, and I suggest that readers refer to them when mentioned.

## 6 Chapter 6 Dichotomies

*Chinese women value our economic power but not political rights and voices. We have very high participation in the job market, but we rarely think about going into politics. We are very hardworking and successful in academic and professional achievements, but we also conform to beauty standards to be fairer, younger, and slimmer. (Ming)*

### 6.1 Introduction

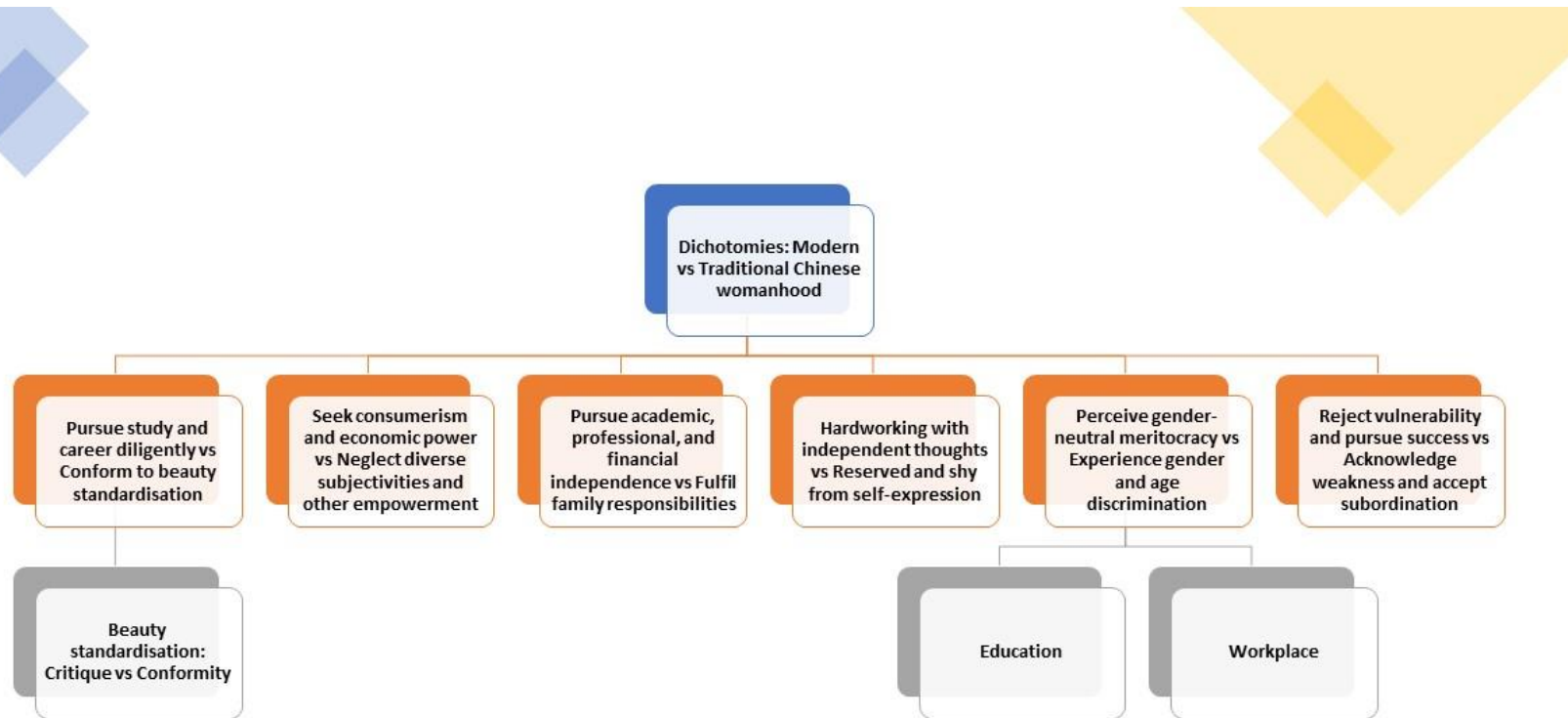
Illustrated by Ming's observation, participants often discussed contradictions in their understanding of Chinese womanhood. One significant contradiction among participants' views was their perception of “*modern and traditional*” Chinese womanhood. Below I outline six specific dilemmas to explain what this main contradiction meant for participants' understanding of Chinese womanhood (RQ1), before addressing these more fully in the discussion that follows.

1. Some participants believed that pursuing education and a career showed modern open-mindedness among Chinese women, but conforming to aesthetic standards represented traditional constraints.
2. Some participants observed that while Chinese women sought consumerism and economic power, they often neglected their diverse subjectivities and other forms of empowerment.
3. Many participants saw a conflict between fulfilling family responsibilities and pursuing academic, professional, and financial independence.
4. Some participants viewed Chinese women as hardworking and independent thinkers but also as reserved and hesitant in expressing themselves.
5. Participants noticed a key contradiction regarding gender (in)equality: while many perceived a gender-neutral meritocracy, they also experienced gender and age discrimination, especially in Chinese educational and workplace settings.
6. Some participants felt they faced binary choices. They could either acknowledge their vulnerabilities and differences, leading to intersectional

marginalisation, or reject these vulnerabilities, striving for a strong personality and competitiveness in academics and the workplace.

This chapter, mainly informed by versus coding of collage-facilitated focus group data, situates participants' contradictory construction of Chinese womanhood in wider power relations. Guided by dialectics and intersectionality, I sat with these contradictions to understand the power relations that shape them. Therefore, the (sub)titles in this chapter are framed in dichotomies. Figure 6-1 illustrates the structure of this Chapter using primarily versus codes. Rather than suggesting essentialist binaries, these sections elaborate on the formation of these contradictions before highlighting participants' changes and challenges of these contradictions. However, this research adopts a temporal belief that past-present-future coexist, and changes always happen. Thus, a clear labelling of change isn't always possible in every section. Additionally, while I try to clarify temporal and spatial contexts, this isn't always possible as this research adopts transnational intersectionality to capture the interplay of the product and the process of social relations in multiple locations and temporalities. The chapter's end combines the six aforementioned dilemmas to offer a conclusion.

Figure 6-1 A visualisation of Chapter 6



## 6.2 Pursue study and career diligently vs Conform to beauty standardisation

Some participants believed that pursuing education and a career showed modern open-mindedness among Chinese women, but conforming to aesthetic standards represented traditional constraints, such as Ming's interpretation in Figure 6-2. Participants believed that academic and professional achievement fostered independence and signalled modernity. Similarly, the Chinese state promulgated meritocratic achievement and knowledge economy as markers of modernity (Wooldridge, 2021). However, participants saw that adherence to beauty standards encouraged dependence and indicated submission to male expectations. Thus, they found it contradictory that Chinese women excelled academically and professionally while also conforming to beauty standardisation. This section only elaborates on participants' negotiations of the beauty standardisation as the following sections will discuss their academic and professional diligence.

Figure 6-2 Collage (Ming)



*Being both smart and pretty is very contradictory, as we are both very open-minded but also constrained by many societal norms and expectations. (Ming)*

### 6.2.1 Beauty standardisation: Critique vs Conformity

Many participants noted that Chinese women conformed to the mainstream beauty standardisation called *báiyòushòu*<sup>28</sup> being fairer, younger, and slimmer. For instance, in Figure 6-3, Stella used a picture of a blonde, fair, slim, young woman looking at the big gap between her body and the pants to suggest that Chinese women experienced significant pressure to conform to this unrealisable, homogenising, and harmful aesthetic standard. Similarly, many observed the

<sup>28</sup> The literal translation is fairness, youth and slimness, and my translation is intended to highlight its unrealisable characteristics.



gendered and homogenising aesthetics and severe anxiety about their appearance, physique, and age among many Chinese women of all ages. Xuan shared that her mother never wore skirts and dresses to hide her self-perceived thick calves and commented “*For significant parts of her life, she’s been trapped by figure and appearance*”. Some also observed that increasingly specific beauty standards for Chinese women, like having “*Square shoulders A4 waist*”<sup>29</sup> (Wei) gained popularity on social media, heightening their anxiety about body image.

Figure 6-3 Collage (Stella)

*In China, it’s almost abnormal for women not to try to lose weight. Most have tried to lose weight at some point. (Stella)*



The standardisation of being fairer, younger, and slimmer not only undermined some participants’ bodily autonomy but also reflected and (re)produced the intersectionality of patriarchy-colourism-ageism-consumerism. Specifically, the negative impacts of the relentless pursuit of slimness and youthfulness on women’s well-being were used to justify their weak and dependent status in patriarchy in contemporary China (Wang & Fong, 2009). Besides, the idealisation of fair skin and blond hair – rooted in China’s history of racialisation (Cheng, 2019) and influenced by the “caucasianisation” of beauty standards during economic reforms and the rise of the internet – is colourist, gendered, and classed (Wang, 2017). Moreover, the pursuit of being fairer, younger, and slimmer demanded significant financial, time, and energy investments in beauty products and surgery (Ma, 2023). Altogether, this hegemonic standard could weaken Chinese women’s bodies and spirits (Ma, 2023), divert their focus from important decision-making,

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<sup>29</sup> This implied an ideal body shape characterised by broad and square shoulders along with a slim waistline that is so narrow that it can be covered by the width of an A4-sized sheet of paper.

undermine their economic capabilities (Wen, 2013), encourage women's competition, promote gendered consumerism and marketisation of beauty products (Wang, 2017), and conflate beauty consumption with individual freedom (Xie, 2021).

When understanding sports during UKHE, many contrasted women's widespread concern about appearance and body standards in China with non-Chinese women's emphasis on well-being, hobbies, and personal development. For instance, different from the relentless weight-losing in Figure 6-3, Zhi used Figure 6-4 to show non-Chinese women's healthy, joyful, and self-focused motivations for sports. Comparatively, some critiqued the increasingly homogenising and exacting beauty standards for Chinese women, noting their detrimental effects on physical and mental health, like widespread body-image anxiety, eating disorders, and compromised bodily autonomy. Additionally, while sports for unrealisable weight loss focused on external standards, sports for well-being centred on individual subjects.

Figure 6-4 Collage (Zhi)



*Non-Chinese women have much less body-image anxiety. (Zhi)*

The standardisation saw Chinese women's bodies not as unique whole, but as measurable, comparable, and compete-able shapes, potentially indicating a market mentality of Chinese women's appearances and physique (Ma, 2023; Yang, 2023). Illustrated by sports, many frequently compared appearance anxiety and body shaming in the beauty standardisation and competition in China and the diversity and inclusion of women's bodies and aesthetics in the UK. Besides, some discussed other's control of Chinese women's bodies via sexual objectification, like male gazes, body shaming and victim shaming in sexual harassment. Both beauty standardisation and sexual objectification tried to deny women's bodies

as whole, autonomous, and individual human bodies (Liu, 2017c; Wang, 2021b). Participants observed that unlike the bodily constraints many experienced in China, non-Chinese women often enjoyed bodily autonomy, focusing on personal feelings, expression, and confidence, with less regard for physique.

Participants often compared their level of bodily autonomy to that of some non-Chinese women in the UK, particularly through differences in clothing. For instance, in Figure 6-5, Rui felt that Asian beauty standards continued to limit her from wearing her preferred dress even while she was in the UK.

Figure 6-5 Collage (Rui)



*I bought a crop top dress [in the UK], but I didn't dare to wear it. My local friends told me, 'What are you afraid of? If you like it, just wear it! Who cares what others think?' Later, I saw many local girls confidently wearing these dresses. Unlike us Asians, they didn't think you had to have a slim waist to wear them. With much fuller figures than me, they still wore these dresses. I probably wouldn't dare to wear it. (Rui)*

Others provided intricate accounts of their clothing experiences in the UK. Ming stated:

*I would subconsciously dress like the locals. This is my self-imposed pressure from the education I received in China, where I was taught to be like everyone else. After coming to the UK, I have the freedom to be different, but I still don't dare to be different.*

Both Rui's experiences with beauty standardisation and Ming's experiences with homogenisation illustrated the hegemonic domain of power on their psyche, transcending borders, and deterring them from wearing clothes of their choosing. Additionally, I would like to highlight Ming's experiences of "four times of racial

*discrimination when wearing a mask in the UK*” and her self-perceived “PTSD”, which potentially influenced her reluctance to stand out. While many participants experienced discrimination in the UK, none attributed it to their feelings of bodily restraint, which they primarily linked to Chinese traditions, culture, and homogenisation. I will further discuss participants’ experiences and their interpretation of discrimination in the UK in Chapter 8.

Participants’ experiences of bodily autonomy and constraints in the UK reflected a complex negotiation of various power dynamics. Many participants complied with yet criticised the unattainable and unhealthy beauty standards. Some highlighted the role of social media in homogenising beauty standards and perpetuating patriarchal control over their bodies, while others noted the advantages and privileges that compliance could bring. For instance, Chloe stated, *“Being good-looking brings more advantages, as it makes it easier for others to accept you.”* Similarly, in Ma’s study (2023), Chinese women consciously engaged with beauty norms to secure social benefits. Participants in my research further linked their awareness of conformity to the growing criticism of beauty practices on Chinese social media.

Despite observing a greater diversity in non-Chinese women’s body types, Ming and Han still felt pressured to become slimmer in the UK as they considered themselves not slim enough among Chinese women students. While they experienced more bodily constraints from Chinese beauty standards compared to some non-Chinese women, they also perceived advantages in the beauty competition among other young Chinese women in UKHE. Thus, despite their dissatisfaction with these constraints, they simultaneously conformed to beauty standards and competition due to vested interests in intragroup hierarchies within the patriarchy. These participants distinguished themselves from some non-Chinese women, facing more specific competition among young, educated Chinese women in the UK. Coupled with their critique of constraints from China and overlooking injustices in the UK, this pointed to a complex intersectionality involving gender/sex, class, age, race, and nationality. Their experiences embodied both privileges and barriers, highlighting their complex engagement with these intersecting forces.

Some started to explore different clothing, make-up, and hair colours alternative to the beauty standard prescribed for Chinese women and often felt encouraged by others' compliments in the UK. Thus, some perceived growing diversity in their aesthetics and increasing resistance to the beauty standard. For example, Chloe shared:

*I tried everything to lose weight [before UKHE], but now, I don't bother with makeup or any of that. I've noticed a significant change in what I can accomplish every day. It saves me money and time, very satisfying.*

After her one-year study in the UK, Chloe's growing aesthetic diversity and resistance to the hegemonic standard freed up her time, finances, and energy which she used to invest in her career and new hobbies after she returned to work in China, contributing to her growing appreciation of self. During and after UKHE, a few pointed out their similar diminished appearance anxiety and rising confidence in work and study, suggesting their resistance to misogynist and patriarchal restraints and growing agency.

For instance, Gao used the two pictures and texts in Figure 6-6 to show that Chinese women in UKHE were not bound by external beauty standards, but exuded self-confidence, self-defined beauty, and demonstrated independence and professional excellence. Finally, a few participants' changes towards the more typical Eurocentric beauty standard in the UK, like tanned skin and blonde hair, indicated that the UK was not free from beauty standardisation as many participants discussed. Participants often negotiated with beauty standards alongside their pursuit and concerns about consumerism.

Figure 6-6 Collage (Gao)

Left: In workplaces, women can equally stand on their own and become outstanding performers.

Right: Confident girls are the most beautiful, and they rarely experience appearance anxiety.

在工作中，女人同样可以独当一面，成为佼佼者



自信的女生最美 很少有容貌焦虑

### 6.3 Seek consumerism and economic power vs Neglect diverse subjectivities and other empowerment

Some participants discussed Chinese women’s consumerist indulgence. For instance, Zoe observed some “*MǎiMǎiMǎi*<sup>30</sup>” during UKHE to highlight the relentless shopping. Yan further saw some preoccupied with shopping, beauty, and dining at expensive restaurants and neglected their studies and dreams during UKHE. Existing literature has also observed gendered (hyper)consumerism in China, indicating “patriarchal capitalism with Chinese characteristics” (Meng & Huang, 2017). A few participants further noted that consumerist indulgence restrained women’s diverse subjectivities. For instance, Emily commented:

*There seem to be misconceptions about loving oneself, like equating self-love with indulging in buying expensive meals or bags...This hedonism targets women...suggesting treating oneself well involves undergoing cosmetic procedures or buying costly clothing. However, these actions envelop women with material possessions and fail to address their emotional needs.*

*Of course, the purpose is to make money, but I feel many women unknowingly agree due to a lack of understanding of genuine self-care. This perspective reflects a broader issue of neglect in families and society, failing to nurture women’s inner development from childhood to adulthood.*

<sup>30</sup> The literal translation is “buy buy buy”.

Emily highlighted the consumerist economy's target of women and the familial and societal neglect of girls' and women's selfhood, both of which restrained their self-knowledge. Similarly, Liang suggested that the escalating market economy and the media drove women's beauty consumption, and shaped a standardised ideal of fairness, youth, and slimness. She commented, "*The development of a market economy may overshadow certain diverse voices.*"

Their experience of (hyper)consumerism and its restraints on women's diverse selfhood in China could be further exacerbated by discursive conflation. Specifically, many frequently used the term "zìyóu"<sup>31</sup> to refer to having the capital to buy certain products, like "mǎibāo zìyóu"<sup>32</sup>, indicating the discursive conflation between capital to consume and individual freedom of self-expression. Meng and Huang (2017) contextualise gendered consumerist freedom within the history of China's socialist era, during which consumer options were limited, consumerism was widely criticised, and gender sameness was promoted. Departing from these restraints, post-socialist consumerism aligns with patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty and has adopted "a feminist rhetoric of agency and freedom" (Chen, 2016, p. 2840).

Indeed, some participants' resistance to the heteropatriarchal restraints also focused on consumerist self-expression and finance. For example, Chun used Figure 6-7 to depict the experiences of Chinese middle-class women in pursuing three fashion styles<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Freedom

<sup>32</sup> Freedom to buy bags

<sup>33</sup>These three fashion styles - women wearing Hanfu (top), women wearing JK fashion (bottom left), women wearing Lolita fashion (bottom right), and sketches of beauty products (right) - highlight super femininity and have become popular forms of self-expression among many women in contemporary China.

Figure 6-7 Collage (Chun)



*[Chinese women] have their hobbies and form subcultural communities; they possess consumer power and are the driving force behind the consumerist economy. They pursue freedom of expression within societal constraints, while also experiencing aesthetic kidnapping. (Chun)*

They used the clothing and make-up to express themselves in ways that were to a certain extent outside the expectation for traditional women to be reserved and negligible in public. However, the highlighted femininity in these styles mirrored the fairer, younger, and slimmer aesthetics and advocated consumerist self-expression that Chun considered “*self-restraining*”. Besides, Jia shared:

*When a company asked why a woman wasn't wearing makeup, she responded that the company didn't provide her with money to purchase makeup, and if they wanted her to wear makeup, the company should allocate time for it during working hours. This argument is valid, and I appreciate the fierce growth and strength of Chinese feminism.*

Jia spoke highly of Chinese feminist resistance and considered financial compensation an acceptable resolution of patriarchal discipline over women's bodies in workplaces. Ming further observed the gap between women's growing financial capabilities and limited political engagement, stating:

*Chinese women highly value our economic capabilities, but not our voices. Although economic power can influence one's voice, very few women in China consider participating in political activities.*

Both excerpts highlighted women's growing interest in economic power and the relative absence of political and other forms of empowerment. This mirrored ‘consumerist pseudo-feminism’, a term coined by Yang as a Chinese equivalent of



post-feminism embedded in the local discourse (2023). Yin (2022, p. 988) discusses Chinese women's new subjectivities as consumers, which substitute the socialist image of "dignified political subjects" amid the state's authoritarian neoliberalism. My research further shows that, despite some participants' awareness of and resistance to heteropatriarchal restraints, they might not fully recognise consumerist restraints on their agency and power. Some participants' pursuit of consumerist and economic power was often supported by their dedication to academic and professional endeavours, all of which they saw as integral to modern womanhood.

#### **6.4 Pursue academic, professional, and financial independence vs Fulfil family responsibilities**

Many participants considered HE, career, and financial independence very incompatible with their relationship, marriage, reproduction, and motherhood to the extent that they frequently differentiated two oppositional categories of Chinese womanhood, namely modern womanhood, and traditional womanhood. For instance, Kai observed the making of this dichotomy, saying:

*Currently, there is a polarisation of womanhood online. Traditional women find stable jobs, marry a good man, and have a relatively traditional life. Extreme 'feminists' don't want a man, children, and only want to earn a lot of money, become nǚqiánggrén<sup>34</sup> and enjoy a single life. They buy many luxury goods, occasionally go to hotels for afternoon tea, and post their happy single life [on social media].*

Similarly, many participants perceived traditional womanhood as full-time or part-time housewives, seeking a stable relationship, getting married, managing homes, caring for children, shopping, and sometimes doing stable and easy jobs. Their perception of traditional womanhood, distinct from the "iron girl" image in socialist China, resonated with the state-led systematic revitalisation of gender roles, femininity, familism and patriarchy that began during the economic reform, particularly in the 1990s (Song, 2023; Spakowski, 2018). For instance, President Xi Jinping declared to the ACWF that "Special attention should be paid to women's

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<sup>34</sup> Female strong man (Xie, 2021). Participants used the term to refer to women with successful career.

unique role in propagating Chinese family virtues and setting up a good family tradition...Women should consciously shoulder the responsibilities of taking care of the old and young, as well as educating children” (Xi, cited in Wang, 2017, p. 260).

Meanwhile, many participants considered modern womanhood – characterised by single, urban, young women with HE experiences, successful careers and financial independence – as the alternative to financially dependent traditional womanhood and a strategy to resist related pressure. For example, some pointed out the exclusively single status of their career-oriented women friends and colleagues. Rui said, “*They all want to gǎoqián bù gǎorén*<sup>35</sup>.” Ming thought it incomprehensible for women with HE experiences in the metropolis to be a full-time housewife. Like Kai’s observation of “*nǚqiánggrén*”, participants mainly discussed their accumulation of economic capital, academic and professional competitiveness and achievement and self-focused consumption. Participants’ perception of modern womanhood echoed the studies about young Chinese women’s middle-class subjectivity, like competitiveness and consumption (Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021). Yin (2022) and Song (2023) further historicise and contextualise this state-led modernisation of womanhood in China since the 1980s. The representation of the ‘iron girl’ engaged in socialist production was rejected by post-socialist elites for its “masculinisation” of women, and the image of women as dignified political subjects was substituted by a subjectivity of empowered urban, middle-class consumers, as part of the restoration of urban, class, and gender hierarchies (Song, 2023; Yin, 2022).

The discourse *nǚqiánggrén* highlighted the exceptional female gender due to the taken-for-granted connotation of maleness in successful careers and was used by some to differentiate women with a successful career from other women and men in general. Like the stigmatisation of women with a PhD as the third sex/gender (Zeng, 2020), these discourses constructed the subjectivities of either traditional womanhood conforming to heteropatriarchal familyhood or modern womanhood competing and consuming in various markets, thus creating the dichotomy of

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<sup>35</sup> Make money, not relationships

familyhood versus academic and career achievement for Chinese women. A few noted the restraints of such either-or choices. For instance, Kai analysed:

*The spectrum seems to be two extremes, but in reality, human nature is diverse. Women are inherently diverse individuals, and beyond being women, we are also individual humans who should exist somewhere in between these two extremes. There should be a multitude of choices available, but the current discourse makes it seem like you are forced to pick one side or the other. The middle path is somehow neglected.*

Notwithstanding their perceptions of the family-career dichotomy, some participants experienced gendered expectations for them to both manage family and develop careers. They observed the gendered responsibilities that women were often required and expected to prioritise family, managing most childcare, elderly care and complex relationships with relatives, while also contributing to the family economy, although men could contribute to family finances only. Many experienced conflicts in the dual expectations and felt tired and restrained in constant negotiations. For instance, one participant wrote in the collage that “*the increase of women’s economic responsibilities leads to a greater overall burden and less time for themselves.*”

Additionally, some considered dual responsibilities as heavy burdens because of their function as the moral framework to discipline and restrain women. For example, Dong said, “[*They say that*] *If you are not doing well in fulfilling responsibilities, it is a dereliction of duty as a woman.*” Participants’ experiences of gendered dual expectations echoed existing findings that Chinese women were expected to excel academically and professionally, akin to their male counterparts, while also bearing the bulk of domestic responsibilities, including significantly more housework and childcare than their husbands (Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021). Participants’ struggles with these expectations agreed with existing discussions that Chinese women struggle to achieve an ideal balance between career and family, with many facing the painful consequences of advocating for their rights (Sun & Chen, 2015). This is because the modernisation of Chinese society requires both highly skilled employees and quality child-rearing (Shen, 2013) in education, job, marriage, childcare and elderly care markets (Meng, 2020; Xie, 2021).

Meanwhile, participants' prioritisation of academic and professional pursuits over reproductive responsibilities was systematically restrained. Many encountered structural and institutional gender discrimination in job markets and workplaces, like demotion and precarity, due to their (expected) pregnancy. For example, Liang shared, "*My manager gave birth to a child, and soon her position was taken over by another man*", indicating a lack of legislation and law enforcement to protect women's professional positions before, during and after their pregnancy (Burnett, 2010). Scholars witness the increasingly dropping female employment rate and the continuously widening gender gap in employment rates and pay in China from the late 80s (Song, 2023; Wu & Dong, 2019), but this gender gap was justified by the state stressing the significance of women's domestic duties to maintain a stable and harmonious society (Wang, 2021b).

Some participants who prioritised their professional development over domestic responsibilities were discursively stigmatised as "leftover women" in need of solutions, echoing existing literature (Hong-Fincher, 2023). Additionally, some participants experienced the hegemony of a moral framework, which defined happy and successful Chinese womanhood as familyhood with a prescribed social clock, restraining their financial and career pursuits. For example, Wei noted that "*people often say, 'Oh, as a girl, what's the point of earning so much money? You still can't get married, it's so pathetic'*".

In interpersonal interactions, although participants were expected to excel academically and professionally, they experienced discouragement from these pursuits by their families, relatives, friends, and colleagues when their academic and professional pursuits conflicted with their socially-clocked reproductive responsibilities. For example, when Shu was studying for her Master's degree in the UK, many relatives and friends scolded her for "*abandoning her family and child, because she chose to pursue her dream rather than stay at home to take care of her child*". So, participants' prioritisation of academic and professional pursuit over reproductive responsibilities was institutionally and structurally restrained, discursively and hegemonically stigmatised, and interpersonally discouraged.

Against the backdrop of systemic restraints, while a few pursued professional and academic excellence, they still experienced gendered pressure and discrimination based on their expected gendered family roles. For example, recalling that her female director's well-deserved promotion was rejected by a male supervisor, Jia said "*He thought she was abnormal and unreliable for being unmarried and childless at her age, so didn't want to entrust more important positions to her.*" Her prioritisation of career over family in the perceived dichotomy didn't guarantee a better career without gender discrimination.

Besides the workplaces, many participants, regardless of their academic achievement and family background, were pressured by their parents' prioritisation of their marriage. For instance, Yu and Gabriel shared that their mothers were very career-driven and encouraged them to be independent and supported their PhD studies. However, Gabriel, when finishing her PhD, said that her mother "*still considered a stable marriage and family to be women's ultimate destination and goal*" and Yu's mother "*saw Chinese women as potential wives and mothers...so the purpose of improving themselves seems to become more valuable when choosing a partner*". Participants felt that whether they developed a career, they were always expected and often pressured to marry, reproduce, and form a family. In their lived experiences, participants' academic and professional capital didn't rise above the gendered pressure and discrimination in workplaces and families, disagreeing with their perceptions of academic and career achievement versus heteropatriarchal restraints. Their careers were considered important, not primarily for their personal development, but for increasing their value in the marriage market and ultimately contributing to family building and social class progression.

To conclude, participants perceived the dichotomy between traditional womanhood conforming to heteropatriarchal family expectations and modern womanhood pursuing academic and professional achievements and financial independence. However, in their lived experiences, they were often expected to develop both families and careers, discouraged from prioritising their career over family, encouraged to prioritise family despite their career achievements, and found themselves tired and restrained in negotiating the gendered struggles between family and career. The conflict between participants' perceptions and

lived experiences exacerbated the sense of conflict in their construction of Chinese womanhood. This conflict also existed between some participants' perceptions of their independent thoughts and their experiences of suppressing these thoughts.

## 6.5 Hardworking with independent thoughts vs Reserved and shy from self-expression

Some participants viewed Chinese women as hardworking and independent thinkers but also as reserved and shy from expressing their thoughts. For instance, Yi used Figure 6-8 to illuminate that while their inner world was filled with magnificent waves, Chinese women appeared calm and docile on the surface. According to Liu (2011, 2014), diligence is expected from all young people regardless of gender/sex in contemporary China. However, compared to Chinese men, some participants questioned the gendered expectations and discourses describing women's personalities, like "*wēnhé*<sup>36</sup>". Participants' perceived necessity of both diligence and achievement is discussed in Sections 6.4 and 6.7; this section focuses on their experiences of reservedness.

Figure 6-8 Collage (Yi)



*Hardworking, gentle, introverted  
...often do not express their inner  
selves. (Yi)*

During UKHE, many participants contrasted Chinese women's tendency to be quiet, timid, reserved, and unconfident with non-Chinese women's inclination to be expressive, brave, outgoing, and confident in their academic, social, recreational, and professional lives. Particularly, some attributed the latter's greater tendency to express their emotions and thoughts in academic and social settings to their heightened confidence compared to the former. Interestingly,

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<sup>36</sup> Gentle, describing soft, kind, or mild demeanour, often associated with a calm and moderate personality.

while some perceived themselves to be outgoing before UKHE and/or with their co-nationals, they were surprised by their unexpected shyness in intercultural interaction during UKHE. For instance, Jia pondered:

*I don't know why, but I feel a bit passive, waiting for others to approach me and make friends [in the UK]. I'm unsure why I hesitate to take the initiative to get to know people. When this aspect of my personality happened, it felt a bit strange to me. I've noticed that many Chinese women tend to be quite shy here, exhibiting that typical Asian shyness. I find it intriguing, although I cannot explain why it happened.*

Similarly, a few perceived their shyness in intercultural interaction as “*typical Asian women's shyness*”, potentially a performance of social script associated with young Asian women in some Western contexts. Literature on Chinese international students in Western English-spoken HEIs also frequently discussed their quietness. While some deficit approaches tend to interpret all silence as passivity and attribute it to Chinese education and collectivist culture (Huntley, 1993), more recent research has started to differentiate different types of international students' silence to resist deficit narratives (e.g., Wang *et al.*, 2022). Increasingly, more literature questions the hierarchy between Western-centred classroom engagement, like actively speaking up, and Chinese “passive”, quiet, and “rote learning” (Dai, 2023; Heng, 2017, 2019). Below, I attempt to contextualise, historicise, and problematise such hierarchical dichotomies by shedding light on transnational power relations embedded in some Chinese women's perceived shyness before and during UKHE.

Some considered their expression of emotions and thoughts constrained by the gendered cultivation and expectations from their parents and Chinese society. Specifically, some revealed that they were expected to be quiet and gentle, maintain peace and harmony, and give others a sense of comfort and warmth. This gendered regulation of their emotions became salient during UKHE when compared with the recognition and encouragement of emotions experienced by some non-Chinese women. For instance, Ming reflected:

*Local British girls' laughter is very hearty; often, on the street, you can hear them laughing loudly, and I think they are truly happy. Looking back at my past, I never laughed so loudly on the streets, or rather, I've never felt like I could laugh that loudly.*

Ming's encounters with hegemonic restraints on her self-expression mirrored some participants' experiences of gendered cultivation, like being “zhīshū dǎlǐ<sup>37</sup>”. From the widely studied sùzhì<sup>38</sup> discourse, the state idealised urban middle-class individuals as exemplars of high quality to modernise Chinese subjectivities (Liu, 2014; Sigley, 2009). However, the participants' experiences of contradictory cultivation – being educated and knowledgeable yet inexpressive – reflected middle-classed and gendered subjectification. This echoes the intersectionality of gender and class hierarchies in the modernisation of Chinese womanhood, as part of the male-elite-led restoration of the gender/sex, urban, and class hierarchies from the 1980s (Wang, 2017; Yin, 2022). While some participants consciously questioned the gendered restraints, its intersectionality with classed cultivation often went unnoticed. For instance, a few considered the gendered cultivation as patriarchal oppression. Similarly, Zhi observed:

*Asian women often experience strong oppression from their families of origin. Among my own classmates, there are Filipinos and Indians, and we feel we aren't as enthusiastic about expressing ourselves as our Caucasian peers. Our timid tendency and lack of confidence are influenced by East Asian culture. Comparatively, we feel white women were more self-assured. So, I think this isn't exclusive to China but exists throughout Asia.*

Many participants viewed reservedness, attributed to oppression and constraints, as a common trait among Chinese women, and a few perceived it as characteristics of Asian women during UKHE. Their naming of oppression might signal a significant development in their feminist awareness during UKHE. However, their perceptions of Asian women echo the monolithic and postcolonial representation of oppressed third-world women under Western feminist eyes (Mohanty, 2003b), indicating the intersectional impacts of racialisation and gender in their experiences and subjectivities. For instance, Qian analysed:

*I feel shyness and gentleness are common stereotypes that foreigners often associate with us. We might inadvertently project this stereotype onto ourselves as well, as we exist within an environment where this perception has been constructed. Even though we might not always agree with it, unconsciously, we absorb it, and we start to believe that this is*

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<sup>37</sup> knowledgeable and well-mannered

<sup>38</sup> Quality



*how others see us. So, some people gradually live up to that image in their own minds.*

Similarly, some shared that their teachers at UKHEs particularly encouraged them to join classroom discussions by asking them “*not to be shy*”. This suggested the perception of them as shy and the simultaneous disapproval of their shyness as the opposite of the desired talk in classrooms. Above, I analysed participants' perceptions of gender and patriarchal restraints from their parents and Chinese society in the contemporary restoration of gender and class hierarchies. However, as the above excerpts suggested, their quietness and reservedness were also racialised and gendered performances and negotiations, influencing their academic and social experiences during UKHE. Many attributed their shyness to their lack of confidence, self-perceived poor English, unfamiliarity with British culture and national differences in academic culture. Rather than giving a comprehensive account of all the reasons, I will focus on their lack of confidence in English capacities to illuminate the embedded power relations.

Some perceived that students of other nationalities, incorporating non-native English speakers, were more capable of using English than Chinese students in academic and social settings during UKHE. This suggested their lack of confidence in English proficiency. To illustrate academic experiences, Jia attributed her shyness in international interaction to her English learning experiences, saying:

*My personality in China was quite outgoing. However, after going abroad, perhaps due to the teaching methods of English, I feel that the process of learning English diminishes our confidence. I lack confidence in speaking English and fear making grammar mistakes, which makes me feel that language sometimes becomes a barrier to my outgoing nature.*

Jia's “unintentional silence” (Wang *et al.*, 2022) indicated the impact of teachers' pedagogical preoccupation with grammar mistakes and their restraints on her self-expression in intercultural interaction. During UKHE, many participants received teachers' feedback on their “*insufficient language skills*” and internalised them as part of their self-perceptions, thus feeling reluctant to express themselves in academic settings. Participants' self-perceptions of poor English and sometimes academic capabilities echoes existing studies, where many HE practitioners' perceive international students as 'lacking' certain skills, like language deficits

(Freeman & Li, 2019; Page, 2021). Additionally, participants experienced this stereotype beyond UKHEIs in the wider British society. To illustrate their social experiences, Hui shared:

*I had a very simple conversation with an Uber driver, saying 'How are you' and 'I am fine.' Then, the driver said, 'You speak English very well, other Chinese students' English is very poor.' I think this is a stereotype. While some Chinese students might not be accustomed to the new language environment, resulting in weaker spoken English, you cannot say that their English is very poor.*

Many participants experienced similar stereotypes, and unlike Hui, they internalised such stereotypes, impacting their lived experiences and subjectivities as racial minorities, Chinese nationals, and women in their academic and social lives in the UK. For instance, Shu's perceptions of Chinese women's poorer English skills than other nationals led to her belief of "*their overall stronger learning abilities than Chinese women*". In social settings, Hui needed to order drinks for all her Chinese women peers in a pub not because they couldn't speak English but because they "*didn't dare to*". Similarly, despite her perceived "*great spoken English*", Lubai decided to be silent and avoided international socialisation and university societies due to fear of occasional incidents where others might not understand her English. Her fears could be related to both the racial and national stereotypes and her patriotic perceptions<sup>39</sup>. So, the structural, institutional, pedagogical, and interpersonal domains of power privileged Anglo-centric and Eurocentric ways of engagement, socialisation, and subjectification during UKHE, while simultaneously categorising, stereotyping and othering "Chinese ways". This helps explain participants' contrast between the quiet, timid, reserved, and unconfident demeanour of Chinese women (and sometimes Asian women) and the expressive, brave, outgoing, and confident behaviour of non-Chinese women, particularly white British women.

Transnational intersectionality regarding categorical differences and, more importantly, power relations can help explain Chinese women's self-perceptions of unintentional quietness and reservedness. They included the intersectionality of gender and class hierarchies in the modernisation of Chinese womanhood and

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<sup>39</sup> Sections 6.7 and 8.2.4 elaborate on patriotic subjectification.

the construction of them as the other via privileging Anglo-centric and Eurocentric ways in broader UKHE settings. While some perceived the patriarchal constraints from China, many were unaware of the racialising and Eurocentric impacts in the UK. Their overlook was related to the deficit conceptualisation of international students, which focused on their lacks, and the adaptation approach to IoHE, which made international students responsible for adapting to the dominant ways in host countries<sup>40</sup> (e.g., Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023). For instance, some participants' experiences of their teachers asking them “*not to be shy*” in classrooms stigmatised them as shy, othered their shyness, privileged talk as the dominant way, made them responsible for adapting to this way of classroom engagement, while also made this hegemony invisible to them via the very reponsibilisation. Besides unintentional quietness, participants also encountered other contradictions in their education experiences, particularly the conflict between their perceptions of gender-neutral meritocracy and experiences of gender and age discrimination.

## **6.6 Perceive gender-neutral meritocracy vs Experience gender and age discrimination**

### **6.6.1 Education**

Whilst participants believed gender was irrelevant in their education due to educational institutions' focus on meritocratic performance, many shared experiences of gender and, sometimes, age discrimination from school through PhD education. For instance, Chloe recalled:

*During undergraduate [in China], our dean said they wouldn't hire female teachers and a room full of female students was headache-inducing and could negatively impact the department's employment rate because we would struggle to find jobs after graduation. They stated that if we didn't pursue postgraduate studies, our department's employment rate would be bleak.*

*The dean asked why they should bother hiring us since once female teachers join, they might get pregnant, take time off for childbirth, and then care for their children, leaving no time*

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<sup>40</sup> Section 8.2.2 in Chapter 8 elaborates on the postcolonial reproduction of the dominant ways and hidden power relations.

*for research. They questioned how their department could develop if they admitted a bunch of people like us...*

*Before, I felt a bit uncomfortable but accepted it, but now I think it's unacceptable.*

Whilst similar experiences were shared by many participants, they often encountered these sorts of discrimination in STEM subjects. For example, studying engineering at a top-ranking male-dominated university in China, Jia said:

*The university didn't deny opportunities to girls, but they only offered opportunities when girls became the very best. This appears blameless on the surface, but girls felt it very hurtful.*

In both quotes, the institution rationalised their gender discrimination using the discourse of meritocratic performance and competitiveness, causing both participants to tolerate the unfairness to some extent. Similarly, many thought neither gender nor gender discrimination were features of their educational experiences in China, which were “*all about grades and rankings*” (Jing). Additionally, a few considered their education fair since the focus on grades and rankings indicated “*equal competition*”. Participants’ perceptions of gender-neutral competition, juxtaposed with numerous experiences of gender discrimination suggested that the dominance of meritocratic discourse and the framing of meritocracy as justice in China’s education (Li, 2023; Liu, 2016c) obscured participants from identifying gender discrimination.

While gender discrimination in STEM subjects caused participants hurt and stress, the meritocratic disguise led more to feel discouraged and sometimes restrained from STEM subjects. For example, the overlook of gender discrimination in STEM led many, incorporating those with STEM backgrounds, to resort to natural gender/sex differences and individual choices to explain the STEM gender gap. Participants’ family education wasn’t immune to the meritocratic masquerade of gender injustice and the resultant naturalisation of gender/sex differences. For instance, Dong remembered “*In high school, my physics grades were relatively low. My mom would say, ‘Oh, it’s normal. Girls, once they reach high school, can’t catch up.’*”

Additionally, when pursuing postgraduate degrees, many received significantly less support than their male peers. For example, Zhi noted:

*When deciding to pursue a Master's, I faced significant resistance because I'm a girl. Women with postgraduate degrees weren't well-accepted in marriage markets, particularly in the past two decades.*

*It's disheartening that our educational pursuits are measured by its convenience for marriage. There is a bias against highly educated women's age, but not for men's.*

Similarly, many perceived increasingly explicit and severe gender discrimination in their educational pursuits as they advanced in age and degree levels. Participants discussed discrimination from academics and HEIs that explicitly favoured male candidates in recruiting postgraduate students. They also highlighted discrimination in the marriage market, which degraded women with PhDs as “*the third sex*” and noted that families often objected to their PhD pursuit due to “*anxiety about women's growing ages as devaluations in marriage markets*” (Xuan). Many experienced familial pressures irrespective of the intimacy of their family relationships<sup>41</sup>.

Additionally, the job market particularly discriminated against women candidates nearing, in, or past their thirties, while society stigmatised single women of these ages as “*leftover*”. Although some participants wanted to further their studies after gaining their Master's in UKHE, they often felt uncertain and discouraged from pursuing a PhD due to the growing gender and age discrimination in academia, job markets, marriage markets, families, and Chinese society. Many participants pursued postgraduate degrees in UKHE, and they encountered heightened gender and age discrimination as they progressed in age, degree levels and awareness of gender issues<sup>42</sup>.

Thus, the framing of meritocracy as justice and the competing demands in job markets and marriage markets didn't rise above participants' experiences of gender and age discrimination in education but indicated the modernisation of

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<sup>41</sup>Hong-Fincher (2023) explains that the state-led pronatalist eugenic project promoted young, urban, university-educated, and Han-ethnicity women's reproduction by targeting their parents with the revitalisation of gendered filial piety.

<sup>42</sup> Section 7.2.3 elaborates on participants' awareness of gender issues.

heteropatriarchal power from various arenas of society, affecting participants' education experiences and perceptions of (un)fairness.

## 6.6.2 Workplace

Besides education, many participants shared experiences of gender and age discrimination in job markets and workplaces. For instance, in Figure 6-9, a woman silhouette is forced to take a leap of faith from one cliff to another on her job-seeking journey. Liang observed and experienced various gender and age discrimination in job markets and workplaces in China over time. Like many, she felt tremendous pressure, loneliness, and deeply wounded as a woman competing “*in a male-dominated era*”.

Figure 6-9 Collage (Liang)



*I have to acknowledge and see the most real side of life that we are living in a male-dominated era.*  
(Liang)

For instance, many discussed the gendered division of labour. Specifically, participants observed various restraints pressuring women to do stable and simple jobs in China. Some participants focused on the institutional restraints that limit women's access to jobs with greater mobility. Shu's previous employer “*explicitly stated they didn't want female employees for positions requiring frequent business trips*”. This institutional discrimination was potentially based on the presumptions of gendered (im)mobility, such as the state-led revitalisation of the belief that men handle external affairs while women manage internal affairs (Meng, 2020). Some discussed Chinese women's own tendency to choose stable occupations, like civil servants. For instance, seeing many women in physically demanding positions in the UK, Wei retrospectively observed self-imposed limitations of professions among women in China. However, some focused on hegemonic and structural barriers as opportunity contexts.

Recalling her work as a civil servant in China, Dong considered women coerced into stable and simple jobs due to gendered expectations of their reproductive labour at home, as well as the precarity and lack of protection of women's rights in workplaces before, during and after their pregnancy. This mirrors Xie's (2021) finding about middle-class women's ideal jobs in China, like teachers and civil servants, due to their negotiations of competition demands and family expectations. Additionally, many noticed a stark contrast: women made significant contributions in frontline and middle-level positions, while men dominated senior management across various industries and professions in China. They attributed this gender disparity to systematic discrimination against women.

However, participants had different interpretations regarding their observation of women's stronger capabilities in the workplace compared to their male counterparts. While some considered it a higher requirement for women candidates thus suggesting gender discrimination, some perceived it as evidence of women's higher educational attainment, thus indicating gender equality. Xie's (2021) analysis of the increased gender discrimination faced by Chinese middle-class women during the transition from education to the workplace could explain their different interpretations. However, the latter's interpretation indicated an equation of gender justice of processual barriers and privileges to gender sameness in capability and productivity, potentially related to the state-promulgated gender mainstreaming and meritocracy in China (Song, 2023).

Additionally, some participants had contradictory feelings about gender and age discrimination in workplaces. Many experienced gender and age discrimination in China's job markets, as employers would automatically assume the company's cost of their maternity leave for three children. This became more serious after participants' post-graduate study as they were approaching or over the expected reproductive ages<sup>43</sup>. Many experienced systematic reproductive pressures and some observed pronatalism in governments' official statements, policies, news, and social media content. For example, participants discussed the shift from the one-child policy to the two-child policy in 2016 and then to the three-child policy in 2021, as well as state-promoted media discussions on addressing the ageing

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<sup>43</sup> Section 7.2.2 in Chapter 7 discusses the expected reproductive ages.

population through women's reproduction. However, some hesitated due to the expectation that women would primarily care for children and the elderly while also contributing to family finances. Additionally, they cited the lack of legal protection for women's rights in and out of marriage, such as the patriarchal "*cool-off period*<sup>44</sup>" and issues with "*property ownership*<sup>45</sup>".

Participants frequently faced discrimination in workplace competitions, as employers' goals of maximising productivity and profit conflicted with women's assumed reproductive responsibilities. Song (2016) discusses the state's revitalisation of traditional womanhood, like returning women home to take reproductive labour, and the concurrent release of enterprises from social services for enhancing efficiency from the late 1990s. Thus, the pronatalist state made individual Chinese women of the one-child generations<sup>46</sup> responsible for reproductive labour in the marketisation of childcare, education, and elderly care, while the state-led economic reform disadvantaged them in competition in productive labour based on assumptions about their reproductive responsibilities.

While feeling that companies' discrimination was unfair, some also sympathised with companies' profit-driven approach to survive and maximise interest in markets and their need to disregard women's reproductive labour. The state modernised the enterprise system (Song, 2016) for nearly thirty years, covering most participants' lifetimes. It's unsurprising that the state-promoted maximisation of profit was evident in employers' rationalisation of gender discrimination and participants' partial acceptance, struggles and sense of stuckness. Despite participants' advancing degree levels after UKHE, many encountered heightened gender and age discrimination in China's job markets as they progressed in age and awareness of gender issues<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> From January 2021, the state introduced a 30-day "cooling off" period before finalising a divorce in China (Zhang & Zhang, 2023).

<sup>45</sup> Hong-Fincher (2023) argues that although women's homeownership has risen in the last decade in China, they have missed the prime growth period in China's real estate market due to gender and family discrimination, social stigma against single women, and government policies.

<sup>46</sup> All participants were the one-child generations (1979 -2015). The one-child policy started in 1979, the same year as the economic opening-up in China.

<sup>47</sup> Chapter 7 elaborates on their experiences of discrimination related to age (see Section 7.2.2) and their awareness of gender issues (see Section 7.2.3).



Thus, some participants' conflation of gender justice with gender sameness in capability and productivity and their internalisation of market logic explained their contradictory experiences of gender and age discrimination and perceptions of gender-neutral meritocracy in workplaces, obscuring their perceptions of gender and age discrimination. The conflation of gender justice with gender sameness foreshadowed a dilemma faced by some participants: either rejecting gender differences to maximise productivity or acknowledging gender differences and injustices.

### **6.7 Reject vulnerability and pursue success vs Acknowledge weakness and accept subordination**

Many participants believed that women need to be strong and successful academically and professionally to resist family restraints and workplace discrimination. For instance, Renhui used Figure 6-10 to show her resolution during her study in STEM subjects. Some participants' understanding of strength went beyond strong performance. They emphasised the need for a strong personality and rejected vulnerability to achieve academic and professional excellence in competitive markets. For instance, pursuing a PhD in UKHE, Yi considered some peers' depression as an undesirable weakness and Chinese women's absence of depression as toughness. Similarly, Gabriel, having finished her PhD viva, praised Chinese women's toughness, independence, and excellence, and considered some non-Chinese women's expression of vulnerability during their PhD pursuit as "*emotionally fragile*". She also disfavoured quota policies, which "*provided women with more opportunities, but implied an unfair situation and was quite terrifying*". Like Gabriel, some exhibited their fear of being seen as weak and vulnerable victims of oppression and restraints. These participants, mostly with STEM and/or high-achieving backgrounds<sup>48</sup>, insisted on the necessity to have a successful career and strong personality and rejected vulnerability.

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<sup>48</sup> Participants with STEM backgrounds studied STEM subjects in their formal HE. Participants with high-achieving backgrounds were either pursuing or have finished their PhD study. These two groups, despite sometimes overlapping, stood out among participants due to their tendency to emphasise Chinese women's academic and professional excellence and denial of vulnerability, gender differences and sometimes gender injustice.

Figure 6-10 Collage (Renhui)



*I have to be a nǚqiáng rén<sup>49</sup> after graduation. (Renhui)*

Additionally, these participants either denied gendered injustice or avoided discussing the topic of gender (in)justice, instead focusing on gender differences and similarities. Specifically, some considered their STEM fields as gender just as “*women have the same abilities and productivity as men*” (Renhui), while also holding biologically essentialist views, like “*men’s stronger logical thinking*” (Lubai). This paralleled my earlier discussion on how the framing of the dominant meritocracy as justice in China (Li, 2023; Liu, 2016c), and some participants’ conflation of gender justice with gender sameness in capability and productivity, obscured their recognition of gender discrimination. The oversight of gender discrimination in STEM led many to resort to biological essentialism to explain the STEM gender gap. They equated neoliberal meritocracy, which emphasises standardisation via measurable similarities and differences in performance, with gender justice, which focuses on power, privileges, and disadvantages in processes. They held an episteme that conceptualises (in)justice as one-dimensional, dichotomising gender injustice and meritocracy and placing gender-related power and class-related power at opposite ends of the same spectrum. Consequently, these participants focused solely on static gender differences/similarities and ignored gender (in)justice in the processes.

Whilst some scholars, like Vallier (2022), argue that normative neoliberalism did not support capitalism because of its focus on meritocracy and lack of interest in social (in)justice, some feminists critique that actual neoliberalism co-opted feminist ideals, as its market-driven meritocracy fostered female competition,

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<sup>49</sup> Female strong man (Xie, 2021). Participants used to refer to women with successful career.

entrepreneurship, and consumption (Fraser, 2009, 2013; Song, 2023). In contemporary China, state-led neo-liberalisation propagated meritocratic competition as the means to advance justice (So & Chu, 2012). Concurrently, state-sponsored gender mainstreaming since 1995 shifted the preoccupation from women's liberation to the discourse of gender sameness and differences in China (Song, 2023; Wang, 2021b). In my research, participants' episteme, seeing class and gender as opposites on the same spectrum, helped explain the hegemonic substitution whereby suppressed class antagonism was redirected into escalating gender antagonism in China's anti-feminist sentiments (Wu & Dong, 2019). A one-dimensional episteme of (in)justice might suppress both gender and class struggles, indicating the need for different and intersecting dimensions of conceptualising (in)justice in China.

These participants often perceived themselves as facing dichotomous choices. They could either acknowledge their vulnerabilities and differences from the privileged hegemonic masculinity, leading to heteropatriarchal arrangements, or reject vulnerabilities and gender differences, striving for a strong personality and academic and professional competitiveness. Their rejection of vulnerability, gender differences, and gender injustice indicated their belief that weakness equated to subordination in heteropatriarchal subjectification, and productivity equated to equality in neoliberal subjectification. The participants' perceived dilemma suggests that this subjectification involves the intersectionality of heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism on their psyche through dichotomisation.

Ueno and Suzuki (2022) discuss elite women's aversion to weakness, manifested in their reluctance to be labelled as victims and their inability to tolerate feelings of weakness. Brown's research associates the denial of vulnerability with reduced joy, a sense of shame, disconnection, depression, and other mental health challenges (2012, 2021) and Bruni *et al.* (2004) critique its masculinist characteristics. My discussion of the psychological impact of dichotomised neoliberalism-heteropatriarchy could complement the existing psychoanalytic findings of the repudiation of vulnerabilities as a consequence of neoliberalism (Binkley, 2011; Layton, 2010), particularly among young women professionals (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Scharff, 2016). I also embedded the participants' negotiations of

vulnerability and gender differences within wider power relations to avoid making them responsible.

Moreover, some participants, all with STEM and/or high-achieving backgrounds, emphasised no difference between Chinese and non-Chinese women in UKHE. Among them, some particularly highlighted Chinese women's outstanding intelligence. For instance, Peng said:

*Chinese women have no differences from female students of other nationalities. Although as international students, we may encounter difficulties in culture, social interactions, and language, these initial challenges can be overcome in the long run...I've encountered many highly intelligent Chinese students...I also saw no difference between Chinese men and Chinese women.*

Similarly, Lubai said:

*Chinese women students in the UK were just as remarkable. Their dedication to studies, their talents, and various other aspects were exceptional. They could outperform many of their peers of different ethnicities.*

Both emphasised no differences in gender, ethnicity, and nationality while simultaneously highlighting Chinese women's outperformance. I speculated three reasons. It first indicated their resistance to the deficit conceptualisation of Chinese international students focusing on their lacks (e.g., Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022) in UKHE, and patriarchal justification claiming women were less intelligent and capable than men in market-driven competitions (Wang, 2021a).

Second, participants used Chinese women's adaptation to the English language, and British academic and cultural norms and measurements to justify their sameness and excellence. The English language and British ways of knowing and being were privileged as the ruler to measure them in the hierarchy above "other" marginalised ways, suggesting neo-colonial (re)production of knowledge and subjectivity in UKHE<sup>50</sup>. Participants faced the dilemma of either accepting their differences from the privileged Anglocentric, British and masculinist way and the resultant intersectional marginalisation or denying their differences and

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<sup>50</sup> Chapter 8 elaborates on this (see Section 8.2.2).

vulnerabilities. Thus, their insistence on no differences indicated their resistance to hierarchised differentiation and marginalisation due to their language, race, nationality, and gender/sex, while their denial of these differences simultaneously reflected the subjectification of the oppressors' ways, marginalising OTHER ways of knowing and being in the hierarchy.

Third, some participants perceived that Chinese individuals abroad represent their country and people, which contributed to their denial of differences and emphasis on Chinese women's excellence in UKHE. For instance, Lubai noted:

*I feel Chinese women have a strong sense of competitiveness in their studies. This competitiveness stems from not wanting to be looked down upon as Chinese people. Yes, it might not be as obvious in China, but it becomes very evident abroad when compared to students from other countries.*

Participants' subjectification of patriotism from China and racial and national essentialisation from the UK<sup>51</sup> interacted to foster their perceptions that Chinese individuals abroad represented the country and its people. Existing literature discussed the strengthening of patriotic education in China during its transition from neoliberalism to state neoliberalism in the 1990s (So & Chu, 2012). Scholars also highlight the racial and national essentialisation of Chinese students, who are often stigmatised as incapable students (Heng, 2017, 2019) and face linguistic subordination and racism (Dovchin, 2020; Freeman & Li, 2019). This helps to explain their contradictory emphasis on Chinese women's sameness with non-Chinese women and the simultaneous highlight of the former's overperformance of the latter.

Some participants' denial of differences in gender, race and nationality and emphasis on Chinese women's over-performance suggested that their meritocratic resistance was shaped by the transnational intersectionality of patriarchy, post-colonialism, patriotism, and racial and national essentialism. Their emphasis on sameness or denial of differences should not be construed as equality, as differences indicate discrimination and marginalisation. De Beauvoir's (2010) argument that equality should precede the discussion of differences holds

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<sup>51</sup>Chapter 8 elaborates on both.

contemporary significance, particularly in the context of identity politics, post-modernism, and UKHE's promotion of celebrating diversities in institutional policies (Bamberger *et al.*, 2019). In my research, participants' denial of differences from the privileged Anglocentric, British and masculinist way, stemming from fears of resulting marginalisation, challenged the advertised diversity and suggested the need to centre the principles of justice.

A few participants, all with STEM and/or high-achieving backgrounds, experienced changes in their attitudes toward vulnerability. For example, both Weitian and Lubai shifted from the belief that they must be strong and successful women competing against others towards a more diverse and self-defined understanding of success to share with others. Lei further noted:

*Gender discrimination exists and puts women in a disadvantaged position, rather than women themselves being inherently weak. Many people struggle to separate these two concepts.*

Reading news about rape and murder incidents targeted at women by ride-hailing drivers in China, Hui recognised Chinese women as a vulnerable group due to ongoing systematic oppression and advocated for a comprehensive feminist movement in China. During and after UKHE, whilst some still suggested the necessity for them to succeed academically and professionally, a few explicitly expressed their decreasing need to be strong, differentiated women's disadvantaged positions from women's inherent weakness, and faced and attributed Chinese women's vulnerability and disadvantages to societal oppression. These participants' recognition of Chinese women's vulnerability and experiences of disadvantages, discrimination, and oppression suggested their feminist courage and strength in acknowledging and challenging injustice, standing in contrast to inherent weakness.

## **6.8 Conclusion and discussion**

To conclude this chapter, this section summarises and discusses the preceding sections in relation to my research questions. Participants frequently perceived themselves as self-contradictory and discussed various contradictions in their construction of Chinese womanhood. One significant contradiction in participants'

perceptions was their modern and traditional Chinese womanhood, echoing the findings of other scholars (e.g., Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021). I detailed six specific dilemmas to articulate what this main contradiction meant for participants' construction of Chinese womanhood (RQ1).

1. Some participants believed that pursuing education and a career showed modern open-mindedness among Chinese women, but conforming to aesthetic standards represented traditional constraints. Thus, they found it contradictory that Chinese women excelled academically and professionally while also conforming to beauty standardisation. In negotiating the beauty standardisation, despite their dissatisfaction with bodily restraints, participants simultaneously conformed to the beauty standards and competition due to vested interests in intragroup hierarchies within the patriarchy.
2. Some observed that while Chinese women sought consumerism and economic power, they often neglected their diverse subjectivities and other forms of empowerment.
3. Many participants perceived the dichotomy between traditional womanhood conforming to heteropatriarchal family expectations and modern womanhood pursuing academic and professional achievements and financial independence.
4. Some participants viewed Chinese women as hardworking and independent thinkers but also as reserved and hesitant in expressing themselves. Their quietness and timidity became more salient when compared with non-Chinese women during UKHE.
5. Participants noticed a key contradiction regarding gender (in)equality: while many perceived a gender-neutral meritocracy, they also experienced gender and age discrimination, especially in Chinese educational and workplace settings.
6. Some participants, mostly with STEM and/or high-achieving backgrounds, faced dichotomous choices: either acknowledging weakness/vulnerabilities and differences from the privileged Anglocentric, British and masculinist way,

leading to the resultant intersectional marginalisation, or rejecting vulnerability and differences, striving for strong personality and academic and professional competitiveness.

Thus, in the participants' dichotomous constructions, modern Chinese womanhood was characterised by academic and professional diligence, competitiveness, consumerist and economic power, and strong personalities. In contrast, traditional Chinese womanhood was associated with experiences of discrimination, conformity to beauty standards, the fulfilment of family responsibilities, subordination, acknowledgement of vulnerability, and the restraint of diverse subjectivities.

The fashioning of citizens is particularly important in the governmentality of contemporary China, aiming at socialising a specific type of Chinese citizenship (Callahan, 2017; Miao, 2020). Comprehensive *sùzhi*, often framed as the ideal subjecthood for Chinese citizens, seemingly serves as a cohesive form of governmentality within the neoliberal-socialist regime (Liu, 2008b, 2011; Sigley, 2009). This chapter analyses a specific type of governmentality in the contemporary PRC, namely the fashioning of Chinese womanhood.

Echoing participants' modern Chinese womanhood, literature on neoliberal subjectification documents similar psychosocial impacts of neoliberalism (Layton, 2014), incorporating constant self-improvement (de Lissovoy, 2018), academic and professional competitiveness (Scharff, 2016), consumerist and economic power (Carr & Kelan, 2023) and rejection of vulnerability (Binkley, 2011; Layton, 2010). Participants' construction of traditional Chinese womanhood involved experiences, conformity, and restraints imposed by the heteropatriarchal structure, where women were seen as the second sex/gender, in education, workplaces, families, consumption and society. Thus, I consider participants' constructions of modern and traditional Chinese womanhood as their subjectification of neoliberalism and heteropatriarchy, respectively.

Such construction can be further located in China's state heteropatriarchy and state neoliberalism. State heteropatriarchy refers to a social and political system where the state enforces and perpetuates heterosexual and patriarchal norms



(Oloruntobi, 2024). In the PRC, the party-state plays significant roles in using laws, policies, and cultural practices to reinforce male dominance, limit women's rights, and discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals (Hong-Fincher, 2019; Wang, 2017). Additionally, the party-state's significant role in China's capitalism leads to debates regarding whether contemporary China aligns with neoliberal principles, although many agree on the unique interconnection of capital, state, and society in China (Weber, 2018; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). This research, with its critical paradigm, is concerned with whether the label of neoliberalism helps address the research questions and build critical feminist knowledge(s), rather than using this label "accurately". Below, I will explain three reasons for this approach.

First, focusing on Chinese women's ways of being and related power relations, this research can benefit from existing discussions on neoliberal subjectification and governmentality, aiming to foster self-sufficient citizens through government intervention or withdrawal from it (e.g., Rose, 2013). Discussions on *sùzhì*, a vital form of Chinese governmentality, reveal its intricate connections with neoliberalism and other ideologies, like eugenics, socialism, authoritarianism, and nationalism (Kipnis, 2006, 2007; Sigley, 2009).

Besides, as discussed in Section 4.2, my research aims to contribute to decolonial knowledge construction, like critical socialist feminism. It challenges the assumption of contradictions between the state and neoliberalism and seeks to elucidate and contest complex power dynamics in women's experiences (Spakowski, 2018; Tian, 2022), like the interplay of patriarchy, neoliberalism, party-state, colonialism, and imperialism in the PRC (Wang, 2017; Yin, 2022). Finally, the party-state has grown increasingly resistant to neoliberal discourse and strengthened the official socialist rhetoric to reinforce class, gender/sex and ethnic/racial inequalities, nationalism, and the party-state's rule, as well as masking various inequalities (Song, 2023; Zhao & Wu, 2020; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, I adopt the label of state neoliberalism as it aligns with the research topics and the agenda to contribute to critical socialist feminism and highlights the interconnection of capital, state, and society in China when the state masks such interactions in its discourse and governmentality.

Having clarified these terms, I argue that participants' perception of contradictions between modern womanhood and traditional womanhood was shaped by state neoliberalism and state heteropatriarchy through dichotomisation. I will elaborate on this using some of the previous dichotomous constructions.

First, while many participants acknowledged the heteropatriarchal constraints of their selfhood, the discursive conflation between capital to consume and individual freedom of self-expression, coupled with their unawareness of the consumerist restraints on their diverse selfhood, encouraged them to indulge in beauty consumption to express themselves. Consequently, the heteropatriarchal restraints on self-expression were constructed as contrasting with the consumerist promotion of self-expression.

Second, while many viewed family responsibilities, like reproduction and childcare, as acts of self-sacrifice by women, their academic, professional, and financial competitiveness was framed as women's independence and autonomy. The state also played a significant role in shaping participants' dilemmas between familyhood and career. On one hand, the pronatalist state systematically coerced women's reproduction via policies, hegemonic cultures, and interpersonal pressure (Hong-Fincher, 2023) and re-emphasised individual women's moral responsibilities for childcare, education, and elderly care (Song, 2023; Yin, 2022). On the other hand, the state concurrently withdrew state-provided welfare, modernised enterprises, partially realised by privatising reproductive labour and pressuring companies to prioritise economic efficiency, and shifted towards market economies, even for the previously state-supported childcare, education, and elderly care (Song, 2016; Spakowski, 2018; Zhu & Xiao, 2021). Participants, all from the one-child generation, simultaneously experienced the state-led concurrence of the revival of heteropatriarchal familism, coercing their reproductive labour, and the arrival of state neoliberalism, pressuring their competitiveness while also discriminating against their reproductive responsibilities in competitions. So, state heteropatriarchy and state neoliberalism dichotomised their choices between family and career.

Third, the framing of meritocratic competition as justice and modernity led participants to perceive meritocracy in education and workplaces as the opposite of heteropatriarchal constraints and women's meritocratic competitiveness as the antithesis of traditional womanhood. Consequently, some further equated productivity with equality in neoliberal subjectification and weakness with subordination in heteropatriarchal subjectification. Their dilemmas of either rejecting vulnerabilities and pursuing success or admitting weakness/vulnerabilities and accepting subordination suggested the subjectification of the intersectionality of heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism through dichotomisation.

The coexistence of the above contradictory constructions challenged the seeming dichotomy of heteropatriarchal womanhood and neoliberal womanhood and suggested their intersectionality. For example, some complained about but conformed to the beauty standard and competition due to vested interests in intragroup hierarchies within the patriarchy. Their consumerist self-expression, as their resistance to patriarchal restraints on women's selfhood, often reinforced the beauty standard. Conforming to the standard of being fairer, younger, and slimmer undermined some participants' bodily autonomy and reflected and reproduced the intersectionality of patriarchy-colourism-ageism-consumerism (see p.130). Despite some participants' awareness of and resistance to heteropatriarchal restraints, they might not fully recognise consumerist restraints on their agency and power. Similarly, despite participants' perceptions of the dichotomy between family and career, their lived experiences often involved expectations to balance both, discouragement from prioritising career over family, encouragement to prioritise family despite career achievements, and feelings of exhaustion and constraint in negotiating gendered struggles between family and career. The conflict between participants' perceptions and lived experiences exacerbated their sense of conflict in constructing Chinese womanhood. So, heteropatriarchal power and neoliberal power often intersected to create participants' dichotomies between traditional and modern womanhood.

Participants' dichotomous constructions also indicated their unawareness of this intersectionality, like their overlook of gendered restraints and discrimination in consumerist self-expression and meritocracy, obscuring their collective

consciousness of both class struggle and gender struggle in contemporary China. This echoes some scholar's observations of the restoration of the gender/sex, urban, and class hierarchies from the 1980s (Wang, 2017; Yin, 2022), the state debilitation of class struggles from the 1990s (So & Chu, 2012; Žižek, 2017) and the concurrent obfuscation of gender/sex hierarchies (Wu & Dong, 2019). Critical socialist feminists argue that the state-promulgated gender mainstreaming and its impact on restoring femininity from the 1990s fuelled the downplay of heteropatriarchy in China (Spakowski, 2021; Tian, 2022). Therefore, it's crucial to adopt an intersectional approach to analyse not only categorical status and identity markers like gender/sex, sexuality, and class but also power relations such as state heteropatriarchy and state neoliberalism. For instance, while the conflict between family and career is also found in research about women's daily negotiations in Western contexts, like the UK (Wattis *et al.*, 2013), what differentiated participants' Chinese womanhood was their construction of dichotomies shaped by the intersectionality of state heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism through dichotomisation.

Participants' construction of Chinese womanhood within broader UKHE settings often extended beyond categories of gender/sex and class, sometimes involving power relations beyond state neoliberalism-heteropatriarchy. For instance, participants tended to critique restraints from China while overlooking injustices in the UK. They differentiated themselves from non-Chinese women and encountered a more specified beauty competition among young educated Chinese women in the UK. These indicated complex intersectionality of gender/sex, class, age, race, and nationality. Similarly, many participants contrasted Chinese women's tendency to be quiet, timid, reserved, and unconfident with non-Chinese women's inclination to be expressive, brave, outgoing, and confident. While some perceived the patriarchal constraints from China, many were unaware of the intersectional cultivation of class and gender and the racialising and Eurocentric impacts in the UK. Additionally, their rejection of vulnerabilities and meritocratic resistance were shaped by the transnational intersectionality of patriarchy, post-colonialism, patriotism, and racial and national essentialism.

This echoes the existing research on Chinese women international students' experiences of various discrimination on the basis of their gender, ethnicity and

culture in Canada (Ge *et al.*, 2019) and transnational and intersectional marginalisation due to their gender, sexuality, class, language, race, nationality and immigration status in Australia (Martin, 2022). Chapter 8 delves into the complex transnational intersectional power relations in participants' construction of Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings. Finally, while I mentioned some participants' changes in some sections, such as their negotiations of beauty standards, to illustrate some complexity, this chapter mainly painted the big picture of participants' construction and served as the backdrop for later, more focused discussions on their transformations.

My research aims to address the question: In what ways did participants construct Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings and wider transnational intersectional contexts? At this stage, I argue that many participants' contradictory constructions of modern womanhood versus traditional womanhood were shaped by the intersection of state heteropatriarchy and state neoliberalism through dichotomisation. During UKHE, the intersectionality of gender/sex, class, age, race, and nationality, along with the transnational intersectionality of patriarchy, post-colonialism, patriotism, and racial and national essentialism, further complicated their constructions. Their sense of contradictions stemmed from several factors: first, the dichotomisation of state neoliberalism and state heteropatriarchy; second, the conflict between their perceptions of dichotomies and their intersectional lived experiences; and third, the conflict between various restraints and their developing autonomy during and after UKHE, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

## 7 Chapter 7 Transformations and Negotiations

*After going abroad, my perspective on women, and on people in general, has become much more diverse. I have come to understand that individuals make their decisions for specific reasons, shaped by their own backgrounds and motivations. There is no need to rush to judge or label them as right or wrong. Such judgments are rather narrow-minded. This has been the most significant change for me. (Chen)*

### 7.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 discusses the fashioning of Chinese womanhood in the contemporary PRC. I argued that many participants' contradictory constructions of modern womanhood versus traditional womanhood were shaped by the intersection of state heteropatriarchy and state neoliberalism through dichotomisation. Participants' sense of contradictions partially stemmed from the conflict between various restraints and their developing autonomy during and after UKHE. This chapter, based on versus coding of collage-facilitated focus groups and dramaturgical coding of timeline-facilitated interviews, elaborates on participants' transformations and negotiations in their construction of Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings and wider transnational intersectional contexts<sup>52</sup>.

Generally, through broader UKHE settings, many participants became more aware of and resistant to the homogenisation, belittlement, restraints, and contradiction of the prescribed Chinese womanhood. They also developed towards diverse, autonomous, feminist, and integrated selfhood. Below I outline four specific changes to explain their implication for participants' construction of Chinese womanhood (RQ1), before addressing these more fully in the discussion that follows.

1. Participants encountered diverse forms of Chinese womanhood and concurrently grew conscious of, and resistant to, various homogenisations.

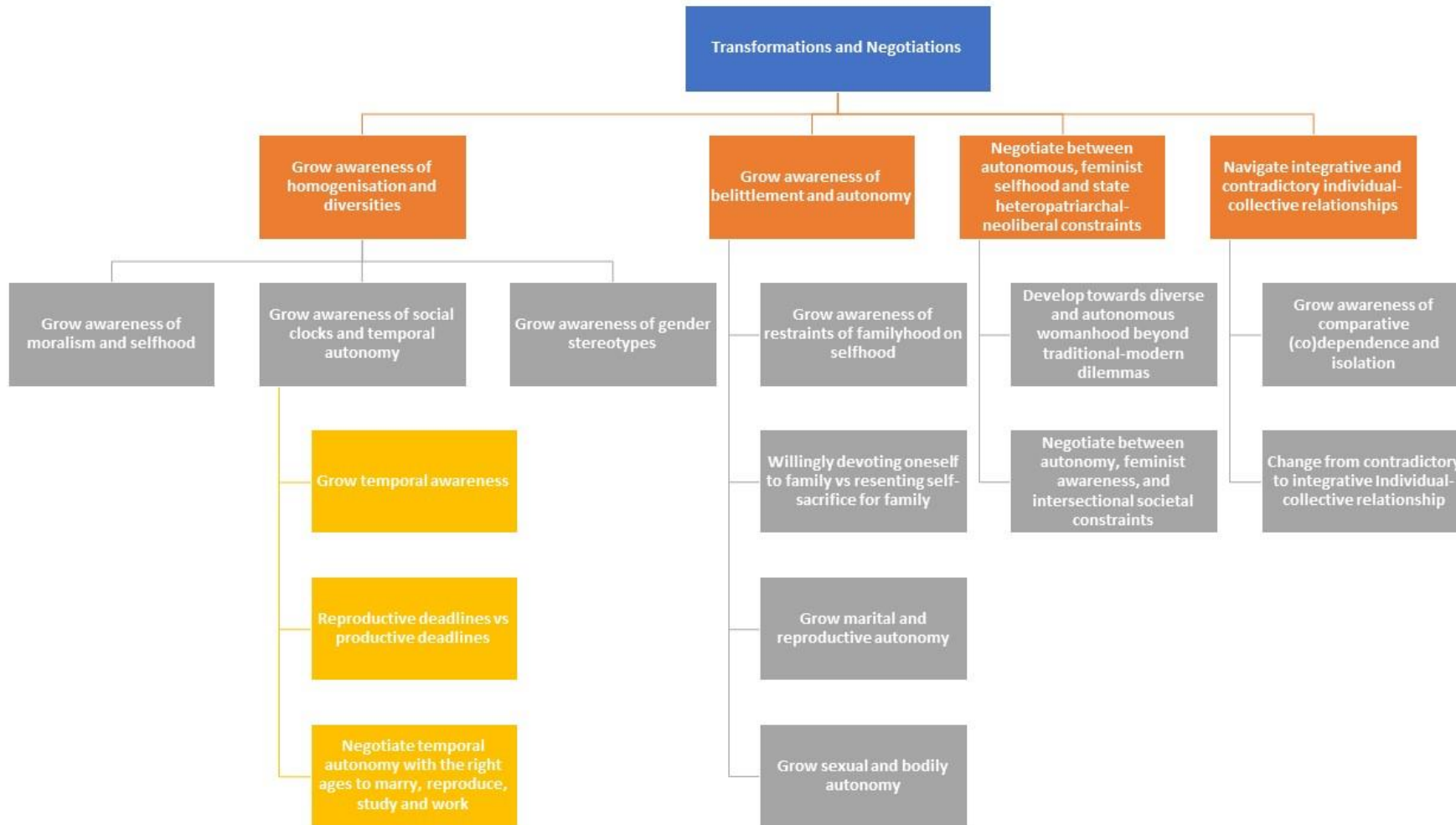
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<sup>52</sup> My temporal lens and cross-case discussions of participants' retrospective account often blurred the distinction between experiences during UKHE and after UKHE, although, when possible, I attempt to differentiate them in specific cases.

2. They became more aware of the belittlement of Chinese women's selves, suggesting their increasing autonomy.
3. They negotiated between autonomous, feminist selfhood and state heteropatriarchal-neoliberal constraints.
4. They became more aware of the comparative (co)dependence and isolation of Chinese womanhood and shifted from contradictory to integrated individual-collective relationships.

Figure 7-1 illustrates the structure of this chapter in more detail. At the chapter's end, I conclude that participants' transformations through broader UKHE contexts offer alternatives to the fashioning of modern-vs-traditional dichotomy in constructing Chinese womanhood, as exemplified by Chen's shift towards a "*more diverse perspective on women and on people in general*".

Figure 7-1 A visualisation of Chapter 7





## 7.2 Growing awareness of homogenisation and diversities

During and after UKHE, participants encountered diverse Chinese womanhood and became more conscious of and resistant to various homogenisations of this diversity. Below, I will focus on their growing awareness of homogenisation through moralism, social clocks, and gender stereotypes.

### 7.2.1 Growing awareness of moralism and selfhood

During UKHE, participants met Chinese women with diverse sexualities, relationships, marriage and reproduction statuses, hobbies, personalities, social networks, religions, entrepreneurship, mobility, family backgrounds, and ages. By experiencing these diversities, participants became more aware of the homogenisation of gendered moralism. For instance, Li said, “*The only moral framework always trims Chinese women into what it wants them to be.*” This framework prescribed a singular definition of successful, happy, and good Chinese womanhood. Many experienced hegemonic pressures from their prescribed social roles “*as a child’s mother, a man’s wife, parents’ daughter, a friend’s friend, but not herself* (Xuan)”, and social responsibilities to care for family and manage domestic life with expected self-devotion and sometimes self-sacrifice. Similarly, Wei observed:

*This expectation centres around marriage and motherhood, and it strictly restrains what Chinese women can do, because a Chinese woman who does not follow this framework will be judged and considered a failure, inappropriate or immoral, even if her life is seen as a success by her definition or a broader definition.*

The “*broader definition*” referred to non-gendered definitions of success, suggesting the gendered characteristics of moralism. Participants often experienced this gendered moralism hegemonically and interpersonally, coercing them to conform to this singular definition of good, moral and successful Chinese women.

Xie (2021) and Liu (2014) find similar gendered and moralised definitions of success in contemporary China, where men are expected to achieve career and financial success, while middle-class women are expected to attain both career

success and maintain a stable and happy family, characterised by heterosexual marriage and child(ren). Hong-Fincher (2019) further critiques the party-state's role in invoking Confucianism to systematically revitalise sexist moralism. For instance, the state promotes benevolent authority and hierarchies based on sex and age to foster women's loyalty to both family and the state.

Besides, Li, Xuan and Wei, like some other participants, noted the moralism's restraints and belittlement of their selfhood. Indeed, participants' self-awareness grew with their awareness of diversity. Many participants' construction of Chinese womanhood shifted from the external demands and social expectations of them as (future) wives and mothers, to focusing on their inner self during and after UKHE. For instance, Shan identified her journey of understanding Chinese womanhood: from society's definition before UKHE to the diverse women she encountered, and finally to self-reflection on what woman she wanted to become during UKHE. Ning observed "*a growing tendency for Chinese women to focus on their genuine thoughts and feelings, and to explore their selfhood*" and Qian suggested Chinese women "*discovering their ambitions for their first time*" during UKHE. Specifically, below, I will discuss their negotiations of temporal autonomy and the social clocks' synchronisation.

### **7.2.2 Growing awareness of social clocks and temporal autonomy**

During and after UKHE, some participants perceived growing temporal choices and decreasing age-related anxiety. For example, after one year of master's study in the UK, some became less anxious about their ages and were motivated to pursue a PhD for the first time. These experiences suggested participants' growing temporal autonomy (Eriksson, 2008), as they also became more aware of social clocks' restraints on it.

Within the moralism, many participants identified prescribed social clocks, referring to the life path prescribed for them with timings of major life events, such as schooling, higher education, heterosexual marriage, reproduction, childcare, retirement, and grandchildren care. Participants frequently discussed related discourse, including "*do age-appropriate things*" and "*follow the prescribed order step by step*". This aligns with existing research about young Chinese women's experiences (Evans, 2010; Xie, 2021). However, in my research,

many participants saw social clocks as limits because they restricted life choices, especially by setting specific ages for marriage and reproduction, and limited their temporal agency by constraining self-awareness, compassion, and knowledge.

To illustrate, in Figure 7-2, Liang used permeating clocks and watches crowding the gloomy-looking woman into a corner to represent that she was oppressed by prescribed social clocks to the point of despair and breakdown, losing the autonomy to control her life.

Figure 7-2 Collage (Liang)



*I have to do certain things at fixed times, and I can't break away from that path. I can't take any other road. It's like my life is not under my control.*  
(Liang)

Additionally, many considered social clocks homogenised their life paths as they observed duplicated life choices amongst their woman peers and repeated life journeys between their generation and their parents, due to the social synchronisation of timing (Adam, 2008). Below, I will discuss participants' negotiations of temporal autonomy with the prescribed ages to marry, reproduce, study, and work. I will then analyse the tension between their reproductive and productive deadlines, followed by their increased temporal awareness through experiencing different temporal structures.

### ***7.2.2.1 Negotiating temporal autonomy with the right ages to marry, reproduce, study and work***

Many participants experienced pressures due to the systematic prioritisation of the right ages for them to marry and reproduce. Interpersonally, participants frequently felt pressure to marry and reproduce from their peers and parents, who considered heterosexual marriages indispensable and emphasised the right ages. Qiang quoted the Chinese idiom “parents’ orders, matchmaker’s words” to

suggest that she had little say in her marriage and was expected to follow her parents' wishes. Yu shared that “*After giving birth, some of my Chinese [women] peers told me ‘I really envy you for completing the task and giving your parents peace of mind’*”. Reproductive pressures like this in social lives restrained Chinese women's bodily and reproductive autonomy (Rodriguez, 2023). Hong-Fincher (2023) explains that the pronatalist and eugenic state propaganda targeted young, urban-born and university-educated women's parents to pressure their daughters' reproduction.

Besides interpersonal pressure, participants also experienced hegemonic and intrapersonal domains of power. Many believed their twenties was the right reproductive age, citing “*scientific evidence*” and expressing concerns about the consequences of missing this window. Within their twenties, participants generally agreed that having a child as early as possible would be preferable, since they believed that biologically, it would be easier for younger mothers to recover from childbirth and that children would be healthier. Additionally, participants felt that socially, they would be less susceptible to workplace discrimination related to potential pregnancy.

The scientific medical discourse of having good-quality children is prevalent in China (Kipnis, 2006; Xie, 2021). As a strong rhetorical device, it has dominated sexuality-related discourses since 1949 (Evans, 2010) and has been sponsored by the party-state's eugenic project since the late 1970s (Rodriguez, 2023). Additionally, Xie (2021) observes that Chinese middle-class women perceived ideal reproductive ages to be between 23 and 30. Literature on *sùzhi*<sup>53</sup> further explores their negotiations between biological norms and social expectations surrounding the ideal ages. Biologically, their preoccupation with healthy babies mirrors state-sponsored eugenics as China's birth planning policy has long emphasised high-quality births and childrearing (Kipnis, 2006), placing significant pressure on individual women to meticulously calculate their reproductive decisions (McMillan, 2006). Their focus on easy recovery echoes beauty standardisation pressuring them to remain youthful, desirable and “hot mum” (Shen, 2015). Socially, Yang (2016) also observes that some women strategised to marry and

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<sup>53</sup> Quality.

reproduce during their postgraduate study to minimise later discrimination in job markets.

Participants also frequently mentioned “*jiéhūn shēngzǐ*”, meaning getting married heterosexually and having child(ren), with a historical preference for and literal meaning of sons. Despite their strong pressure to negotiate with reproductive deadlines, this suggested the normalised rigid sequence of heterosexual marriage before reproduction. Xie (2021) similarly observes this order and attributes it to systematic challenges of childbirth and child-rearing outside marriage in China. Thus, the right reproductive ages were often used to deduce the right ages to marry, be in a stable heterosexual relationship, work, and study.

A distinctive marriage market systematically synchronised participants’ marrying ages in China. Some noted the gendered devaluation of Chinese women as they age and obtain postgraduate degrees in the marriage market since “*the exchange rate between girls’ time and boys’ time is different*” (Zhen). Additionally, some experienced stigmatisation because of their postgraduate degrees. Some participants’ families objected to their pursuit of a PhD due to this perceived devaluation. These indicated heteropatriarchal synchronisations of participants’ marrying ages. Some scholars highlight the state’s role, illustrated by the ACWF’s stigmatisation of single women over twenty-seven as left-over and its advice for them to lower their standards in the marriage markets (Wang, 2021b; Zhou, 2023).

Additionally, participants discussed fierce female competition due to the perceived scarcity of high-quality men in the heteronormative market. Some observed a considerably larger population of high-quality women than high-quality men because of women’s meritocratic resistance to gender discrimination. Their focus on high quality was characterised by professional and financial competitiveness and educational and cultural capital, mirroring the state’s eugenic ideology (Rodriguez, 2023) and meritocratic ideology (Li, 2023) in *sùzhì* discourse (Kipnis, 2006, 2007).

These indicated the state’s active role in the heteropatriarchal marketisation of marriage and aligned with China’s state neoliberalism from the 1990s (So & Chu, 2012). Specifically, this marriage market shared many similarities with the job and

education markets in contemporary China, such as standardisation, commodification, marketisation with discourses of choices, fierce competition, scarcity of high-quality commodities, speed fetish, gendered/sexist discriminations, and state power. So, the systematic synchronisation of participants' marrying and reproducing ages was shaped by state-sponsored eugenics with leverage of scientific and social norms and suggested the intersectionality of state heteropatriarchy and state neoliberalism.

Besides marrying and reproducing ages, social clocks also regulated participants' duration, timing, sequence, and tempo of study. Many perceived strong gendered academic pressures. While Chinese youth's considerable academic pressure in pursuit of middle-class status has been well-documented in the analysis of *sùzhi* (Fong, 2004; Liu, 2014), in my research, participants considered these pressures age-related and gendered.

Specifically, some suggested that the expected duration of study would be shorter for women than for men, as they experienced gendered and systematic resistance to their postgraduate pursuits. For instance, Liang recalled:

*I was already exhausted trying to convince my parents (of my PhD pursuit). But for more than a year in my PhD, every evening, my parents' relatives and friends were pressuring my parents not to let me continue studying. They were saying things like girls near 30 should be more stable and not go through so much trouble.*

Participants' postgraduate study in and after their late twenties conflicted with the idealised reproductive ages according to scientific and social norms and the state's pronatalist eugenic propaganda (Kipnis, 2006, 2007; Rodriguez, 2023).

Thus, some felt pressured to prioritise study to resist the expected more serious sexism and ageism in workplaces and/or families than formal education, while diligent study monopolised their school to undergraduate time. During UKHE, they became more aware that the gendered prioritisation of study in China restrained their self-governance, like their living skills, self-knowledge, self-compassion, and mental health during UKHE, especially when compared to non-Chinese women.

For instance, some, experiencing study's monopoly of their time before UKHE, perceived themselves as more immature than British peers, whose temporalities were comprised of study and explorations of hobbies, socialisation, and future careers. During UKHE, while some enjoyed the lower academic pressure than in China, some experienced broadened academic competition, since they particularly cherished their overseas study time as an opportunity to accumulate educational capital for future personal, temporal, and spatial autonomy. Thus, their daily lives in the UK were mainly beelines between classrooms and student accommodations, where they perceived more temporal and spatial restraints compared to the rich and balanced lives of their non-Chinese peers. This is illustrated by images of women studying in a library, working out in a gym, and drinking in a bar in Figure 7-3.

Figure 7-3 Collage (Yunzhu)



*They can balance work, healthy living, and social life well and have the freedom to focus on themselves.*  
(Yunzhu)

These participants resisted the heteropatriarchal-chrono-normative restraints of social clocks by studying at a faster tempo, which, however, restrained their temporal autonomy. Through a temporal lens, my research aligns with studies on the psychic and affective structure of neoliberalism, such as “*constantly active and still lacking time*” (Scharff, 2016, p. 112) and cruel optimism, namely the attachment to unattainable ideals of the good life (Ibled, 2023).

Besides reproduction, marriage, and study, some discussed social clocks' gendered synchronisation and coordination of the right ages to work stably. They experienced coercion to do stable jobs immediately after completing their undergraduate studies and again after deciding to resign from those jobs to pursue postgraduate studies. For instance, Ning and her boyfriend were planning to resign

from their stable jobs for their studies at twenty-five. Ning faced strong objections from family, friends and colleagues who thought her “*too old to go out to explore and should be at a stable job, marry and reproduce*”, while her boyfriend received encouragement to “*pursue his academic ambitions*”. Participants’ similar decisions to study for Master’s degrees in UKHE challenged and defied the prescribed gendered timeframe to work, its stability/unchangeability, and the right timing for study, marriage, and reproduction.

In summary, participants experienced social clocks’ synchronisation of their lives in three intra-connected aspects and discussions of one have implications for others. Generally, the right ages for marriage and reproduction were centred and prioritised to deduce the right ages to study only and work stably.

Notably, participants actively negotiated between social clocks’ synchronisation and their temporal autonomy in three aspects. First, despite various pressures, many felt more relaxed about marriage and reproduction than their parents. The generational differences in timing and the related difficulties in synchronisation (Adam, 2008) might suggest possible disruptions via critical education on the state’s pronatalist propaganda targeting their parents, filial piety and intergenerational intimacy (Hong-Fincher, 2019; Zheng & Ho, 2017).

Additionally, participants’ awareness of social clocks’ restraints already shows differences from previous research, which suggests that middle-class women believe marriage and reproduction are indispensable (Evans, 2002; Xie, 2021). These differences may be attributed to the fact that my participants belong to a younger generation (with some observing generational differences in the awareness of social clock constraints) and to their UKHE experiences. For instance, before UKHE, Zhixing thought her colleague’s “*double income, no kids*<sup>54</sup>” status was due to infertility. However, during and after UKHE, she interpreted it as a result of autonomous choices reflecting the colleague’s growing self-worth and responsibility. Her previous understanding mirrors the findings of prevalent pathological conceptions of childlessness within marriage in China (Evans, 2002; Xie, 2021). Her later changes indicated her growing awareness of reproductive

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<sup>54</sup> This term describes couples who choose not to have children and both partners earn an income.



agency and the internalised state-sponsored discourse of responsibility in child-rearing (Evans, 2010; Liu, 2018a).

Hui observed that her Chinese women peers who studied in UKHE and returned to China became less preoccupied with the right ages of marriage and more resistant towards the stigmatisation of leftover women as *“Being leftover shows that she is excellent.”* Yunzhu, in her thirties, differentiated her women friends in her hometown, who were all married with most having children, from her Chinese woman postgraduate peers in UKHE, who were focused on developing their careers, with most remaining unmarried and childless. Thus, when making decisions about marriage and reproduction during and after UKHE, many participants developed a stronger awareness of agency, diversified their understanding of choices, and became more resistant to hegemonic synchronisation.

Second, when some participants’ families objected to or doubted their postgraduate pursuit, some temporarily compromised their preferences regarding subjects and duration of study to secure financial support from their families. For example, Stella shared:

*My parents were strongly against me pursuing a [3-year] Master’s degree in China because they believed it would be a waste of women’s time. To them, I would be too old when finishing my master’s study at 25 years old.*

Although disagreeing with her parents’ understanding of her age, she considered her parents’ objection and pursued a master’s in the UK, where the length of study was two years shorter than in China.

However, some persisted in their study with compromised financial and emotional support from family and society. Specifically, a few pursued postgraduate studies despite their family’s objections and felt *“less restrained by their age and gender during UKHE”*. Zhi used Figure 7-4 to articulate that *“Chinese women used HE to rescue themselves”* from a sexist and ageist past-present-future. They exercised their temporal autonomy in negotiating between social clocks’ synchronisation and their academic pursuit. Similarly, Xu (2021) observes that Chinese international students challenge hegemonic temporal structures and seek

temporal autonomy through career strategies. My research highlights the gendered characteristics of this temporal negotiation through UKHE.

Figure 7-4 Collage (Zhi)



Third, a few, such as Dong, sought stable employment to protect themselves from the gendered precarity and job insecurity in China's labour markets, such as potential demotion due to pregnancy. One significant contradiction in participants' negotiations between social clocks and their temporal autonomy was their struggle with reproductive and productive deadlines.

### ***7.2.2.2 Reproductive deadlines vs productive deadlines***

Many participants experienced gender and age discrimination in job markets due to assumed deadlines for their reproductive responsibilities, such as heterosexual marriage, reproduction, childrearing, and elderly care. Some experienced gender discrimination in job applications, including requirements to disclose their marriage and reproductive status and related plans, promises of no reproduction for five years, and B-mode ultrasonography to exclude pregnant women. Thus, participants showing any signs of reproductive responsibilities faced discrimination in China's job markets.

Companies often justified their discrimination by citing the need to maximise productivity and the perceived negative impact of women's reproduction. This was influenced by the state's move to release enterprises from social services to enhance efficiency while concurrently reviving traditional views of womanhood from the late 1990s (Song, 2016; Spakowski, 2018). However, some participants observed that women without reproductive responsibilities also faced

discrimination in job markets. For instance, recalling that her female director's well-deserved promotion was denied, Liang said:

*He considered her abnormal for being unmarried and childless at 37 and hesitated to give her more significant roles. Believing that having a child would stabilise her, he saw her as unreliable without one, considering her an unstable factor.*

Women who remained childless after 35, a milestone widely regarded as the reproductive deadline due to social and scientific hegemonies in contemporary China, were potentially viewed “as a failure beyond redemption, a social outcast” (Xie, 2021, pp. 129-130). Thus, although some passed the deadline, supposedly posing no threat to productivity, the heteropatriarchal-chrono-normative hegemony was still leveraged for discrimination, irrespective of their marriage and reproductive status.

Participants encountered both explicit and implicit age and gender discrimination in job markets. Explicitly, compared to their job searching time after undergraduate study, participants noted increased discrimination after gaining their master's degrees due to employers' concerns about their approaching reproductive deadlines. Implicitly, some felt gendered restraints from the seemingly “objective” age limitations in workplaces. Age restrictions for academic positions in China are common, such as postgraduates and entry-level lecturers under 35 (Zhao & Rezai-Rashti, 2021). Rui saw the age limitation “*affecting women more than men*” as it conflicted with “*the reproductive deadline, constraining many ambitious women from PhD studies*” and academic careers. 35-year-old is constructed as a deadline for securing entry-level professional positions structurally and for reproduction hegemonically.

These conflicting deadlines coerced participants to choose between them, restraining their autonomy. For instance, Shu felt inhibited from pursuing a PhD in her thirties domestically and internationally, due to the age requirement of academic positions and her childrearing responsibilities in China. Age limitations in job markets and reproductive deadlines connected public and private times, while state-led privatisation of reproductive labour (Zhou, 2015) and the objective age limitations in job markets disregarded privatised and feminised reproductive time, thus implicitly (re)producing gender injustice in post-socialist China. This

shaped the dichotomy between reproductive time and productive time in the social clock prescribed for Chinese womanhood, while also systematically encouraging the former.

After two-child and three-child policies, some felt even more disadvantaged in job markets and experienced significantly more reproductive pressure. They clarified that these policies led institutions and companies to assume that women would have three children, causing them to factor in losses from maternity leaves. Consequently, companies are less inclined to hire and promote women in order to maximise productivity. Liang suggested that smaller companies sometimes had to focus on maximising capital to survive, as they faced a lack of government support for women's maternity leave. Although, Shu, shared that "*In reality, maternity leave or breastfeeding leave would be appropriately shortened, rather than being arranged according to national regulations.*" Additionally, some observed that the demotion of women after pregnancy was a common practice amidst the intense competition in China's job markets. The state-led marketisation and privatisation of social services (Song, 2023) prompted companies to prioritise economic efficiency, while the state failed to fund maternity leave (Connelly *et al.*, 2018) and enforced coercive pronatalist policies targeting women's reproduction in China (Hong-Fincher, 2023). This shifted the burden of women's reproductive costs onto companies.

Against this backdrop, the lack of legal protection for women's rights in the workplace (Burnett, 2010; Ngai, 2005) further encouraged companies to discriminate against women based on assumptions about their reproduction. This suggested the heteropatriarchal characteristics and the state's authoritarian power of China's neoliberalism (Hong-Fincher, 2023; So & Chu, 2012; Wang, 2017), which differed from the liberal democracy and modest welfare some neoliberals claimed (Vallier, 2022) and from conventional neoliberalism in the Washington Consensus (So & Chu, 2012). These power structures, articulated temporally from the social clock, caused some returnees to experience multiple pressures with conflicting deadlines between productive and reproductive labour, incorporating financial independence, elderly care, heterosexual marriage, reproduction, and childcare.

While prescribed social clocks were common in other contexts, their distinctiveness in China lay in the systematicity and dichotomy of power. Systematically, the social clock synchronised and co-ordinated some participants' life courses through various domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Respectively, this was illustrated by state eugenics, family planning policies, state-sponsored stigmatisation of single women over twenty-seven as "leftover," family-inflicted reproductive pressure, and internalised scientific hegemony justifying reproductive deadlines. Notably, some experienced the pressure from the prescribed social clock but referred to it as age anxiety. Although both discourses were about their experience of friction and contradiction with established timings of major life events planned for them, age anxiety risked making individual women responsible for choosing these timings and downplaying the systematic power where their psychic life was embedded.

Additionally, the intersectionality of state neoliberalism and state heteropatriarchy coerced participants to choose between the dichotomy of reproductive time and productive time. As I discussed in Chapter 6, participants' internalisation of these dichotomies of traditional and modern womanhood indicated their unawareness of these intersectional power structures. For instance, some participants felt their strategy to resist heteropatriarchal pressure through increasing tempos restrained their temporal autonomy, which according to Berlant (2011), turned into constant struggles for self-improvement and benefit the neoliberal economy. This systematic dichotomisation obscured participants' knowledge of the intersectional power structures that affected their temporal autonomy and restrained their resistance to the dichotomous temporal hegemony.

### ***7.2.2.3 Growing temporal awareness***

The systematicity and dichotomisation of power were particularly evident in participants' perceived temporal differences during UKHE. Specifically, they observed the personal temporality non-Chinese women enjoyed and became more aware of the constraints imposed by the temporality prescribed for Chinese women.

First, many discussed differences in timing and related subjectivities. Participants noted that non-Chinese women in the UK were much less constrained by their age and gender in education, sports, health, clothing, work, and socialisation and thus were more liberal than Chinese women. Yan summarised “*There’s no direct correlation between [non-Chinese] women’s age and the things they do. They can do anything they want to do.*” Rather than suggesting full temporal autonomy for non-Chinese women in the UK or their homogeneity in this matter, participants’ discussion was on relative terms and focused on Chinese women’s life paths, where they perceived more systematic restraints particularly related to heteropatriarchal-chrono-normative duties, such as reproductive deadlines.

Additionally, many perceived differences in tempo and related subjectivities. Chen recalled her mother’s observation and said:

*My mom thinks that people’s lifestyle there (in the UK) is really different from China. They always seem calm and walk leisurely, unlike here in Shanghai where everyone is in a rush. She said that people there seem so relaxed, but she cannot relax herself. She cannot find that inner calmness and cannot be like them.*

*This is quite thought-provoking because we, the younger generation, also face various anxieties in different aspects of life, such as body image, marriage, work, and study anxieties. We have all kinds of anxieties, and it feels like we cannot slow down. We have to keep going like gears that must keep turning; we simply cannot slow down.*

Similarly, some observed non-Chinese women’s relaxed, slower, and calmer tempo and process-oriented approach, leading them to consciously reflect on their own need for a quicker tempo, pervasive anxiety, and result-oriented mindset. While often feeling anxious due to the constant need to speed up and maximise their productivity, participants barely questioned this need and attributed their anxiety to the large population of both Chinese people and highly accomplished women in markets.

This echoes existing discussion of neoliberal subjectivities, such as anxious autonomy as a way of being (de Lissovoy, 2018; Read, 2009), and empirical findings on the impact of *sùzhì* discourse on youth’s subjectivity and lived realities in contemporary China, highlighting their relentless competition for opportunities

and resources (Liu, 2014, 2018a). The state-promoted middle-class good life was a time-bound and hardly-reachable ideal (Liu, 2008a; Xie, 2021) that could synchronise and coordinate individuals' lives to be measurable, comparable and compete-able. Chasing this ideal for scarce resources and privileges led to a constant struggle for self-management and many couldn't afford to know, question, and challenge social injustice and engage in collective political transformation, echoing Berlant's (2011) analysis of the affective project of neoliberalism. The hegemony of this ideal could be exacerbated and invisibilised by the authoritarian state's suppression of dissents in China (Chan, 2023; Thornton, 2023) and its socialist facade aimed at suppressing class struggles while operating capitalist economies (Guo, 2009; Žižek, 2017). This discussion helps explain why my participants felt a constant need for a quicker tempo while simultaneously overlooking the power that coerced and demanded their self-management.

Many also became aware of differences in sequence, such as the order, priority and simultaneity of life events, and related subjectivities. They contrasted non-Chinese women's work-life balance focused on their selfhood and Chinese women's preoccupation with studying and working for external competition. For instance, two participants compared their British peers who dropped out or changed their programme to chase their dreams with Chinese women who continued their studies for their career prospects despite lacking interest. However, British immigration policies and UKHE emphasised the talents of international students and immigrant workers, illustrating global elitism and meritocratic discourse (Lomer *et al.*, 2023) in constructing the deservedness of international students. Research also finds that meritocratic rhetoric is used to obscure both the xenophobic, racist, classist and Islamophobic attitudes of some British citizens towards immigrants (Keating & Janmaat, 2020). Therefore, despite the relative economic privileges of my participants, the systematic intersectionality of heteropatriarchal, neoliberal, and chrono-normative pressures in education, job, and marriage markets, and the UK's hostile and elitist immigration policies could restrain their freedom to discontinue studies they were uninterested in. Instead, they often considered academic persistence as their only chance to advance their future careers and resist some barriers at individual levels.

Thus, participants perceived differences between Chinese womanhood and non-Chinese womanhood in the UK in terms of timing, tempo, and sequence. These differences were shaped by the systematic intersectionality of China's state neoliberal and heteropatriarchal chrono-normativity and the UK's xenophobic, racist, and elitist immigration<sup>55</sup>. Negotiating with these intersectional power relations transnationally, participants constructed their time-bound lived experiences and subjectivities. For instance, perceiving differences in temporal autonomy between Chinese and non-Chinese women, some participants, regardless of their own choices, valued the importance of developing awareness of diverse temporal choices for women and actively communicated these ideas with more women in China. Their retrospective awareness of the social clock's temporal restraints suggested their growing temporal awareness. Their negotiations with such synchronisation showed their developing temporal autonomy during and sometimes after UKHE. Besides social clocks, some participants also discussed their increased awareness of gender stereotypes through experiencing gender diversity.

### **7.2.3 Growing awareness of gender stereotypes**

Some participants explained and justified the differences in gender roles and maturity by using ideas of natural femininity and masculinity, based on the belief in two distinct biological sexes. Specifically, some believed women were unsuitable for labour-intensive activities as their physical strengths were inherently weaker than men. Some, like Grace, considered women's caretaker labour "*an objective fact due to inherent personality differences between men and women*". Besides, a few considered women more mature than men due to mixed reasons, including men as the hunter and women as the gatherer, and women's biological functions like lactation. They stressed that it was a biology-based objective fact that women were more empathetic, mature, disciplined, and better at organisation, planning and domestic work.

Additionally, the focus group, where all five participants studied remotely in China, held particularly different understandings of gender/sex. For instance, Ronglu felt confused about the *xingbié* of a Thai course-mate due to their non-

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<sup>55</sup> Section 8.2.3 elaborates on this.



binary gender expression and compared them with “人妖 (*rényāo*)<sup>56</sup>”. Other focus group members’ similar confusions suggested that they didn’t know the existence of transgender, intersex, and non-binary people and the concept of gender identity and indicated a conflation between sex and gender. In this research, the remote-study group stood out to be the only participants who explicitly showed their unawareness of gender identity. These participants’ understanding differed from the distinction between sex and gender prevalent in Western contexts, reflecting the local concept of *xìngbié* (*gender/sex*).

While *xìngbié* is widely translated as gender, my participants’ understandings suggested the distinctions between them, echoing Spakowski’s discussion of plural interpretations and translations of gender into the Chinese language (2021). McMillan (2006) and Xie (2021) further critique that *xìngbié* in Chinese conflated gender and sex, indicating an absence of linguistic tools for the public to deconstruct the naturalised gender roles based on binary biological sexes.

Inspired by Song’s (2023) anticolonial analysis, I attempt to explain this conflation by historicising and contextualising Chinese feminism(s). Historically, while Western second-wave feminists develop gender as an analytical framework, *nánnǚ*<sup>57</sup> has been the prevalent framework in China from the early 20th century and was adopted in the party-state’s discourse in the socialist period until the reform era when the Anglo category, gender, was embraced to complement the local *nánnǚ* framework (Li & Mills, 2021). Unlike second-wave feminists who use gender as a social construction of sex differences (de Beauvoir, 2010), gender has been embraced by the party-state to revive traditional womanhood from the 90s (Wang, 2021b). Like the Western counterparts, gender has become the primary focus in Chinese feminism(s) (Spakowski, 2021).

After almost thirty years of state-supported gender mainstreaming in China (Wang, 2021b), rather than seeing gender as social constructions, the remote-group participants in my research held entrenched binary biologically-determinist

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<sup>56</sup> Kathoey, the literal translation is human monsters or human demons. This degrading term is often used in Chinese to refer to what is known as ladyboys in Thailand.

<sup>57</sup> Man-woman. However, in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*, Liu *et al.* (2013, p. 11) move beyond binary translation and emphasise He-Yin’s conceptualisation of this framework as “all patriarchal abstractions and markings of distinction”.

understandings. This echoes the image of women as feminine consumers in post-socialist China (Wang, 2015) and was potentially more essentialist than the understanding of *nánnǚ* in the socialist period when women were encouraged to express what post-socialist elites criticised as masculinity (Dong, 2016). This was partially explained by critical socialist feminism's critique that state neoliberalism and state revival of femininity have colluded under the guise of gender since the 1990s (Zhu, 2011). Participants' biological essentialist understanding of gender echoes scholarly critique of gender's failure to challenge patriarchy in China (Tian, 2022). However, the remote-study group's differences also indicated that other participants' transnational living experiences in the UK, where gender identity was widely discussed, provided them access to a different episteme.

During UKHE, some participants considered themselves more constrained by gender stereotypes regarding their bodies, actions, hobbies, mobility, and careers than non-Chinese women. For instance, a few saw themselves as less likely to go hiking as "*Chinese women were expected to manage their existing and immediate environment, such as home, rather than explore the unknown*" (Ning). Some observed that non-Chinese women in the UK had less gendered constraints in their career types, such as labour-intensive work and STEM careers. However, a few saw women's struggles with balancing career and family regardless of their nationalities and residence. So, rather than suggesting essentialising differences or non-Chinese women's full freedom, participants' perceptions indicated their growing awareness of the prescribed, essentialising and limiting gender stereotypes. For instance, Zhen said:

*Initially, I noticed many more female smokers abroad, but upon reflection, I realised this perception might stem from ingrained gender expectations. Unlike in foreign countries, where smoking is viewed as a personal choice unrelated to gender, our cultural mindset may influence our perception of how women should behave. I've observed a few Chinese female classmates who smoke [in the UK], but only discovered this after spending significant time with them. This observation extends beyond smoking and may apply to various aspects of behaviour.*

Observing her classmates' attempts to hide their smoking behaviour, Zhen reflected and questioned that the gendered expectations constrained Chinese

women's bodies and behaviours in the name of virtue, echoing Evans's (2010) analysis of Chinese women's negotiations of gendered moralism.

Similarly, unlike naturalised understandings of femininity and masculinity, many participants became more aware of and resistant to gender stereotypes and injustice during and after UKHE. For example, Ming used the image<sup>58</sup> of a shaved-head blonde woman tearing apart the "female" label to express that she "*became more sensitive to gender stereotypes and discrimination [during UKHE]*". Additionally, some developed a more diverse and inclusive understanding of gender, moving away from the binary femininity-masculinity and the binary relations with prescribed femininity. For example, before UKHE, Chen completely rejected the patriarchal moral framework and disliked women who conformed to traditional femininity. During and after UKHE, she developed a more empathetic, inclusive, and diverse understanding of womanhood, which helped her accept herself and others. Focusing on women collective, Jun spoke of "*the importance of blurring gender and age differences in social progress*". Different from the remote-study group's unawareness of gender identities, a few explicitly supported "*individual free choices of gender*" but simultaneously expressed some biological-determinist views, indicating contradictions and complexities in participants' changing perceptions and the need for temporal and spatial contextualisation.

#### **7.2.4 Summary**

Through broader UKHE settings, participants encountered diverse Chinese womanhood and became more conscious of and resistant to various homogenisations of this diversity. I elaborated on their growing awareness of homogenisation through moralism, social clocks, and gender stereotypes. Participants' increased awareness of homogenisation, such as social clocks' synchronisation, foreshadowed their developing autonomous selfhood, like their temporal autonomy.

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<sup>58</sup> The picture is watermarked, so I'm not using it here to avoid infringing copyright.

### 7.3 Growing awareness of belittlement and autonomy

During and after UKHE, participants developed towards autonomous selfhood and grew awareness of various belittlements in prescribed Chinese womanhood. Some suggested Chinese women were belittled and ignored. For instance, Nora observed the frequent use of *xiǎo*<sup>59</sup> in Mandarin to describe women's body shape, strength, personality, and dependency, such as *xiǎonǚshēng*, *jiǎoxiǎo*, *ruòxiǎo*, and *xiǎoxìngzi*<sup>60</sup>. During and after UKHE, some questioned these discourses, suggesting that they belittled, weakened, and ignored Chinese women. Conversely, Nora and Yunzhu used *dà*<sup>61</sup> to describe Chinese women's characters and strengths after UKHE, such as *dàdǎn*, *dàqì*, *dàfāng*, *qiángdà*<sup>62</sup>. This discursive transformation indicated their resistance to the hegemonic belittlement and their reclaim and redefinition of Chinese womanhood. Specifically, below I will discuss their growing awareness of the restraints of familyhood on selfhood and the related contradictory emotions. Then, I will elaborate on their increasing marital, reproductive, sexual, and bodily autonomy, followed by a conclusion.

#### 7.3.1 Growing awareness of restraints of familyhood on selfhood

Many participants noted that Chinese women often shift their focus from themselves to their families after marriage and reproduction. Specifically, some noticed that, after marriage, their expected roles as wives were prioritised over their selfhood. For example, Shu explained, "*Traditional education believes successful women should support men.*" Some further discussed motherhood, where they observed more pronounced women's devotion of time, energy, and finances to families. For example, Figure 7-5 and Figure 7-6 illustrate the importance of childcare responsibility for prescribed Chinese womanhood as (future) mothers and the absence of men.

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<sup>59</sup> Little

<sup>60</sup> Respectively, these terms mean: 'little girl,' 'petite and delicate,' 'small and weak,' and 'quick-tempered'.

<sup>61</sup> Big

<sup>62</sup> Respectively, these terms mean: 'bold', 'broad-minded,' 'generous,' and 'powerful and strong'.

Figure 7-5 Collage (Group 10)



*Widowed  
parenting*<sup>63</sup>  
(Shao; Zhi)

Figure 7-6 Collage (Group 10)



Some further noted women, particularly mothers, often had very limited time to themselves and socialisation, as many were preoccupied with childcare after paid work. Similarly, while some used images of mothers and daughters in kitchens in constructing Chinese womanhood (see Figure 7-7 and Figure 7-8), some highlighted the absent fathers and sons in kitchens. They believed that this gendered family education limited women's space and subjectivities.

Figure 7-7 Collage (Group 9)



Figure 7-8 Collage (Group 9)



For instance, Liang remembered, *“My mom didn't want me to end up like her, spending her whole life stuck in the kitchen... Cooking was a symbol of women being confined to the kitchen, a symbol of women's roles”*. Indeed, some exclusively focused on marriage and motherhood in their discussions of Chinese womanhood before UKHE. For instance, Qian reflected on her equation of Chinese womanhood to motherhood.

Additionally, some noted that Chinese women often undertook responsibilities beyond prescribed roles as (future) wives and mothers. For instance, Wen observed:

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<sup>63</sup> It refers to the phenomenon in China that women undertake almost all parenting, while men contribute minimally as if women are widowed (Gao & Li, 2021).

*Women often do many things at home and hold families together, while men seem to be scattered. The cohesion of the family is managed by women, who have the power to bring everyone together.*

Liu (2017c) also discusses women's power in families as the distinctiveness of Confucian familism's role orientations, despite its consequence of gender inequality in China. Thus, familyhood was particularly significant in participants' constructions of Chinese womanhood, especially before UKHE.

Some, recalling their mothers' and friends' sacrifice for families, considered that they prioritised families over their own needs and lacked self-awareness. Fang commented, *"For mothers who accompany their children's study, their lives revolve completely around their children, and they gradually lose themselves."* Friedman (2003) suggests that families and other communal identities didn't contradict autonomy if the person reflectively reaffirmed them. With more complexity, Mackenzie (2021) conceptualises relational autonomy through a multidimensional and scalar lens, including self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorisation as distinct but interacting dimensions.

I decided to use this concept to understand the relations between selfhood and familyhood in participants' perceptions since the distinctiveness and intersectionality of these dimensions assist in analysing various ways social oppression can weaken autonomy, while also minimising paternalistic representation and recognising people's different degrees of autonomy in different dimensions (Stoljar, 2022). For example, family roles limited alternative choices (self-determination) and potentially some women's self-awareness (self-authorisation), but not necessarily their self-governance.

Some participants suggested the gendered and prescribed family roles, responsibilities and moralities belittled women's autonomy. Specifically, they frequently mentioned struggles of *"swinging between pursuing self-realisation and returning to the family"*. Weitian referred to the popular discourse that *"remaining unmarried and childless for one's safety and peace"* and recalled *"happy girls were all unmarried and childless"* at her work to highlight the conflict of familyhood with women's selfhood after marriage and reproduction. The prescribed and prioritised family and social roles and responsibilities as (potential)

housewives, mothers and family organisers cost them considerable time, financial resources, energy, and self-awareness, all of which were important for their exploration and development of selves. Therefore, many became aware that the expected familyhood restrained their selfhood.

When compared with non-Chinese womanhood during UKHE, some perceived more conflicts between familyhood and selfhood in some Chinese womanhood. For instance, a few noted that while British universities respected women students' reproductive choices and provided some childcare support, some professors in China deemed women students' reproduction as a sin. Jia said, "*They (British universities) don't want women to have to choose between education and parenting*". Shu observed, "*Rather than constantly having to manage the family, women can achieve a balance between their work and personal life because men also look after the children [in the UK]*". These differences in support for women's education, career, and selfhood caused greater conflicts between familyhood and selfhood in Chinese womanhood as observed by participants. This echoes the systematic dichotomy of productive and reproductive deadlines.

Notably, during UKHE, some still perceived more restraints of familyhood on Chinese women's autonomy compared to British womanhood and attributed this to Chinese familism. Existing literature also discusses familism among Chinese women international students (Chan, 2006; Huang & Khan, 2024). While acknowledging the influence of familism, my research further complicates this understanding. Specifically, Chapter 8 (see p.244) elaborates on the impact of British immigration policies and UKHE on the greater selfhood-vs-familyhood contradictions in Chinese womanhood. A significant contradiction in participants' negotiations between familyhood and selfhood lies in their emotions and attitudes.

### **7.3.2 Willingly devoting oneself to family vs resenting self-sacrifice for family**

Many participants observed that Chinese women's willingness to selflessly devote themselves to family was contradictory to their resentment towards self-sacrifice for the family. Specifically, most perceived the selfless devotion to familyhood among women of their mothers' generation in China. For example, Lin observed:

*I think they lack self-awareness. When facing situations, their first thought is probably about their husband, family, and children, not themselves. However, they do harbour resentment. They believe they should handle things a certain way, but deep down, they are unhappy. This accumulated resentment can eventually manifest as complaints.*

Some also observed selfless devotion among their peers. For example, returning to China after UKHE, Yan noted:

*It's particularly noticeable after returning to China that my acquaintances have gradually become yuànfù<sup>64</sup>. I don't know why they live like resentful women ... Even though marriage and reproduction seemed to be their own choices, there were still many complaints and grievances [about marriage and child-care]..they felt overwhelmed, confused, and painful.*

Some used societal expectations to explain these resentments and complaints. For instance, Xuan said “*Stability and family are still considered the greatest achievements and happiness for women [in China]*”. While this belief aligns with existing findings (Evans, 2010; Xie, 2021), in my research, many participants started to question these presumed responsibilities and happiness, particularly during and after UKHE. For example, Qian questioned, “*Why are women accustomed to taking on these responsibilities and having the spirit of selflessness and dedication? This confuses me.*”

Participants’ sensemaking of Chinese women’s complaints and resentment centred around mixed understandings about if and to what extent the family responsibilities they fulfilled were autonomous choices. For instance, Shan noted:

*Grace (another participant) said women willingly chose to devote more energy to their families due to childbirth. I think whether their choices are genuinely voluntary is worthy of discussion.*

Participants’ discussions resemble “hard cases” where feminists debate “whether (and how) the cases illustrate diminished autonomy” (Stoljar, 2022, p. 2). To understand participants’ perceptions of the contradictions between willingness

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<sup>64</sup> This is a term with a negative connotation referring to constantly resentful, bitter, or discontented women.



and resentment of selfless devotion, I will refer to their interpretations and literature on relational autonomy and Chinese feminism(s).

Some participants observed that Chinese women's prescribed roles, responsibilities, and morality were romanticised. For example, recalling a magazine article teaching women to educate husbands "*who were mama's boys*", Xuan exclaimed "*Oh, my goodness! Nowadays, married women must take on the responsibility of educating their husbands. Women are mighty. This responsibility, society expects it from you.*" Speaking highly of Chinese women's multiple roles, Weitian said "*They can completely portray characters like Wonder Woman in superhero films. China should also produce a film featuring a superwoman in the style of XiānXiá*<sup>65</sup>." Yu observed similar portrayals of Chinese women as supernatural beings in the state-controlled media's construction of heroines during the COVID-19 response. Despite glorifying women's sacrifices for the nation, this portrayal, unlike the "iron-women" image of the socialist era, emphasised stereotypical femininity within gender/sex hierarchies to discipline women in contemporary China (Zhou & Xie, 2022).

Additionally, a few participants cited the socialist propaganda that "*women hold up half the sky of the motherland*", aligning with the state's discursive deployment of socialist-nationalist commitment to equality to disguise sex/gender hierarchies and stifle mass struggles in post-reform China (Stewart *et al.*, 2024; Wang, 2021b). The state and hegemonic expectations and discourses disguised women's self-sacrifice for family, society, and nation-state as praise, rewards, and privileges. Therefore, this intricate romanticisation potentially compelled some women to accept the prescribed lots and duties and systematically restrained their alternative choices (self-determination).

Many participants highlighted and questioned some Chinese women's contradictory emotions and attitudes towards selfless devotion to family, namely willingness and resentment. For example, Wen observed:

*A deep psychological aspect is difficult to alleviate. You have selflessly devoted yourself to many. However, this selflessness*

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<sup>65</sup>Literally meaning "immortal heroes", it refers to a genre of Chinese martial arts fantasy.

*is not necessarily something you genuinely feel within yourself, but rather a societal perception of selflessness.*

*After you have acted according to it, you still have your own thoughts and feelings inside, but you struggle to reconcile them with the external expectations, societal norms and even sycophancy. The inconsistency between your actions and feelings leads to a sense of confusion about what to do, causing complaints.*

She articulated dissonance between prescribed responsibilities and autonomous choices and between the prescribed selfless emotions and embodied self-focusing feelings. The romanticisation of women's emotions associated with self-sacrifice for family-nation, "as part of state's affective governance strategies" (Zhou & Xie, 2022, p. 372), could limit their exploration, knowledge of, and compassion for self, and the independent decision-making process. Stoljar and Mackenzie (2022) discuss the gendered self-abnegation or an excessive willingness to defer to the desires of others. Friedman (2003) analyses adaptive preferences that acting in alignment with one's sincere values may nonetheless compromise their ability to sustain this alignment in the long term. Hence, in my research, the romanticisation of Chinese women's emotions served to restrain their self-governance, such as introspective and emotive skills.

Some further pinpointed the restricted space for women to express their thoughts and concerns related to gender and selfhood due to "*the magnified patriarchal voice*" (Xuan) and "*the rampant stigmatisation of feminism*" (Chen) in China. For instance, Emily said:

*They prevent you from voicing your thoughts in various ways, so some women choose to adopt a more radical approach to make their voices heard, leading to others finding more ammunition to criticise or label them as 'crazy' or 'aggressive'.*

Beyond the restrained voices, a few participants perceived "*Chinese women as overlooked and ignored*". To illustrate, in Figure 7-9, a participant used an image featuring a black silhouette of a woman drying colourful clothes under a vibrant ribbon bow in the sky to imply that Chinese women were overlooked in romanticised family roles and responsibilities. Colourful clothes and bow, materialising the romanticisation of their responsibilities and emotions, sharply contrasted the black silhouette, concretising their ignored and sub-ordinated

selfhood. Feeling unheard and unseen echoes Martin Luther King Jr.'s depiction of "a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'" (King, 1964, cited in Mackenzie, 2021, p. 382) and Mackenzie's analysis of social invisibility, potentially weakening their sense of self-worth and accountability. Thus, while existing discussions widely document state-sponsored stigmatisation and violent crackdown on bottom-up feminist dissents in China (e.g., Hong-Fincher, 2019), my research emphasises the impact on Chinese women's self-authorisation.

Figure 7-9 Collage (Group 10)



Discussing whether and to what extent some Chinese women's selfless devotion was autonomous without contexts and histories seemed futile and harmful, so my analysis only attempted to understand participants' perceptions of contradictions between the willingness and resentment of selfless devotion. The romanticisation of prescribed patriarchal responsibilities and emotions compelled their willingness to selfless devotion to family and nation, while the sugar-coating of their emotions and the authoritarian blockage of women's voices fostered their resentment. These potentially diminished their self-determination (e.g., alternative choices), self-governance (e.g., introspective skills), and self-authorisation (e.g., self-worth). Rather than suggesting their low autonomy, my atemporal and general analysis uses relational autonomy as a framework to offer one way to understand the impact of the state's affective governance on women's autonomy in China. A primary discussion around women's selfless devotion centred on their negotiations around marriage and reproduction.

### 7.3.3 Growing marital and reproductive autonomy

Many perceived that diverse family types, incorporating single parents, homosexual couples, “*double income, no kids*” families, and civil partners, were more common in the UK. In contrast, in China, families consisting of a heterosexual couple married in their late 20s with child(ren) were idealised and normalised. Participants often attributed this to cultural and interpersonal differences, incorporating attitudes toward divorce, like the stigmatisation of “*divorced women as devalued*” in China. They also noted institutional differences, such as policies about single parenting, and systematic restraints on reproduction outside of marriage in China<sup>66</sup>. Thus, legislation, hegemonic culture, and interpersonal pressure restrained participants’ self-determination about family types.

Additionally, some contrasted the diverse reproductive attitudes in the UK and the naturalisation of motherhood in China, expressing a desire for greater reproductive autonomy. For instance, Chloe recalled her American female supervisor’s family, which consisted of a boyfriend and a dog, saying “*They didn’t have to have children even in their 40s. I and another Chinese girl thought it was wonderful.*” Thus, many thought that the prescribed ideal of Chinese womanhood, which prioritised a nuclear family life with a heterosexual and stable marriage and childbearing, restrained their marital and reproductive autonomy. Participants’ experiences of diverse family types and reproductive attitudes in the UK grew their marital and reproductive autonomy, including their awareness of and resistance to the heteronormative nuclear family and naturalised motherhood.

Specifically, during and after UKHE, some downplayed reproduction, shifted focus to self-worth, considered marriage institutions oppressive, and questioned the three-child policies’ coercive nature. For instance, some felt increasing reproductive pressure after the enactment of two-child and three-child policies. One group discussed the more severe sex-ratio imbalance than the statistics of the first child. Jia said:

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<sup>66</sup> Although that Sichuan, as the only province, legally allowed birth registration without a marriage to boost the birth rate from 2023, Chinese women’s reproductive freedom outside marriage was still systematically limited (Guo, 2023).

*The sex ratio reached 160:100 or 270:100 for second or third children. Fifth-child births were rare and showed an exceptionally high male ratio, approaching infinity based on mathematical calculations.*

Additionally, some denounced the practice of pressuring women to bear children before marriage, with marriage being permitted only after the birth of a boy in certain regions, while Zhi questioned a preference for more children regardless of their sex in other regions. These participants thought new policies further allowed for sex-based selection and jeopardised women's reproductive and marital agency, echoing pronatalism and sex-based preferences in the existing literature (Rodriguez, 2023).

During and after UKHE, despite experiencing marital and reproductive pressure, some distanced the three-child policy at a state level from their attitudes and decisions at an individual level to (re)gain their marital and reproductive agency. For example, a few explicitly shared their decisions not to reproduce after UKHE. In light of Mackenzie's multidimensional autonomy (2021), these participants' experiences of diverse family and reproductive choices during UKHE boosted their self-determination, continuously growing their self-governance and self-authorisation in their marital and reproductive autonomy after they returned to China. Meyers (2000) suggests that oppressive socialisation impeded programmatic autonomy<sup>67</sup>, but not necessarily local autonomy<sup>68</sup>, while my participants' changes indicated that transnational lived experiences could foster their programmatic autonomy. Some participants discussed their growing marital and reproductive autonomy alongside their increasing sexual and bodily autonomy.

### **7.3.4 Growing sexual and bodily autonomy**

Many perceived Chinese women as relatively conservative, and "*would not associate them with sexuality*" (Qian), attributing this to the gendered moralism regulating their sexuality and bodies from childhood. Referring to the traditional saying that "*Boys and girls are seated separately at the age of seven,*" one-focus-group participants discussed their experiences of childhood education with "*a strong emphasis on sex/gender segregation*" to protect them from male's

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<sup>67</sup> The capacity to make major life decisions.

<sup>68</sup> The capacity to make smaller decisions.

potential sexual harassment and guard their reputation according to the gendered moralism. The construction and practice of this heteropatriarchal discourse could subjectify them as sexually passive while also sexually objectifying them (Evans, 2008; Xie, 2021).

Many participants continued to experience this in their adulthood. Specifically, their parents continued to regulate their clothing to be “*less revealing and provocative*” (Rui) after UKHE. Additionally, Yang noted the common moral judgement of women using tampons and getting HPV tests, which defied the sexual moralism for women to “*keep themselves pure and virtuous*” in China. Many further highlighted that the hegemonic expectations for women to have a “*monogamous and lifelong relationship*” limited their sexual and relationship freedom. Dong questioned:

*If a woman has had multiple relationships, people often label her as unchaste. If she gets divorced, when she goes on another blind date or re-enters into a marriage, her so-called value is greatly diminished. People start questioning her value.*

*I would like to ask, what does it mean to be 'valuable'?*

Dong’s observation of the valuation of women based on their monogamous and lifelong sexuality echoes Xie’s findings on the objectification of women with sexual experiences as “second-hand properties” in Chinese marriage markets, where men’s sexual experiences often didn’t diminish their values (2021, p. 94). Therefore, the double standards of heteropatriarchal moralism and the commodification of their bodies in marriage markets intersected to restrain their sexual, bodily and relationship autonomy.

During UKHE, many perceived their relationships as more conservative, passive, marriage-focused, monogamous, heteronormative, and utilitarian than some non-Chinese women. Some contrasted the norm of dating before committing to a relationship and the possibility of having children without marriage in the UK with the dominant expectation in China that women should aim for heterosexual marriage from the beginning of a relationship. Lubai considered some British peers’ relationships “*simple, wonderful*” and different from the material orientation of relationships in China. A few experienced cultural shocks when

encountering their non-Chinese women peers' greater sexual freedom, like open discussions and non-monogamous relationships, during their undergraduate study in the UK. Besides, Yang observed differences in menstrual products, women's awareness, understanding and choices of contraception and HPV tests between the two countries.

However, some noted that sexual freedom became more normalised for Chinese women with experiences of UKHE compared to those who were only educated domestically. While most participants didn't discuss their changes in sexuality and relationships in focus groups, indicating gendered moralisation, a few shared their changing perceptions of women's sexuality during and after UKHE in interviews. Lei pinpointed:

*Sexual freedom is considered taboo in China. You have limited knowledge and choices about sexuality. However, I feel it is more open-minded here (in the UK) than in China. You can explore more, and even if you don't intend to try everything, you can still learn a lot, so you can have more choices.*

*I think having more [sexual] choices and knowledge is crucial for women to acknowledge their nature and understand themselves. Sometimes, it leads to a rediscovery of oneself as a woman and a deeper understanding of oneself.*

Although gendered moralism, commercialisation of women's bodies and scarce sexuality education restrained some women's sexual and relational autonomy in China (Evans, 2008; Xie, 2021), Lei's experience suggested her growing self-determination (freedom to explore), self-governance (sexual knowledge), and self-authorisation (her reconstruction of womanhood) during UKHE. According to Lorde's concept of the exotic as power (1984), restraints on sexual autonomy could limit other aspects of autonomy, while growing sexual autonomy could enhance other areas of autonomy, potentially explaining why "*some Chinese women discovered their ambitions for the first time [during UKHE]*" (Qian).

Some considered younger generations more accepting of queer sexualities<sup>69</sup> than older generations in China, although some, when expressing their support, saw queer-sexualities as results of emotional trauma and childhood bullying. This

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<sup>69</sup> Rather than non-heterosexuality, I use queer to minimise centring heterosexuality and othering queer-sexualities.

unconscious pathologisation of queer-sexualities, which is widespread in China (Miles - Johnson & Wang, 2018), could potentially restrain some participants' knowledge and experiences of sexual orientation and intimate relationships (self-governance).

During UKHE, some experienced and praised the inclusivity of diverse sexual orientations, as seen in pride parades, pride flags, queer communities, and university policies. For instance, during her undergraduate study in 2010, Ning was introduced to "*LGBT-related topics*" for the first time from university policies and "*clearly felt people's slow acceptance of unconventional sexualities ...despite their sometimes-inherent stereotypes*". The perceived distance from heteronormativity in China and greater visibility and support of queer sexualities in the UK allowed some to better know, explore, express, and understand diverse sexual orientations.

Participants' discussions about Chinese women's sexual orientations often occurred in their sense-making of lived experiences during UKHE. Chloe said, "*I met a [Chinese] lesbian for the first time [in the UK].*" Jia shared her changes from heterosexuality to homosexuality in a supportive focus group. In Figure 7-10<sup>70</sup>, she used a woman's upper body fully in rainbow colours to concretise some Chinese women's experiences of greater freedom to explore and express their sexual orientation during UKHE. The bright and bold colours indicated their bodily and explicit resistance to the heteropatriarchal control of their sexuality and their (re)claim of their bodily and sexual autonomy. Their bodies were the site of control and resistance (Xie, 2021) that embodied their autonomy (Meyers, 2000).

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<sup>70</sup> I translate characters to "Actually, there are so many lesbians offline", indicating online spaces as the primary platform for many lesbians to express their homosexual relationships in China.



Figure 7-10 Collage (Chloe)

线下  
女同  
原来  
这么多



### 7.3.5 Summary

I discussed participants' retrospective awareness of how Chinese women's selves could be belittled through familyhood, self-sacrifice, prescribed marriage and reproduction, and sexual and bodily discipline. This awareness indicated their growing autonomy during and after UKHE. According to Friedman (2003), autonomy can be influenced by the alternative options in the environment, the ability to choose, and character traits. Illustrated by Figure 7-11, many participants experienced new opportunities for self-exploration (self-determination), so they grew imagination of life choices alternative to selfless family devotion (self-governance) and became more aware of devotion's restraints or adaptive preferences, which Mackenzie defines as the inability to imagine alternative ways (2021). Additionally, some participants developed their self-worth and self-accountability in social relations (self-authorisation) during UKHE<sup>71</sup>.

Figure 7-11 Collage (Jing)



Women's choices: more  
options, opportunities,  
open-minded

<sup>71</sup> Chapter 8 elaborates on this change through experiencing autonomous learning with an emphasis on self-responsibility in UKHE (see Section 8.3.3).

Indeed, participants' critique of the restraints of familyhood on their selfhood differs from Xie's findings about young middle-class Chinese women's belief in family commitments (2021). My participants' critical awareness indicated a growing sense of autonomy. To illustrate, in Figure 7-12 and Figure 7-13, Ning used an enclosed botanic garden to concretise "*the expectation for Chinese women to manage family lives in a limited environment before UKHE*" and employed a woman figure marching forward with a suitcase to denote their "*independent exploration of the unknown and focus on selves during and after UKHE*". Many shifted their focus from the social expectations placed on Chinese women with limited options to (re)claiming their various definitions of selfhood and seeking more life opportunities beyond those expectations.

Figure 7-12 Collage (Ning)



Figure 7-13 Collage (Ning)



Almost all participants emphasised their development of autonomy and sometimes decreased focus on familyhood during and after UKHE. Many also encouraged their mothers to enrich their personal lives and focus on themselves. A few participants observed their mothers' growing focus on selfhood, such as their mothers' increasing leisure and social time. These participants believed that their mothers' shift in focus from family to themselves would benefit both parties, indicating participants' increasing emphasis on women's autonomy and a more empathetic, relational understanding of autonomy during and after UKHE.

This chapter first discusses participants' encounters with diverse Chinese womanhood and their concurrent growing consciousness of and resistance to various homogenisations, before elaborating on their awareness of the belittlement of Chinese women's selves and suggesting their growing autonomy. Next, I will bring these discussions together to examine these transformations and their implications for participants' selfhood and broader social (in)justices.

#### **7.4 Negotiating between autonomous, feminist selfhood and state heteropatriarchal-neoliberal constraints**

Through broader UKHE settings, many participants diversified their understanding of womanhood, developed autonomy, and gained more feminist awareness. Concurrently, they became more cognizant of intersectional societal constraints, especially within the context of China. Below, I will first examine their diversified womanhood and developed autonomy, which went beyond the career-vs-family and modern-vs-traditional dilemmas in the prescribed Chinese womanhood. Then, I will discuss their negotiations of autonomy, feminist awareness and societal constraints, particularly those imposed by state heteropatriarchal-neoliberal power.

##### **7.4.1 Developing towards diverse and autonomous womanhood beyond traditional-modern dilemmas**

Through broader UKHE settings, many participants developed more diversified and inclusive understandings of womanhood and individual differences in various aspects, incorporating study, career, temporality, family, mobility, sexuality, relationships, and aesthetics. For instance, Chen said:

*The diverse women's lives and personalities, including both Chinese and non-Chinese women, inspired me to contemplate the essential value of womanhood. As a woman, it has made me ponder about the new possibilities I may have or my behaviours that have constrained me in the past. It has sparked my greater sense of self-reflection. Studying abroad has broadened my perspective on women and everyone else.*

Her narrative suggested a diversified understanding of womanhood and individuals, along with a growing awareness of the restraints on her selfhood. This

self-reflective consideration indicated her autonomy (Friedman, 2003). Almost all participants experienced the development of autonomy during and after UKHE in their own ways.

First, many valued their growing attention to their feelings, which Han owed to often being asked how individuals felt in the UK. These new experiences prompted participants to attend to and value their feelings. This change was significant for Chinese women, whose emotions may be regulated and ignored (see Section 7.3.2).

Second, many participants *“became more proactive and courageous in expressing themselves, such as their genuine thoughts and own attitudes, so they became more authentic during UKHE”* (Stella). Many shared their increasingly brave and confident self-expressions, including openly expressing thoughts through speech and presentation, donning clothing they had hesitated to wear, getting tattoos, experimenting with vibrant and bold hairstyles, and articulating their religious beliefs. This was important to many, as they became more aware of *“the gendered education for Chinese women to be reserved and introverted”* (Xuan). Their emotive, introspective and self-expression skills suggested their developed self-governance (Meyers, 2005) through broader UKHE settings.

Third, some developed a stronger awareness of their self-worth and self-realisation, such as discovering their ambitions and dreams. Fang said:

*When choosing university subjects during the college entrance examination in China, very few people considered what they personally like or excel at...However, after going abroad, I noticed more people were willing to focus on themselves, their strengths, and their passions...*

*I started to realise that I had some small dreams, which may not seem grandiose, but they are important because they are things I want to do. This, in my opinion, is a positive change for Chinese women.*

These senses of self-respect, self-worth and self-recognition in social relations suggested their increased self-authorisation (Stoljar, 2022). Some also experienced increasing self-worth, self-love and a sense of security and stability through witnessing Chinese women’s growing independence in living, academic,

professional, and financial skills. For instance, Qiang, a 19-year-old woman growing up in a “*patriarchal family*”, felt inspired by many Chinese female role models in the UK and said:

*Women are completely independent, strong, and confident individuals, so we should accept ourselves and believe we are the best version of ourselves. We don't need to rely on societal expectations or the judgments of others. The first step is to love ourselves.*

This associated Chinese women’s developing self-governance with their strengthening self-authorisation during UKHE, reflecting the interconnectedness of different dimensions of autonomy discussed by Mackenzie (2021). In participants’ praxis of respecting, loving and being themselves, many highlighted choosing and living the lives they wanted and resisting the social clocks prescribed for Chinese women.

Specifically, many perceived changes in life paths towards more diverse and self-focused choices during, and especially after, UKHE. For example, Renhui said:

*I thought I would be a nǚqiángrén<sup>72</sup> before UKHE. I went through a significant transformation after UKHE...*

*Now I am in a very relaxed state where I don't have to be a career-driven strong woman. After experiencing more, my mindset becomes calmer, and I have more ideas. I may not only focus on seeking promotion or salary increase but also have a broader range of thoughts.*

Similarly, Lubai considered both the career woman and the travelling woman in Figure 7-14 “*successful as they defined, chose, and lived the lives they wanted and enjoyed*”. She highlighted Chinese women’s abilities to define success on their own terms and to make their own life choices, which potentially resisted various restraints on their autonomy discussed earlier. Specifically, both the career woman and the travelling woman chose lives different from the familyhood prescribed for Chinese womanhood. Additionally, Lubai’s travelling woman and Renhui’s “*relaxed state*” were different from the dichotomous choices of either traditional and family-oriented womanhood or modern and career-oriented

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<sup>72</sup> Female strong man (Xie, 2021). This subjectivity is discussed on p.152 and p.168.

womanhood. Similarly, Jia consciously used the strategy “*tǎngpíng*<sup>73</sup>” at work to resist fierce and unfair competition after returning to work in STEM in China.

Figure 7-14 Collage (Lubai)



At the individual level, participants' increasing autonomy transcended the prescribed dilemma of either committing themselves to heteropatriarchal family-nation ideals or engaging in constant investment and ultra-competition within neoliberal subjecthood. They resisted such systematic and intersectional power and (re)imagined alternative ways of being and (re)defined their selfhood. This suggested their growing programmatic autonomy in making significant life choices and their developing feminist resistance to intersectional power relations. Chapter 8 elaborates on the role of UKHE in participants' development of feminist autonomy.

Having studied STEM subjects in UKHE for one year, Renhui, Lubai and Jia emphasised the continuous impacts of the changes in their lives after they returned to China. Their long-term transformations held particular significance due to Chinese women's intense pressure to succeed in STEM (see Section 6.6.1). Indeed, some continued their praxis of independence, self-knowledge, self-respect, self-worth, and self-love after they returned to China which they considered as less free than the UK. They continued to experience strong autonomy that wasn't bound by the environment.

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<sup>73</sup> “Lie flat” has gained a specific meaning in recent years in China. It suggests resisting the societal expectation of constant hustle and advocating for a more laid-back and less competitive approach to life (Su, 2023).

Through the lens of Mackenzie's three-dimensional relational autonomy (2021), participants' development of self-governance and self-authorisation continued, despite their perceived less self-determination in China. My discussion of short-term and long-term autonomy extends the focus on learning autonomy in studies about/with Chinese international students. This relational analysis also helps explain the existing findings on Chinese international students and graduates' increased learning autonomy, independent living, and maturity levels (e.g., Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Wang, 2018).

Similarly, participants who studied SHAPE subjects also experienced “*processes of transformation from a narrow perception of women to a more enriched perspective, and eventually engaging in self-reflection (Kai)*” through broader UKHE settings. For example, Kai, who chose the career end of the dichotomy before UKHE, started “*placing more emphasis on investing in personal interests and hobbies, focusing on self-development, caring less about external opinions, and prioritising well-being*” during and after UKHE. Chun further articulated:

*I have experienced changes in interpersonal relationships, gender relations, and even my future. In these aspects, I have gained a greater sense of freedom, higher aspirations, and a feeling of both physical and psychological liberation.*

This sense of liberation further testified to their strengthened autonomy and its long-term and significant impacts on their lives during and after UKHE. Some of their growing appreciations of individual selves were not limited to themselves but included others' selfhood. To illustrate, Chun summarised:

*I believe that currently, the best way for us as individuals to address these issues, such as social injustice and discrimination against various groups, is to respect the differences of each individual. We should not generalise, or judge based on any specific group but rather approach and perceive each individual with sincerity and inclusiveness. Although it may be challenging to implement, I think it is something that can be achieved on a personal level. It could be a way out for me, at least.*

Chun highly valued the respect for individual selfhood as a way to promote social justice at a personal level and acknowledged both the challenges and the prospects. Similarly, some feminists value cultivating autonomy since

intersectional power hierarchies and social injustice weakened personal autonomy (Mackenzie, 2021; Meyers, 2000). I would like to highlight the feminist importance of participants' development of relational autonomy in contemporary China's state heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism.

Specifically, participants grew awareness of and resistance to the restraints on their selfhood from the prescribed moralism, such as social clocks and the gendered and patriarchal neglect of Chinese women's selfhood. Some also grew awareness of ideologies and power that impeded their imagination of alternative lifestyles and values, such as the state romanticisation of prescribed patriarchal responsibilities and emotions. They further (re)imagined and practised ways of being alternative to the prescribed Chinese womanhood beyond the career-vs-family and modern-vs-traditional dilemmas. Therefore, their growing autonomy resisted and transgressed the intersectionality of state heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism through dichotomisation in prescribed Chinese womanhood to invent new selfhood at personal levels.

This extends the discussion on Chinese international women students, incorporating the positive impacts of their autonomous self-fashioning on challenging traditional gender roles (Kajanus, 2016; Martin, 2022) and their creation of complex identities (Huang & Khan, 2024). Specifically, my participants' diverse personhood differed from the construction of neoliberal personhood highlighted in the literature (e.g., Kim, 2010; Martin, 2022). However, participants' affordance of the lifestyles of lying flat or travelling around without worrying about livelihood and quality of life might indicate their class privileges. Besides, some participants' respect for all individuals' autonomy, illustrated by the excerpt above, held the potential to resist social injustice beyond gender/sex relations. Thus, below I will discuss the implication of their autonomy and feminist awareness on intersectional restraints.

#### **7.4.2 Negotiating between autonomy, feminist awareness, and intersectional societal constraints**

Many participants perceived that non-Chinese women in the UK enjoyed more respect, social status, equity, and power than women in China. For instance, Shu said, *"When I arrived here (the UK), I could truly feel the different levels of*



*power and status the women around me had compared to me. It was shocking.”* Participants observed greater gender justice in the UK than in China across various interrelated aspects of women’s lives, such as heterosexual relationships, families, and work. Some attributed this to differences in the systematic support of gender justice.

Specifically, in the UK, some experienced the legislative, institutional, cultural, and interpersonal protection of feminist discourses, which were systematically stigmatised and repressed in China. For example, Lin said *“My tutor happily and loudly said ‘I am a feminist’ in the very first class [during UKHE]”* and thought it impossible to happen in China due to the sensitisation of the term feminism. Hui contrasted the structural protection of women’s equal rights in the UK with the news about gender-based violence in China, *“considering Chinese women as oppressed”* for the first time. Similarly, in Figure 7-15, Peng witnessed various political activism in the UK, noting that women are entitled to advocate for their equal rights. I consider these participants’ growing awareness of social restraints and oppression of women, gender perspectives, and women’s equal rights as their development of feminist awareness.

Figure 7-15 Collage (Peng)



*It was only after coming to the UK that I became aware of and observed many events like protests and strikes. Through these experiences and Me-Too, I started to understand more about these issues. For the first time, I understand the significance of gender as an important perspective. (Peng)*

Besides witnessing greater gender justice and systemic support in the UK, some developed their feminist awareness through first-hand experiences of gender and intersectional justice during UKHE. For example, Fang benefited from the *“business for her”* initiative in building up her own business in the UK with exclusively Asian women employees. In Figure 7-16, she used the image of a

brown-skinned woman smiling and working in a room filled with sunlight and plants to suggest that female entrepreneurs were nurtured and supported in the UK. Her experiences of institutional support to start her business in the UK fostered her contextualised and historicised understanding of gender justice, particularly in entrepreneurship and employment. She considered the disadvantaged start of women's societal resources and status and noted (in)justice beyond the categories of gender to include race.

Figure 7-16 Collage (Fang)



*Political correctness in the West has impressed me, especially concerning gender and race. As an all-Asian female team, we might receive some privileges. I believe this phenomenon is definitely good for women. Throughout history, women faced many injustices, leading to societal biases favouring men.*

*So, only by overcompensating can we hope to bring things back to a fair position. Western countries, particularly Europe and America are working on correcting these biases and granting certain privileges to women. This benefits women in terms of entrepreneurship and employment. This is different between the UK and China. (Fang)*

Along with their developing feminist awareness, some perceived growing conflicts. Ming noted:

*I feel Chinese women were confined. Even if our thoughts become very progressive, there are gaps between our thoughts and our systems and societal culture... between our thoughts and our actions, giving us strong self-contradictions.*

Similarly, Yan observed:

*Our (Chinese) society lacks tolerance for truly independent-minded women. So, women who have a certain level of awakening find it challenging to take that step forward and often end up in a state of suffering.*

Participants' growing autonomy (e.g., independent thinking) and feminist awareness (e.g., awareness of gender/sex (in)justice) contradicted the systematic societal restraints of women's autonomy, leading to their sense of confinement and contradiction between their thoughts and actions. Considering three-dimensional autonomy (Stoljar, 2022), their growing self-governance and self-authorisation potentially contradicted the external constraints of their self-determination, creating these conflicts.

Specifically, many felt torn because, while they grew resistant to the prescribed womanhood focused on family, they perceived themselves as lacking the knowledge, capabilities, bravery, and social network to make autonomous life choices. Participants who studied in the UK for one-year master's programs often experienced these dynamic feelings of being stuck. The short duration of their stay, the various challenges of living in the UK, and the demanding academic requirements at the postgraduate level often left them little time to fully develop their autonomy to make alternative life choices. The duration and tempo of master's study hardly equipped them to confidently challenge hegemonic social clocks upon returning to China and barely allowed them to develop the strong mobility capital needed to significantly enhance their life choices. Meanwhile, some became more aware of the danger, violence, and hate crimes towards Chinese women<sup>74</sup>, leading to their greater hesitance to step outside the protection of social clocks and families. So, they felt stuck between the dissatisfaction of the arranged life paths and a sense of powerlessness to make alternative choices.

Participants' growing sense of contradiction during and after UKHE were related to changes in both their sense-making and experiences. First, their diversified understanding of womanhood increased their awareness of the homogenisation of Chinese womanhood by gendered moralism and social clocks; their growing autonomy heightened their consciousness of the restraints that familyhood imposed on their selfhood; their growing feminist awareness intensified their experiences of (hetero)patriarchal realities. For example, during UKHE, Wei re-interpreted her experiences in China:

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<sup>74</sup> Chapter 8 elaborates on these experiences and awareness (see Sections 8.2.3 and 8.2.5).

*Before UKHE, I lived in a country with a strong emphasis on collectivism and a relatively patriarchal society. So, women experience more constraints [in China than the UK].*

Additionally, their autonomous and feminist selfhood sensitised them about neoliberal subjectivities, like quick tempo and anxious beings, and about state neoliberal-heteropatriarchal restraints. For instance, during UKHE, Shu became more aware of the gendered and aged competition in workplaces in China and felt *“the age restraints in job markets particularly unfair for older women like myself.”* Thus, participants' development towards diverse and autonomous womanhood, along with their growing feminist awareness, made various societal restraints on women more visible to them.

Second, compared to their experiences in China before UKHE, many highlighted that they experienced considerably more gender and age discrimination and stronger pressure to compete in employment, family, and society after they returned to China from their UKHE. Participants attributed this to their increased ages, higher academic degrees, greater needs for financial independence and financial pressure to support families. Their experiences of gender discrimination were exacerbated after they developed higher academic achievement and entered the workforce. Similarly, Xie (2021) finds that middle-class Chinese women experienced greater sexism when transitioning from education to the workplace. My participants' experiences highlighted the severity of patriarchal realities, particularly in competition in public spaces and high-ranking levels, where scarce resources and power lie. The growing discrimination and pressure, related to state heteropatriarchal and neoliberal power<sup>75</sup>, distinctly opposed their developed awareness and value of self, womanhood, and gender justice.

Many experienced conflicts between their autonomy and feminist awareness and societal restraints as dynamic negotiations. The processes and their positions within these negotiations varied across individuals. For instance, Renhui described *“I have been in a constant struggle between sticking with a career I dislike and exploring a path I enjoy.”* For Wen, this process felt like *“walking in the dark*

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<sup>75</sup> For analysis, see Sections 6.6 and 7.2.2.2. While participants mainly discussed societal restraints on their autonomy from China, I highlighted injustices and constraints from the UK in Chapter 8.

*without knowing where you are but keeping moving forward anyway, one step at a time.*” A few, after seeing and feeling hurt by patriarchal realities, decided to do feminist PhD research to create ways out of the contradictions. Jing, pursuing a PhD in feminism in UKHE, said:

*I strictly classify and put feminism into my work and research. This research is interviewing myself, so if I set aside my identity as a scholar, I want to live happily, have a nice life, and enjoy more freedom in my personal life. I build my own comfort zone to de-gender. I focus on the positive aspects, such as being in the UK and free from family constraints. So, my understanding of myself as a woman is not to think of myself as a woman.*

Similarly, some perceived the conflict between their growing feminist awareness and individual happiness as women. This seems to lend further evidence to claims made in other research which has explored the relationship between awareness of discrimination and wellbeing. For example, Napier *et al.* (2020) find that women, particularly in societies with high sexism, experienced better subjective well-being when they denied gender discrimination, suggesting that this denial is an individual coping strategy that could contribute to perpetuating gender injustice. My findings shed more light on the reasons for this correlation between awareness of gender discrimination and well-being: I would like to foreground the emotional struggles and personal costs of women’s feminist awareness of patriarchal experiences.

Jing experienced both secondary and first-hand emotional distress from doing feminist research as an emerging feminist scholar and a woman from a state heteropatriarchal society, so she needed to consciously minimise the emotional impact of gender/sex injustice on her. This could explain her strategy of “*de-gendering*” in her personal life, while consciously directing her feminist effort towards work. So, “*de-gendering*” meant to rid of gender injustice, including her “*fight for gender equity at work*” and minimising the related negative distress and impact on her personal life and wellbeing. Her feminist work and “*de-gendered*” personal life illustrated some participants’ negotiations of feminist endeavour and individual happiness. This highlighted the emotional labour of feminist efforts and demonstrated their pragmatic wisdom and resilience.

Similarly, many felt various negative emotions due to the dissonance between their growing feminist awareness and the heteropatriarchal experiences, particularly in China. Jia articulated “*I was in considerable pain, hurt, and profound loneliness. I immersed myself in learning about feminism, and I witnessed the suffering of many other women.*” She felt powerless due to her everyday experiences of gender/sex and sexuality discrimination as a lesbian woman in STEM, so she resorted to online feminism for support. While she built some connections and a sense of belonging, her growing feminist awareness from engaging with feminist content highlighted her heteropatriarchal realities and intensified her pain. After returning to China, some participants' sense of conflict intensified, and their feelings of powerlessness persisted, sometimes turning into hopelessness.

While often owing their stuck-ness and powerlessness to their own lack during UKHE, participants tended to attribute their hopelessness to societal restraints after they returned to China<sup>76</sup>. For example, Yan observed, “*In China, most Chinese women dislike their current lives but find themselves unable to break free from that cycle, feeling trapped and self-contradictory.*” Four out of five participants from the remote study group felt powerless in their lives and sometimes had to resort to superstition. Elizabeth said, “*As I live longer, I start to realise that there is no way to change the reality as if everything is predetermined by fate.*”

Meanwhile, participants adopted diverse understandings, attitudes, actions, and plans in trying to break through the confinement in their constant negotiations. A few recognised and named the contradiction as “*reverse cultural shock*”; a few used the strategy of “*Satyāgraha or non-violence, non-cooperation*” (Jia), particularly “*tǎngpíng (lying flat)*”, to resist gender discrimination and fierce competition in workplaces. For instance, they refused to comply with employers' demands to wear makeup and chose not to overwork for potential promotions. Similar to Jia's interpretation of *tǎngpíng* as “*Satyāgraha*”, Su (2023, p. 137) sees lying flat-ism as Chinese youth's “morally conscious resistance to capitalist exploitation and the state” and a “non-violent uncooperative declaration of a way

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<sup>76</sup> Chapter 8 elaborates on (neo)colonial and neoliberal power in UKHE to explain their different reasoning (see Section 8.2.2).

of life...for autonomous subjectivity”. Participants’ innovative use of this strategy was their feminist resistance to intersectional social injustice.

Additionally, some were actively developing diverse professional skills and accumulating different capital for future re-emigration to a new country to leave the societal restraints in China. For instance, Qiang observed:

*Social environment plays a significant role in shaping one's personality. Many women who find it challenging to adapt to the domestic environment choose to stay abroad. This is a significant reason for emigration among Chinese women.*

These participants recognised the significance of the societal environment in exercising their feminist autonomy and identified societal constraints in China. However, almost none saw hope for changing society, thus viewing re-emigration as a means to break through confinement and conflict. This echoes recent publications on the emerging buzzword *rùnxué* (run-ology), the study of running away from China. While existing literature suggests that China’s Zero-COVID policy (2020-2022) fuelled strong desires to dissent among the population and a surge in interest in emigration from China (Chan, 2023; Huang, 2022), my participants’ re-emigration was a desperate escape from perceived prevalent gender/sex and sexuality injustice and fierce competition to regain their self-determination.

A few noted individual differences in Chinese women returnees’ potential to make changes in societies. For example, Shu, pursuing a master’s in UKHE in her thirties, imagined her life returning to China and said:

*Although my mindset has changed, it doesn't necessarily mean I can bring about definite changes in my environment upon returning to China. My environment may remain unchanged, so despite the education I received here, I might still be treated according to the same old norms in that environment.*

Comparing herself with her younger sister, who was in UKHE from undergraduate to postgraduate study and returned to China, Shu said:

*My sister's values have all been shaped in the West. So, when returning to China, she felt out of place. She has developed a comprehensive understanding of feminist ideologies...and has embraced this independent Western mindset. Upon*

*encountering conflicts in China, her behaviour and response differ from mine. She always confronts and challenges disparities in education and workplaces. So, her presence may instigate changes in her environment.*

Shu thought their different ages and durations of study during UKHE caused their different understandings, attitudes, and actions in a society with systematic gender/sex and age discriminations, thus differences in the interaction between their feminist awareness and societal constraints.

Additionally, some participants' feminist awareness extended beyond their individual needs to encompass all women due to their connected experiences of constraints. This led to their feminist understanding grounded in the realities faced by women in China. They particularly emphasised the importance of theorising feminism with China's characteristics and building dialogical space for feminist education. Chen said:

*Having identified patriarchal problems, we now need to seek theories and methods for change in the Chinese context. Currently, a platform for impartial discussions is lacking and awakened women need ideological guidance in China. It will be crucial to raise awareness on effectively disseminating feminist ideologies and promoting people's correct understanding.*

Echoed by a few, her call for “*impartial discussion*” on matters of gender/sex (in)justice in China responded to the state-sponsored crackdown on feminist activism (Hong-Fincher, 2019) and systematic silencing of feminist voices through stigmatising feminists as gender traitors and national traitors (Huang, 2023a; Huang, 2023b). Working as a school English teacher after returning to China, Chen consciously used feminist pedagogy to inform her daily interaction with pupils and to resist gender stereotypes in school textbooks. Her ongoing negotiations of power in teaching and restraints in curriculum suggested her continuous exercise of autonomy and feminist awareness to promote her students' feminist awareness and autonomy in China.

Thus, in participants' negotiations of their autonomy, feminist awareness and intersectional societal restraints, they experienced various negative emotions, such as self-contradictions, while also using diverse and innovative strategies to break away the contradictions, incorporating pursuing feminist PhD research, non-



violently uncooperatively lying flat, preparing to re-emigrate, developing a local and communal understanding of feminism, and exercising feminist autonomy in their immediate environment. Participants' diverse strategies echo the existing discussion on Chinese youths' negotiations beyond comprehensive *sùzhì*, including retreatism, escapism and more radical and active forms of resistance (Brossard, 2022; Chan, 2023). However, Su's (2023) prognosis of Chinese youth culture moving towards radical and active forms of resistance isn't clear among my participants. Nonetheless, their negotiating strategies could have an impact beyond their personal lives, extending to their social networks in both personal and professional contexts, and future feminist knowledge building. This provides some insights for the call to understand the long-term impacts of IHE on Chinese returnees' lives and their potential socio-political implications for Chinese society (e.g., Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015).

## **7.5 Navigating integrative and contradictory individual-collective relationships**

My feminist relational perspective to understand participants' autonomy differs from an atomistic understanding, so, this section extends the discussion to their autonomy in interpersonal relationships. Generally, through broader UKHE settings, participants developed more integrative individual-collective relationships and became more aware of contradictory characteristics of individual-collective relationships in prescribed Chinese womanhood. Below, I will elaborate on their growing awareness of comparatively (co)dependent and isolated Chinese womanhood, followed by a discussion of their changing constructions of individual-collective relationships.

### **7.5.1 Growing awareness of comparative (co)dependence and isolation**

Participants perceived differences in various aspects of independence between Chinese and non-Chinese women during UKHE. Regarding financial (in)dependence, some considered Chinese women frivolous due to their family's financial support, while viewing non-Chinese women as frugal because of their self-funded status. To illustrate social (co)dependence, Yi noted that Chinese women were more afraid of being alone than other nationals, and therefore

preferred staying together when dining, travelling, and participating in group activities. Moreover, Shu observed:

*I felt that women in the UK have their own independent rights. They are not considered mere attachments to men or families. They possess their own independent personality and unique significance. They have the right to be respected and have their own voice. This includes women being able to pursue the career they desire, instead of being influenced by their parents or partners.*

Shu's observation included women's self-determination ("*independent rights*"), self-governance (abilities to pursue their aspirations) and self-authorisation ("*independent personality*"). Thus, while many focused on differences in financial (in)dependence, participants discussed various aspects and dimensions of autonomy. Rather than essentialising non-Chinese women as more autonomous than Chinese women in the UK, participants' discussions suggested their increased awareness of potential restraints that could weaken their autonomy.

First, some noted the constraints of financial dependence. For example, Xuan returned to China after UKHE, thinking:

*Women of my generation, born after 1995, are influenced by many modern and emerging thoughts, want to change, and chase their dreams. However, they can't be financially independent yet, so they can only accept the changes society imposes on women.*

The concession of individual dreams suggested that financial dependence heavily restrained their choices. Chinese middle-class women's family status provided them with certain social class privileges, such as transnational mobility and opportunities for IHE. However, their class privilege didn't transcend the patriarchal restraints of their lives, as they often experienced financial dependence alongside increased control from families. Dong noted:

*Most of our studies rely on family's financial support, so we have to consider families' opinions. But they (non-Chinese women) are self-funded, so they don't have to consider their family's views...Perhaps they are freer than us because they are more independent.*

Second, some participants' class privileges could also weaken their awareness and motives to resist dependence and patriarchal arrangements. For instance, Ming used Figure 7-17 to highlight the admirable independence and confidence of non-Chinese women in UKHE, especially Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian women, as some of them pursued PhD with their government's funding, worked to earn their living fee, and cared for their children as single mothers. Meanwhile, she reflected if seeing Chinese women leading similar lives, she would intuitively consider them miserable due to the differences from the ideal life for Chinese women. This ideal involved class privileges, such as financial and temporal abundance (Liu, 2014), contradicted women's hard work and indicated families' financial support. This ideal was gendered as financial independence was considered essential for men, while financial dependence was seen as part of happy and successful familyhood for women in China. Thus, the good-life ideal served as classed and gendered hegemonies (Xie, 2021), restraining some women's financial self-authorisation.

Figure 7-17 Collage (Ming)



*Many women from the Middle East and Southeast Asia are remarkable. (Ming)*

Third, some felt that intergenerational co-dependence restrained their autonomy. Many negotiated with strong family pressure that restrained their residential, professional, and marital choices to remain within China, and sometimes within their hometown. For instance, Dong said:

*We (Chinese women) cannot move to a new country without considering parents. Although I currently stay in the UK, I am thinking about developing further and eventually moving back to China to take care of my parents. However, Brits completely disregard this idea.*

While she felt depressed in China and was married to a British citizen in the UK, Dong wished to return to China due to the perceived responsibility to care for her parents and their emotional ties. According to her, her younger brother also studied in UKHE and felt differently. Indeed, a few noted daughters' stronger emotional bond with their parents and greater responsibilities to reside near their parents to provide care. Despite their desire to stay in the UK, some returned to China after UKHE due to their intergenerational co-dependence with families. Lubai further highlighted her financial pressure to provide quality elderly care to her parents. Their strong moral, emotional, and financial responsibilities to care for their parents seemed to continue restraining their autonomy during and after UKHE. Gendered filial piety, constructed as a core virtue for Chinese nationals via law<sup>77</sup> and familistic propaganda, along with the one-child policy and the marketisation of childcare, education, and elderly care, reinforced intergenerational reciprocity<sup>78</sup> (Liu, 2017b; Zhang, 2016a).

Moreover, many participants considered Chinese students (co)dependent and isolated, while seeing non-Chinese peers independent and integrated in academic and social lives during UKHE. Academically, many contrasted their compatriots' dependence and preference for solitary, competitive work with non-Chinese students' autonomy and collaboration in teamwork, as illustrated by Figure 7-18.

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<sup>77</sup> According to China's Marriage Law, 'It is a child's duty to support his or her parents'. 'Frequently visiting parents' was added into the law on the protection of the elderly's rights (cited in Xie, 2021, p. 138).

<sup>78</sup> For example, the one-child generations generally felt strong moral duty to reciprocate their parents' love through various filial practices, with parents maintaining influence in their adult children's married lives through practical support like childcare (Zhang, 2016a).

Figure 7-18 Collage (Renhui)



*I thought Chinese girls studied hard on their own. After experiencing more discussion-based classes in UKHE, I feel women students in European or Western countries tend to integrate into groups more easily.*  
(Renhui)

Participants owed these differences to different national cultures, but not gender. For example, Yan compared her experiences working with Chinese and non-Chinese peers in group projects and said:

*I found their (non-Chinese peers') sense of teamwork quite strong, as each member contributed to the group and showed great attentiveness to others' ideas while expressing their own... However, when collaborating with some Chinese classmates... I asked for their opinions, but they often didn't have any ideas. So, working together felt exhausting and demotivating.*

Participants' perceptions of Chinese international students' weak collaborative skills and sometimes lacking learning autonomy echo the deficient and stereotypical representation of them in many Western HEIs (Freeman & Li, 2019; Heng, 2018a). This implies Eurocentric ways of engagement and collaboration and its marginalisation of OTHER ways (see p.147 and p.237). Contrarily, Kai noted:

*I feel they (non-Chinese students) may have a slight tendency towards individualism. The teamwork issue isn't because Chinese people don't know how to do teamwork, but because Chinese people and foreigners have a different understanding of teamwork. Foreigners may think that teamwork should be scheduled according to their own schedules, but Chinese might prioritise teamwork and plan their individual tasks afterwards.*

Chinese students might approach collaboration by prioritising groups over individual needs, echoing the literature's discussion of international students' tendency to avoid dominating conversations to reach a group consensus and their

sense of responsibility to help peers (Scudamore, 2013). Participants also attributed their perceived lower degree of academic and social integration to their poorer English than other nationals (see p.147).

To conclude, compared to independent and integrated non-Chinese peers, participants perceived Chinese womanhood as (co)dependent and isolated due to their financial dependence, the classed and gendered good-life ideal, state-promoted intergenerational co-dependence and privileged Eurocentric ways of collaboration in IHE. Their growing awareness of comparative (co)dependence and isolation occurred alongside their developing consciousness of independence and integration. This development foreshadowed their changing constructions of individual-collective relationships.

### **7.5.2 Changing from contradictory to integrative Individual-collective relationship**

Many participants discussed differences in individual-collective relationships between non-Chinese and Chinese women. Specifically, many noted non-Chinese people's focus on individuals, such as "*(their) emphasis on 'I' rather than 'we'*" (Rui). Additionally, some perceived non-Chinese people's respect, understanding and support for the diversity of individuals within collectives. This indicates a perspective of seeing communities as respecting individual selfhood and believing in the positive synergy between individual growth and community development. Different from this integrative relation, many felt that their individual selfhood contradicted collectives.

For instance, while many considered family a significant community, they also perceived Chinese women sacrificing their selfhood for familyhood (see Section 7.3.1). Additionally, the state-sponsored romanticisation of prescribed heteropatriarchal responsibilities and emotions compelled some Chinese women to devote themselves to family and nation (see Section 7.3.2). Moreover, a few felt that various collectives contradicted their individual selfhood. For example, Lin said:

*In Western culture, with its maritime history, independence and individualistic tendencies are more easily accepted. Conversely, in China, personal thoughts are often disregarded. They don't*

*care much about what an individual thinks. They want you to stop focusing on yourself and prioritise common interests, like the family or the collective. They may even go as far as encouraging you to think about the Party and the people.*

In the excerpt, the collective extended beyond families to include Chinese nationals as defined by the party-state, indicating the authoritarian characteristics of the collective, which tried to deprive individuals of their selfhood. Lin also indicated that the collectives became involuntary collectivisation of unwilling or sceptical individuals. Indeed, some recalled their tendency to avoid various social activities in groups and communities in China before UKHE. They perceived a conflict between heteropatriarchal, authoritarian, and involuntary collectivisation – such as familyhood and nationhood – and their individual selfhood, leading them to choose isolation for self-protection.

A few with only STEM backgrounds felt particularly isolated in China before UKHE. As a lesbian woman in STEM, Jia “*felt very lonely and witnessed the suffering of many other women*” due to normalised gender and sexuality discrimination. Retrospectively, Tian attributed her intense isolation in China to the necessity for individual achievement in intense competition. Their experiences of discrimination and ultra-competition in STEM (see Section 6.6.1) involved a competitive and hierarchical approach to interpersonal relationships, further exacerbating individual disconnection and isolation. Hence, compared to non-Chinese women, many perceived a stronger sense of isolation from collectives due to conflicts between their selfhood and involuntary collectivisation, as well as fierce competition.

Similar to previous discussions on participants’ growing autonomy, although many perceived Chinese women as (co)dependent, they experienced growth in independent problem-solving skills, undertaking responsibilities, living alone, and managing loneliness and risks during and after UKHE. For example, Gabriel noted that living outside Chinese students’ comfort zones and familiar environments posed many challenges and required them to face and solve these issues independently. Specifically, many discussed how their journey through UKHE involved developing essential life skills like cooking, which also deepened their understanding of selves and relations to others through self-care, self-observation,

and self-reflection. Their increasing independence led them to feel more capable of multitasking, more mature, aware of limitless possibilities, and ready to explore the unknown. Thus, after leaving behind some protections and restraints in China, they developed autonomy by facing and dealing with challenges during UKHE.

However, different from isolation, some participants grew their autonomy alongside their sociability. To illustrate, in Figure 7-19 and Figure 7-20, Ronglu used the picture of a one-person meal and an image of a hot pot to suggest that Chinese women in UKHE, facing various challenges in a new environment, enhanced their living skills and developed independence and sociability through cooking and eating with others. They often socialised with their compatriots and international students through food culture to build new communities of connection and belonging.

Figure 7-19 Collage (Ronglu)



Figure 7-20 Collage (Ronglu)



Similarly, in Figure 7-21, Weitian used the silhouette of two hikers to suggest that Chinese women in UKHE “*were independent and always willing to help and support others*”. Unlike participants’ perceptions of a collective-individual contradiction, this indicated that their need for community and companionship didn’t necessarily contradict their autonomous selves.



Figure 7-21 Collage (Weitian)



Some experienced significant changes in their sociability through broader UKHE settings. For example, Tian recalled her changes from “*solitary fight and struggle*” before UKHE to “*socially capable*” during and after UKHE and said:

*Instead of being isolated, I now have a stronger desire to integrate with the community. I believe this change is influenced by peers from other nationalities. Observing their way of [social] life has affected how we live.*

Counterintuitively, she felt the need and willingness to fight and struggle alone in a collectivist society in China but developed desires to engage with communities in an individualistic society in the UK. She developed a new understanding of relating to self and others by seeing the synergy between individual growth and community development among her non-Chinese peers during UKHE. This was different from solitary competition and motivated her to socialise more. Similarly, unlike the prevalent criticism received in social interaction in China, many experienced positive encouragement in socialisation in the UK. This gradually shifted their understanding of individual-collective relations from contradiction to possible integration. For instance, some participated in community volunteering for the first time during UKHE, like in charity shops, community art, environment protection, and youth support. They felt their individual needs, wants, feelings, voices, thoughts, explorations, and self-worth were more allowed and encouraged in social activities in the UK. They saw themselves as part of the social groups and aligned their development with that of the collectives, becoming more willing to engage, connect, and share in communities, and even form groups.

Some participants perceived more freedom and possibilities to form alternative types of interpersonal relationships in the UK, which had long-term impacts after they returned to China. For instance, Jia used Figure 7-22, Figure 7-23, and Figure 7-24<sup>79</sup> to narrate her journeys of (re)constructing Chinese womanhood before, during and after UKHE respectively. Figure 7-22 concretises her loneliness and hurt from gender and sexuality discrimination as a lesbian woman in an elite STEM university in China. Figure 7-23 symbolises her experiences of sexual diversities, visibility and support of queer communities and shared identities with queer women in the UK. In Figure 7-24, the warmth, acceptance, connection, and support she experienced in international queer communities in the UK helped her embrace herself, diverse sexualities, and diverse individuals. She became more accepting, inclusive, optimistic, and more willing to connect with and support others, even after she returned to China.

Figure 7-22 Collage (Jia, before UKHE)



*I saw my and others'  
loneliness and wounds  
(Jia).*

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<sup>79</sup> I translated the text from Chinese to English, but both the images and texts in these three figures are taken directly from the collage she created.

Figure 7-23 Collage (Jia, during UKHE)



*Diversity, similarity, and support (Jia)*

Figure 7-24 Collage (Jia, after UKHE)



*Compared to the pessimism and discomfort before going abroad, I have seen more silver lining. As I grow and enrich my spiritual world, I am more capable of accepting every person...*

*In this challenging environment, I value friends who share my values even more. I hope to accompany each other and grow together. Seeing them often brings me immense support and comfort (Jia).*

Friedman (2018) differentiates non-voluntary communities from voluntary communities, which could be formed by marginalised groups who shared oppression, like women's communities and queer groups. Initially, some participants felt that involuntary collectivisation, like certain aspects of familyhood and nationhood, contradicted their selfhood, leading them to avoid socialisation. However, their positive social experiences during UKHE fostered an integrative understanding of individuals and collectives, prompting them to seek and construct voluntary communities to grow both their autonomy and social connections.

Their perspectives on individual-collective relationships shifted from dichotomisation to integration, benefiting their personal lives and offering alternatives to individual isolation and competition. These alternatives differed from various hierarchical ways of relating, such as heteropatriarchal and authoritarian collectivisation and meritocratic competition. Lorde (1984) values changing the oppressor's relationships in pursuit of truly revolutionary changes, and Song (2023) emphasises the importance of alternative ways of relating in her (re)imagination of community-based socialist feminism in China. Specifically, voluntarily formed feminist communities held the potential to counter and transform the antifeminist predicament in China, characterised by female competitions and women-men conflicts (Huang, 2023a; Huang, 2023b). Thus, in my research, participants' long-term transformations in their ways of relating have the potential to weaken the antifeminist plight and challenge related power dynamics.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

This chapter elaborates on participants' transformations in their construction of Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings and wider transnational intersectional contexts. I first discuss participants' encounters with diverse Chinese womanhood and their concurrent growing consciousness of, and resistance to, various homogenisations. Then, I delve into their developing awareness of the belittlement of Chinese women's selves, suggesting their increasing autonomy. These discussions culminate in their negotiation between autonomous, feminist selfhood and state heteropatriarchal-neoliberal constraints. Through a relational lens on autonomy, I then examine their growing awareness of comparative (co)dependence and isolation of Chinese womanhood, before elaborating on their construction of increasingly integrated individual-collective relationships.

This research aims to address the research question: In what ways did participants construct Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings and wider transnational intersectional contexts?

In Chapter 6, I argued that many participants' contradictory constructions of modern womanhood versus traditional womanhood were shaped by the intersectionality of state heteropatriarchy and state neoliberalism through dichotomisation. However, through broader UKHE settings, many participants became more aware of and resistant to the homogenisation, belittlement, restraints, and contradiction of the prescribed Chinese womanhood. They also developed towards diverse, autonomous, feminist, and integrated selfhood. These transformations were most salient in their negotiation between state heteropatriarchal-neoliberal constraints and autonomous, feminist selfhood.

These transformations offer alternative ways of being beyond the traditional-versus-modern dilemma and alternative ways of relating beyond the individual-versus-collective dilemma. Thus, their (re)construction of Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings transcended the prescribed womanhood shaped by state heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism. Yin (2022) urges feminists to establish new possibilities of subjectivities for ordinary individuals to dismantle unjust intersecting structures in China. In my research, participants' (re)construction of alternative ways of being Chinese women and ways of relating provides possibilities beyond the fashioning of modern-vs-traditional Chinese womanhood. The next chapter draws on the fashioning of Chinese womanhood discussed in Chapter 6 and the alternative ways of being Chinese women discussed in Chapter 7 to engage in conceptual discussion and propose heuristic concepts for future research.

## 8 Chapter 8 Autonomous Futures

*I feel that all the changes in my living environment, especially my year of studying in the UK, had a profound impact on me at the time and, I believe, will continue to do so in the future. It is one part of my past experiences that taught me I must continue seeking out new things and even change my living environment.*

*I want my thoughts to always be about thinking more, feeling more, and experiencing more. I believe that only through experiencing and knowing more can I truly understand what my heart desires. All these experiences are part of my past, shaping who I am, and I want to continue to gain courage. I want to have the courage to make both big and small decisions. (Jia)*

*Most Chinese women's lives were well-arranged [by others] in China, but moving to a new environment where no one would help arrange things meant that you had to be on your own. I first felt this in September 2017. Just in that first month of arriving in the UK, I experienced significant personal growth because I realised that I had to take responsibility for my own life from then on. It was this kind of realisation – because I made the choice, and now I have to take responsibility myself. (Zhixing)*

### 8.1 Introduction

Life history analysis and the previous two chapters inform this chapter. However, due to concerns about representation and word count limitations, I have chosen to summarise selected episodes from participants' life stories and use excerpts rather than collage images for conceptualisation<sup>80</sup>. Thus, in this chapter, I aim to theorise participants' (re)construction of Chinese womanhood through UKHE based on their life stories and experts, thereby developing heuristic concepts open to contestation.

Chapter 6 discusses the fashioning of Chinese womanhood in contemporary PRC. I argued that many participants' contradictory constructions of modern womanhood versus traditional womanhood were shaped by the intersectionality of state heteropatriarchy and state neoliberalism through dichotomisation. Building upon this framework, chapter 7 elaborates on participants' transformation, highlighting their development of autonomy through broader UKHE settings. I observed various

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<sup>80</sup> I explained my decision regarding this approach to representation in Sections 5.5.3 and 5.5.4.

ways their autonomy could be understood in relation to their social conditions, especially within the context of (state) heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism.

For instance, while autonomy is often discussed in the literature on neoliberal subjectivity (de Lissovoy, 2018; Read, 2009), Chinese youth's negotiation of *sùzhi* (Fong, 2007; Liu, 2011) and the construction of modern Chinese womanhood (e.g., Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021), some of my participants' autonomy showed differences from the neoliberal anxious autonomy. For instance, as seen in the excerpts above, while both Jia and Zhixing highlighted their focus on themselves through broader UKHE settings, their experiences seemed to differ – Jia found a drive for new possibilities, whereas Zhixing realised the necessity of self-responsibility. Therefore, there is a descriptive and explanatory need for me to analyse and better understand participants' various autonomies.

Additionally, relational autonomy as a feminist remaking of autonomy (Stoljar, 2022) inspired me to integrate the discussion of autonomy with social (in)justice embedded in Chinese women's histories and contexts, so there is a normative value to further analyse participants' various autonomies in their social conditions. Hence, in this chapter, I will conceptualise participants' construction of autonomy in relation to heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism to theorise the implications of their transformations for their social conditions. While chapters 6 and 7 focus on elucidating participants' (re)construction of Chinese womanhood in the past and present, my conceptualisation in this chapter, driven by the explanatory need and normative value, seeks not only to understand but also to (re)imagine the power dynamics in their past-present-future (re)construction.

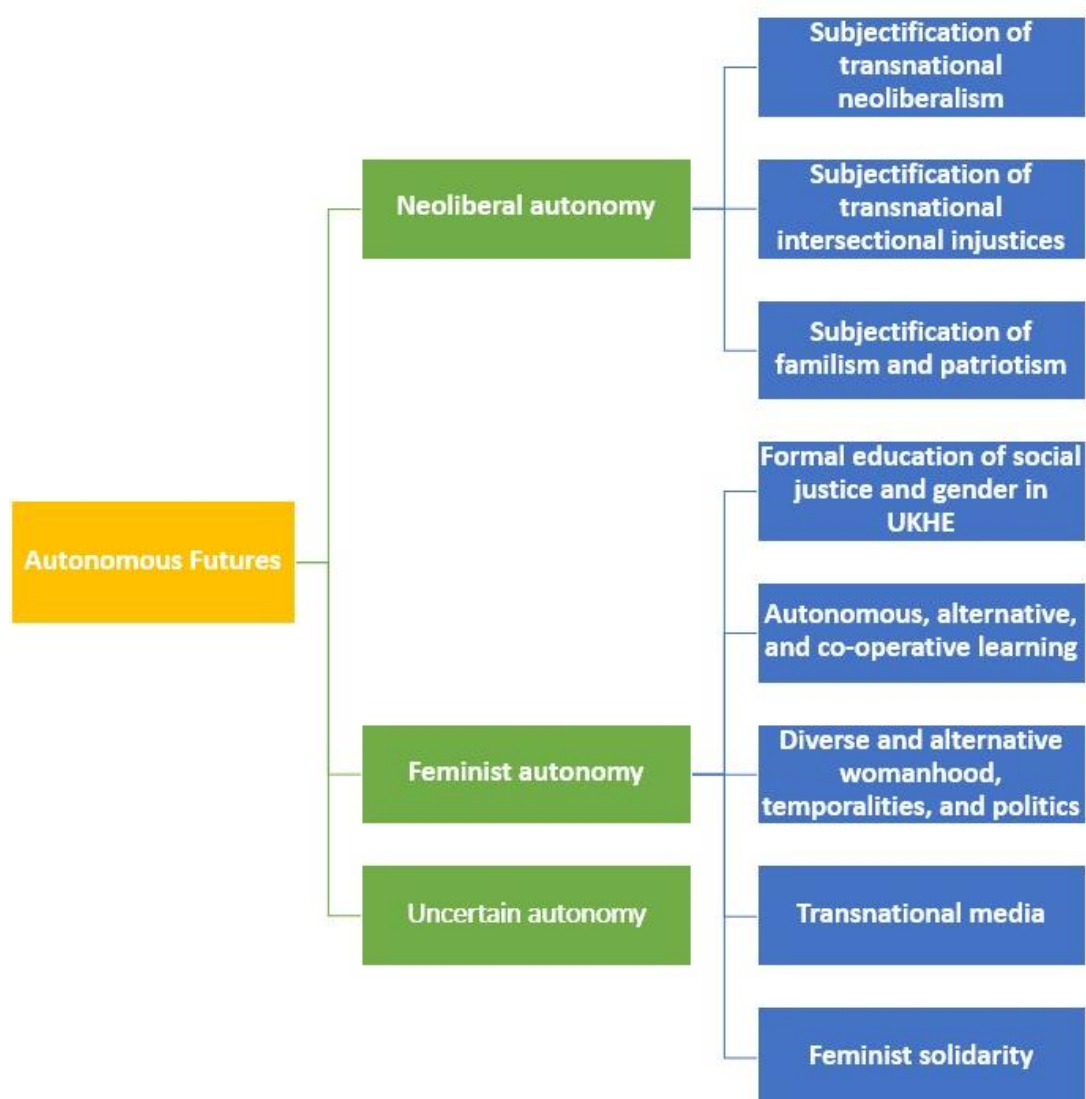
Furthermore, Chapter 7 discusses participants' transformations through broader UKHE settings; this chapter delves deeper into the role of UKHE in these transformations. UKHE played significant yet complex roles, so I have structured this discussion in alignment with the participants' autonomy in relation to heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism. This approach aims to elucidate the potential roles of UKHE in shaping participants' autonomy within this socio-political context.

Specifically, I conceptualise three ways in which their autonomy could be understood in relation to heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism: neoliberal

autonomy, feminist autonomy, and uncertain autonomy. Rather than viewing these as static and ahistorical traits, I conceive them as representing participants' dynamic, complex, and multifaceted processes of identification within multi-layered, temporal, spatial, and ideational contexts.

Below, I will discuss these three ways along with subsections outlining specific factors related to UKHE (see Figure 8-1). These specific factors are not determinants of participants' relations to heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism. Instead, they should be situated within the broader context of individual participants' processes and contexts, serving as part of the mechanisms through which their (re)construction of Chinese womanhood occurred. I will elaborate on these mechanisms in the conclusions of each section and at the chapter's end.

Figure 8-1 A visualisation of Chapter 8





## **8.2 Neoliberal autonomy**

### **8.2.1 Introduction**

I theorised neoliberal autonomy as one way in which participants' development of autonomy related to the intersectional heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as an ideology, advocates for the organisation of political and social matters based on market principles like competition, economic efficiency, and rational choice (Harvey, 2007; So & Chu, 2015). This entails a political logic that transfers the responsibility for services offered by the government in areas like education and social welfare to individuals (Blackwell, 2012). Neoliberal governmentality requires personal responsibility and technologies of self-managing individuals (Foucault *et al.*, 2008; Rose, 2002).

Neoliberal autonomy refers to participants' entrepreneurial ways of being that encourage and require individual accountabilities, autonomy, competition, and careful calculation, like the constant need for self-improvement accompanied by anxieties (de Lissovoy, 2018; Ibled, 2023). In my research, their neoliberal autonomy was based on a dichotomous understanding of neoliberalism and heteropatriarchy. For instance, many considered constant self-improvement and individual achievement in "meritocratic" competition the main and often only means to gain and exercise their autonomy and resist gender injustice. Many developed neoliberal autonomy in their (re)construction of Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings and wider transnational intersectional contexts.

To provide an anti-essentialist yet concise understanding of their autonomy, I conceptualise neoliberal autonomy as complex and multi-faceted processes of subjectification of transnational neoliberalism, transnational intersectional injustices and familism and patriotism.

### **8.2.2 Subjectification of transnational neoliberalism**

Participants' subjectification of transnational neoliberalism refers to the internalisation of neoliberal governmentality and the entrepreneurial ways of being from their lived experiences between China and the UK. In China, many experienced and internalised seemingly non-gendered meritocracies in

intertwined academic, professional, and personal lives, thus overlooking gender discrimination (see Section 6.6).

To illustrate professional experiences, Elizabeth's ten-year tenure at a private high school, which prioritised performance in competition and exhibited systematic sexism (e.g., women's absence in senior management), caused her to feel pressured to compete and internalise sexism. She believed her workplace was gender equal through various tactics, incorporating invoking neoliberal discourses like individual choices and accountability in meritocratic competition, naturalising gender differences like "*women's inherent irrationality and emotional instability,*" and masculinising meritocratic workplaces by viewing rationality as vital in workplaces and leadership. While these beliefs helped her reconcile with experienced injustices, they also led to a lack of self-confidence and acceptance of patriarchal oppression.

Regarding families, participants' sense-making of their class privileges and positionalities within neoliberal market economies particularly mattered in their development of neoliberal autonomy. First, while many used (re)emigration to the UK with parental financial support to resist patriarchal restraints and gain autonomy, a few both emphasised and overlooked their class privileges embedded in their (re)emigration when constructing (Chinese) womanhood and relating to women of lower classes.

For instance, after UKHE, Fang re-emigrated to run her business and benefited from the policies supporting women of colour in business in the UK. After three years of entrepreneurship, she believed that advancing women's educational and class status in competitive markets was the only means to assert autonomy and resist heteropatriarchal constraints, like reproductive coercion. However, she "*considered illegal immigrant Chinese women without HE as reproductive machines*" and attributed "*their internalised sexism*" to their lack of educational and economic capital. Meanwhile, as a "legal" elite immigrant, Fang identified with her middle-class, autonomous, and childless Chinese women friends. Thus, she formed a hierarchical relationship with women of disadvantaged class and immigration status, developing a classed view of Chinese womanhood. While differentiating herself from "the abject" by her immigrational, educational, and

economic strengths, she attributed her success to her efforts in competition and overlooked her family's financial support. Consequently, both the patriarchal barriers faced by lower-class women and Fang's class privileges, which underpinned her (re)emigration and benefits from quota policies, became less visible in her understanding. Heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism intersected through contradiction, rendering privileges and barriers related to class and gender/sex invisible.

Additionally, a few participants' positionalities in neoliberal markets mattered in their neoliberal autonomy. Like many, Grace felt powerless regarding women's collective rights when confronted with omnipresent news on gender-based violence in China, while also perceiving growing autonomy in her life after gaining international education capital. Consequently, she "*wanted to help Chinese women who weren't t as lucky as*" her. However, she perceived conflicts between the interests of her husband's company, the primary familial financial source, and the rights of women employees. For example, "*the company was under the state's legal pressure to pay for women employees' maternity leave and the pressure to survive in competitive markets*" (Grace). This conflict propelled her to align herself with her family, namely the company. So, despite having a child herself, she considered "*women's reproductive time a waste (for the company)*", rationalised companies' gender discrimination in job markets, and naturalised women's caretaker roles. Her entrepreneurial "choice", which obscured the patriarchal restraints she had wished to resist, needs to be contextualised within the state-sponsored heteropatriarchal market economy (Wang, 2021b; Yin, 2022).

While the state mandated that companies bear full financial responsibility for extended maternity leave (Connelly *et al.*, 2018), ostensibly portraying state support for women's rights, the state-led market economy coerced companies to prioritise economic efficiency. This made maternity leave a waste of company resources and positioned women employees as barriers to profit maximisation (Xie, 2021). Like Fang and Grace, a few attributed the suffering of "the abject" women under reproductive coercion to their own choices and low educational and economic status, suggesting a dichotomous understanding of heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism in constructing Chinese womanhood. Their sense-making of class privileges and positionalities in market economies shaped their subjectivities as

urban, middle-class, internationally educated, and entrepreneurial Chinese women, who they considered the opposite of rural, “illegal”, lower-class, and uneducated Chinese women.

Besides, many experienced and believed in gender-neutral meritocracy in UKHE. UKHE’s neoliberal preoccupation with economic efficiencies, competition, and students’ responsibilities often hindered many participants from *seeing* intersectional injustices. Participants cited advocacies of individual choices, diversity, and inclusion in UKHE as evidence of freedom and justice. However, these advocacies often (re)produced social injustice. For example, Ning employed the discourses of choice, freedom, and diversities of UKHE when justifying “natural” gender STEM gaps.

Bamberger *et al.* (2019) analyse how the internationalisation of HE often advocated progressive humanistic views, like cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and diversity, while also pursuing them via neoliberal practices, like markets, competition, and rational choices. The entanglement of neoliberalism and progressive ideals in IHE promoted neoliberalism in the masquerade of progressive values. This mixture rationalised and overlooked inequalities embedded in internationalisation’s transformation “into a meritocratic global race” (Bamberger *et al.*, 2019, p. 208).

For instance, in the neoliberal framing of IHE, the deficit conceptualisation of international students and related pedagogical interactions (Bamberger *et al.*, 2019; Stockfelt, 2018) fostered a categorical, dichotomous, and hierarchical mindset among some participants in my research. Specifically, many perceived the dichotomy of Western modern and neoliberal womanhood and Chinese traditional and (hetero)patriarchal womanhood and preferred the former.

For example, when differentiating herself from the perceived passiveness of Chinese students in classes, Rui emphasised her quick transition from the passive listening learnt in Chinese education to active seminar discussion in UKHE. Rui also contrasted British women’s bravery with Chinese women’s hesitance to protect their rights in the UK, attributing this hesitance to “*their lack of confidence and awareness of their rights*”, while overlooking the systematic intersectional power

relations that constrained them. Her contrast between Chinese passivity and British activity mirrors the prevalent deficit framing of international students (e.g., Mittelmeier *et al.*, 2022).

Based on this, she constructed a dichotomy between “*Chinese traditional and family-oriented womanhood*” and “*Western individualist, modern and career-oriented womanhood*”, favouring the latter. When she heard that a Chinese woman transferred to a lower-ranking university to finish her PhD sooner and care for her child, Rui remarked:

*It's quite a waste. She used to be a great student at prestigious universities, but now because of this situation (motherhood)...I find it quite wasteful. From the data, women have higher educational attainment...but when women graduate from great universities, due to family ties...it is quite a waste of resources.*

Rui valued education and people's time by economic efficiency and considered unpaid reproductive work wasteful, suggesting her internalisation of time as industrial clock time, resources, and commodities that can be measured, bought, sold, and maximised (Adam, 1995). She believed that family responsibilities were the main barriers to productivity and career development, particularly for high-achieving women. This indicated her preference for neoliberal womanhood, reflecting the dichotomous understanding encouraged by deficit conceptualisations of international students in the neoliberal framing of IHE.

Besides pedagogical interactions, participants' engagement with (neo)colonial curriculum also (re)produced the hierarchical dichotomy of Western neoliberal womanhood and Chinese (hetero)patriarchal womanhood. Many used critical theories they learnt in UKHE to critique the oppression women experienced in China and other majority-world countries, but rarely various intersectional injustices they experienced in the UK<sup>81</sup>.

For instance, when recounting her experienced harassment in the UK, Zhi applied intersectionality from her studies to differentiate between white women's active protest against harassment and Chinese women's silence, which she fully attributed to “*family's oppression of Chinese and Asian women*”. The Western-

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<sup>81</sup> Section 8.2.3 elaborates on their experiences of injustices in the UK.

centric and (neo)colonial curriculum in UKHE contributed to the absent critiques of power relations in the UK in participants' sense-making of injustices. When discussing their learning of feminism and critical theories, participants only cited Western theorists, like R. W. Connell and Foucault, highlighting the absence of theories from their backgrounds and the majority world in their curriculum.

This epistemological absence had three implications. First, the Western-centric curriculum and the teaching of criticality in UKHE narrowed participants' practice of criticality to their home country and the majority world, limiting them from fully knowing the complex power relations influencing their ways of being. Specifically, participants' rationalisation of marginalisation and discrimination in UKHE indicated its lack of self-reflexivity through a Western-centric curriculum.

Second, participants often conceptualised the majority world as problems that needed theories from the minority world to improve and solve, (re)producing “the global hegemony of Western scholarship” (Mohanty, 2003b, p. 336). Indeed, participants' sensemaking of Chinese womanhood centred on their oppression, mirroring Mohanty's analysis of the monolithic and ahistorical image of third-world women under Western feminist eyes (2003b). Thus, UKHE curricula that solely include theories from the minority world and occasionally use local examples from the majority world risk not only being tokenistic in the IHE but also perpetuating the global neo-colonial epistemic hegemony, like (re)constructing hierarchical dichotomies of neoliberal womanhood in Western democracies and patriarchal womanhood in Chinese authoritarianism.

For instance, in entrepreneurship courses, Milan used criticality learnt in UKHE to praise the British policies for helping businesswomen and criticised gender and age discrimination in workplaces in China. However, she viewed “*construction work as female oppression*” and planned to marry up to a man of higher social class for more power, indicating a biological-essentialist, patriarchal, and entrepreneurial understanding of womanhood. By citing British policies and contrasting the status of women in China, she highlighted entrepreneurship and modernity in the UK. This encouraged her to construct neoliberal womanhood as the antithesis of womanhood in patriarchal, authoritarian China. In this way, while patriarchal and authoritarian power in China was revealed and criticised, the neo-

colonial knowledge production that created hierarchies – such as West vs. China, neoliberalism vs. patriarchy, and democracy vs. authoritarianism – went unnoticed and was often internalised. Therefore, a (neo)colonial curriculum that lacked self-reflexivity, limited participants from fully practising criticality and caused the (neo)colonial knowledge reproduction, reproduced hegemonies of defining the Western neoliberal ways as the modern and superior ways of knowing and being.

Third, considering the partnership between the state and neoliberalism in China (Song, 2023) and the intersectional neoliberalism-heteropatriarchy in fashioning Chinese womanhood, some participants' internalisation of neoliberal womanhood as the modern womanhood risked obscuring and perpetuating the state authoritarian-heteropatriarchal power in China. Specifically, some considered meritocratic competition as proof of fairness, thus denying the presence of gender discrimination.

To conclude, some participants internalised entrepreneurial ways of being with a dichotomous understanding of heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism from their lived experiences in neoliberal education, workplaces and families between China and the UK. These participants' subjectification of transnational neoliberalism through the broader UKHE contexts aligns with the existing findings on Chinese women's enhanced identification with mobile self-entrepreneurship through IHE (Kim, 2010; Martin, 2022). Additionally, their subjectification process suggested both the predominance of neoliberal approaches to internationalisation in UKHEIs within global elitism (Lomer *et al.*, 2023) and Chinese students' active roles in (re)producing global elitism and inequalities (Xu, 2022). These neoliberal experiences often occurred alongside their encounters with transnational intersectional injustices.

### **8.2.3 Subjectification of transnational intersectional injustices**

Participants' subjectification of transnational intersectional injustices referred to the internalisation of intersectional injustices from their lived experiences between China and the UK. Many faced various intersectional stereotypes, prejudices, micro-aggression, discrimination, and marginalisation based on their race, nationality, language, gender, age, size, and sexuality at different stages of

their stay in the UK. They experienced heightened injustices in the form of verbal and physical attacks during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For instance, Ming encountered four instances of discrimination, including verbal insults and physical assault, when wearing a mask. Some youths attacked Yunzhu and her Chinese women friends in a cinema. Qian elaborated:

*When the pandemic hit, our vulnerabilities suddenly became exposed. People don't care about what we have learned here or the contributions we make to the local community. They still view us as outsiders. Especially as women, they perceived us as physically weaker, making us more susceptible to discrimination.*

Against the backdrop of attacks during the COVID-19 pandemic, many shared similar feelings of being powerless and hopeless outsiders who didn't belong to British society, regardless of the length of their stay. Ming noted:

*After experiencing several assaults, I developed PTSD, fearing going out. I experienced a profound sense of helplessness, feeling angry, while also knowing I could do absolutely nothing.*

After discussing these experiences with white women and Chinese men, many suggested that the discrimination was specifically targeted at young Chinese women. Shu, attacked on the street by a group of white Britons shortly after her arrival in the UK, noted:

*Chinese women often encounter discrimination, particularly from white people. We've encountered unfriendly attitudes and discriminatory behaviours directed at Asian women, particularly Chinese women, rather than white women.*

*When we just arrived in the UK, we didn't know how to protect ourselves and were hesitant to involve the police due to language barriers...So, we silently endured, feeling like they were treating us like playthings disrespectfully...We discussed it with our Chinese male classmates, and they rarely encountered such issues.*

Similarly, Ge (2021) highlights that Chinese women students were particularly vulnerable to mental issues and racial discrimination during their IHE during the COVID-19 pandemic. These injustices, stemming from their intersectional differences from the white, male, British, Anglo-centric, heterosexual insider,



contributed to participants' lack of safety, belonging, and inclusion in the UK. Shu's worries about her English proficiency, mirroring stereotypes of Chinese students' language "deficiencies" (Heng, 2018b), and her lack of safety, belonging and trust in institutions prevented her from reporting incidents to authorities. Many participants encountered discrimination in the UK, but none reported it to the police or UKHEIs.

While Chang *et al.* (2021) attribute Chinese international women's students' low tendency to report experiences of sexual harassment to cultural factors like saving face and filiality, I would like to highlight the impact of intersectional injustices on their psyche. Some experienced micro-aggression and marginalisation, but rationalised or dismissed such experiences, for example, by attributing them to their own "*paranoid delusions*" rather than the hostile environment. Some experienced structural barriers to learning, socialisation and well-being as international students, but none thought UKHEIs were responsible. Instead, they adopted a more individualist approach to explain and improve their experiences. The systematic making of "nobody-ness" weakened some participants' self-authorisation, leading to their rationalisation of discrimination, distrust of authorities, and hesitance in protecting their rights and holding institutions accountable in broader UKHE settings.

Some participants' lack of safety and belonging often contributed to their decisions to return to China after their studies in UKHE. For instance, despite Jia's desperate need to find an alternative to systematic heteronormativity in China, her racist-xenophobic-heteropatriarchal experiences in the UK caused her return. Notwithstanding Han's value of mobility, her experiences of sexual harassment and burglary contributed to her decision to return to her hometown after her graduation.

During their time in UKHE, participants experienced intersectional injustices in the UK, often incorporating gender-based violence, racism, and xenophobia, alongside (hetero)patriarchal restraints from China, such as gendered social clocks, familism, filial piety, and moralism. For instance, Hui, a Chinese woman PGR student in STEM, attributed the global STEM gender gap to patriarchal expectations of women as caretakers at home, sexual harassment and gender

discrimination in workplaces, and the Matilda effect<sup>82</sup> in society. She further observed the more marginalised participation of East Asian women in the STEM (associate) professorship in Western countries, attributing it to the restraints of gendered familism and the stigmatisation of high-achieving women in their home countries, which affect their mobility, life choices, and academic pursuits. Additionally, she highlighted the impact of structural racism and xenophobia in Europe on “*the disappearing East Asians in middle-management*”.

Subjectification of transnational heteropatriarchal injustice in families, education, and workplaces fostered some participants’ biological-essentialist, sometimes biological-determinist, understanding of womanhood and internalised sexism. Zhi experienced omnipresent sexism and pressure to marry from her patriarchal, patrilinear and patrilocal family and kinship, which practised male-line primogeniture<sup>83</sup>. Her encounters with sexism in family, workplaces and the marriage market in China, as well as sexual harassment in the UK, fostered her biological-determinist view of womanhood with a sense of hopelessness toward gender justice<sup>84</sup>. Additionally, some internalised sexist experiences, negatively affecting their subjectivities. Specifically, Liang’s and Lei’s experiences of sexism in families, schools and social lives led to their rejection of girlhood and womanhood and suppression of selfhood.

Participants’ experiences of transnational heteropatriarchal injustice were often intertwined with affective experiences of transnational neoliberalism, like pressures of high performance, speed fetish, insecurity, and anxiety. I will use Yu’s experiences during her pregnancy as an international PhD student in UKHE to illustrate some participants’ structural patriarchal-xenophobic-neoliberal experiences.

Unlike home students, who were entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave, international students were only allowed “*a maximum of 60 days of maternity-related absence (Yu)*”. While Yu could access 52-week maternity leave if she

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<sup>82</sup> The tendency to downplay or attribute women’s achievements to men, often resulting in their contributions being undervalued or overlooked.

<sup>83</sup> A system of inheritance by the eldest son from the family’s heritage of monogamy with concubinage. Zhi experienced sexism due to sex/gender and her family being in a concubinage line.

<sup>84</sup> Section 8.2.4 elaborates on this.

returned to China, this was impossible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Yu, reproduction was already challenging for PhD students because of the speed fetish and high-performance expectations in academia, but this policy heightened the challenges for international PhD students, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yu “*felt very guilty for her pregnancy as it slowed down PhD progress*” and experienced post-natal depression, though she “*had to toughen up due to the 60-day restraints*”. Structural restraints, like immigration legislation and visa regulations, limited some participants’ available life choices and restrained their self-determination.

Concurrently, Yu was influenced by intersectional injustice related to gender, social classes, and regional differences from China. These included familial disapproval of naming her child after her grandmother’s surname, gendered pressure related to the speed fetish, reports of sexual violence against Chinese women, and online discussions regarding class and urban-rural disparities in feminist development. Together, her transnational patriarchal-xenophobic-neoliberal experiences led to her particularly pessimistic view of the present-future of Chinese women’s rights and her struggles with mental health and motherhood. Similarly, many participants’ experiences of intersectional injustice from the UK and China affected their well-being, life opportunities and construction of Chinese womanhood.

Specifically, some participants’ experiences of the speed fetish and high-performance requirements in UKHE, combined with marriage and reproductive pressures with deadlines from China, often exacerbated their dilemma of balancing career and family. For instance, Ning perceived systematic pronatalist pressure at age 30, while also considering the timing undesirable for reproduction due to the high tempo of her PhD, visa restrictions on her length of stay, and unstable accommodation and healthcare as an international student in the UK during the pandemic. Xenophobic immigration policies and the neoliberal demand for productivity in UKHE, along with heteropatriarchal chrono-normativity in China, further constrained some participants’ choices between academic pursuits and reproduction. Struggling between these dichotomies, many “chose” neoliberal womanhood, aiming to use neoliberal achievement to resist heteropatriarchal constraints. Yu reflected that she unconsciously internalised the

speed fetish from both Chinese and British contexts as she strove to excel quickly in various competitions like marriage, reproduction and completing her PhD at a young age. These experiences limited some participants' imaginations of alternative ways of being, thus restraining their self-governance.

Besides ways of being, subjectification of injustices also affected some participants' ways of relating among women. For example, experiencing discrimination from a female principal during a job hunt, Liang observed:

*She showed discrimination based on my age and gender. In her role as principal, she approached gender with a dominant stance, unconsciously aligning with the side of power and male dominance prevalent in our society...women tend to involuntarily compete and face strong peer pressure in job markets and marriage markets due to limited opportunities to them in society.*

Liang suggested that women's competition was coerced by the perceived scarcity of resources in heteropatriarchal markets. Indeed, the subjectification of the intersection of gender-based injustice, market competition and state authoritarianism cultivated a gendered scarcity mindset in some participants. This mindset involved perceptions of limited resources, power, and opportunities for women.

For example, while Ronglu analysed the unfairness of women as the main domestic caretakers, she consciously chose to avoid women supervisors in her PhD application due to "*women's emotional instability from double burdens*" and their competition for gendered and limited social resources. Despite her systematic analysis of the patriarchal oppression of women, she used such understanding to further discriminate against women since she saw women's disadvantages in meritocratic performances.

Besides meritocracy, the subjectification of authoritarian heteropatriarchal experiences also fostered a scarcity mindset. For instance, Zhixing, feeling discontent with the state's control of women's reproduction by forbidding egg-freezing in China, proposed economic and moral criteria to allow egg-freezing for urban middle-class women who were either married or planned to marry. This suggested her acceptance of limited reproductive rights for women under state

authoritarian heteropatriarchal governance and the internalisation of women's economic and marriage status as indications of their entitlement to scarce rights.

I also observed a gendered scarcity mindset in participants' discussions on news concerning transgender people in the UK. Qian and Chloe believed in "*individual liberty to choose their gender identities*" while adhering to biological-essentialist understandings of women. They cited news about transwomen in women's toilets, changing rooms, and sports in English and Chinese languages, worrying that admitting trans-women's rights would harm cis-women's rights. Both participants had experienced various gender injustices, potentially making them vulnerable to the biological essentialist view. Additionally, British mainstream media, which frequently used anti-trans rhetoric in reporting such news (Johh, 2021; Rozado & Goodwin, 2022), capitalised on their experiences of gender injustices to incite fear and resistance to trans women's rights, (re)producing a scarcity mindset.

Existing research discusses Chinese international women students' experiences with transnational injustices, including: institutional discrimination based on their gender, ethnicity and culture in host countries, alongside sexism and patriarchy in China (e.g., Ge *et al.*, 2019), "transnational double exclusion" during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hu *et al.*, 2022, p. 72), their experiences as the racialised and excluded other, and their othering of "refugees" and "Africans" (Martin, 2022), suggesting the intersections of gender, class, race, nationality and culture in their pursuit of global elitism (Goff & Carolan, 2013; Zhang & Xu, 2020). My research discusses the implications of these experiences for Chinese women's psyche, especially their construction of Chinese womanhood in broader UKHE settings.

To conclude, many participants experienced various intersectional injustices in the UK, leading to a lack of safety, belonging, and inclusion, and prompting their return to China after UKHE. During their time in UKHE, their experiences of intersectional injustices in the UK coexisted with heteropatriarchal restraints from China. The subjectification of transnational intersectional injustices affected participants' well-being, life opportunities, and the construction of Chinese womanhood. Specifically, the internalisation of transnational heteropatriarchal injustice fostered biological-essentialist views and internalised sexism in some participants. Xenophobic immigration policies and the neoliberal demand for

productivity in UKHE, along with heteropatriarchal chrono-normativity in China, coerced many to internalise the dichotomy of neoliberal womanhood versus heteropatriarchal womanhood, “choosing” the former. This limited their imaginations of alternative ways of being beyond entrepreneurship and ways of relating beyond female competition based on a gendered scarcity mindset. The subjectification of these injustices diminished some participants’ self-authorisation, self-determination, and self-governance.

Some participants’ experiences of injustices related to families and nationality compelled them to adopt an entrepreneurial mindset. Below, I will discuss the impact of their familial and patriotic attachments on their development of neoliberal autonomy.

#### **8.2.4 Subjectification of familism and patriotism**

Subjectification of familism<sup>85</sup> and patriotism<sup>86</sup> referred to participants’ internalisation of familial and patriotic cultivation of emotions, values, and moralities. Some participants showed a co-existence of emotional connectedness with both their family and the country, illustrated by my exchange with Zhi, a former schoolteacher of Moral and Political Education in China who was pursuing a master’s degree in UKHE.

*Zhi: I believe men are more suited for roles outside the home, determined by their genetic makeup.*

*I: Why do you think so?*

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<sup>85</sup> Familism, a fundamental value of Chinese culture, refers to beliefs that emphasise family responsibilities, “the interdependence among family members for support, emotional connectedness, familial honour, and solidarity” (Xu *et al.*, 2020, p. 160).

<sup>86</sup> Patriotism, generally referring to love for one’s country, is contentious due to its diverse contexts, histories, forms, degrees, and impacts (e.g., cosmopolitan, liberal, moderate, extreme, and moral patriotism) (Lin & Jackson, 2023; Nussbaum, 2008).

Zhi: (3-second pause) *Good question, who gave me such thoughts?*

*When women make significant decisions, I find their vision less far-reaching than men's. My father often challenges my decisions, urging me to consider alternatives. I sometimes think his suggestions may be better, although not necessarily my preference.*

*But how do we define what's better? Is this concept of 'better' imposed on us externally? Are their definitions the same as mine?*

*Despite this, I choose to compromise. In education, top-tier teachers [in China] tend to be men. I think, inherently, men's logic is indeed clearer than ours, and they can make more optimised judgments. So, I can accept this situation.*

I: *How do you know their logical advantage stems from genetics rather than, like, gendered differences in upbringing and expectations? Is there a possibility?*

Zhi: *Of course, there is, but I prefer to believe it is determined by genetics.*

I: *Why?*

Zhi: *Because this way, it makes the difficulties I face seem a bit more bearable. I feel this is something I was born with, and I have experienced some hardships because of it, rather than it being caused by the environment, my family, my country, and my society. For me, this is easier to accept; it's my inclination, not about right or wrong; it's about what people are more willing to believe.*

I: *Indeed, such inclinations exist.*

Zhi: *Alternatively, if I were to believe it's acquired, would I then be questioning my country, my family, and my culture?*

I: *Do you think that family, culture, and country cannot be questioned? That they cannot change or improve?*

Zhi: *They can certainly improve, but not in this way.*

I: *What do you mean?*

Zhi: *Perhaps more indirectly.*

I: *Because a direct approach might clash with culture, is that what you mean?*

Zhi: *Yes, precisely. This is a situation that culture has created for me because the school I taught in was a Confucian system school.*

Zhi's belief in men's inherent suitability for external affairs and high-ranking positions echoes the naturalisation of gender/sex differences and hierarchies in contemporary China (Spakowski, 2011), while her questioning of the imposed notion of "better" reflected her socially constructed view of womanhood. During UKHE, she named experiences in her patriarchal, patrilinear, and patrilocal family as oppression for the first time, despite the unbearable emotions from feeling hurt by family-nation-culture. When negotiating between love and hurt, she "chose to" believe the former, dismissing perceived oppression and attributing differences to genetics.



While she critiqued patriarchy and aspired for feminist futures, her biological determinist view fuelled a profound sense of hopelessness towards gender justice. She said:

*I believe achieving gender equality is impossible until men can give birth. Our inherent function in nurturing the next generation disadvantages us. This biological difference hinders such equality.*

Her choice to avoid being hurt may be understood as an adaptive preference formation<sup>87</sup>. However, through a lens of multidimensional autonomy (Mackenzie, 2021), while social subordination constrained Zhi's self-determination, it didn't necessarily impair her self-governance and self-authorisation. Specifically, her previous role as a teacher of Moral and Political Education in a Confucian school reinforced her internalisation of patriarchal familism and patriotism through her emotional connectedness with family-nation. The moralisation of patriotism through education often invoked Chinese Confucian cultural rhetoric to provoke students' emotional and moral connectedness to the family-country, and love for the party-state (Lin & Jackson, 2023; Zhou & Xie, 2022). Zhi's struggle to question the (love from/for) family-country reflects this moral patriotism in *sùzhì jiàoyù*<sup>88</sup>, which deems it immoral not to love one's family-country (Lin, 2017; Lin & Jackson, 2023). The subjectification of the state's moral patriotism through emotional connectedness with family-country fostered Zhi's acceptance of the patriarchal ideologies and restrained her self-determination.

Like Zhi's negotiations, while highly valuing critical thinking in UKHE, Milan emphasised the imperative of compulsory education in China to cultivate "*Chinese identities, namely the inherent sense of belonging and Chinese culture, namely familism and filial piety*". Inspired by Yangminism<sup>89</sup>, she appreciated familism as the opposite of "*Western individualism*". She valued the individual expression and critical thinking from UKHE to resist the authoritarian homogenisation in China. However, her attachment to family-country restrained her from fully embracing

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<sup>87</sup> An unconscious process where an individual turns away from a preference to avoid the unpleasant cognitive dissonance linked to maintaining it (Elster, 1983).

<sup>88</sup> Education for quality.

<sup>89</sup> The CCP endorsed Yangminism, a significant branch of neo-Confucianism, to reinforce individual moral obligations like filial piety towards family-nation, as illustrated by Xi's propaganda regarding the concept of family-nation-world (Wang *et al.*, 2020).

liberalism and fostered her acceptance of biological determinism and patriarchal family structures.

For instance, she viewed “*construction work as female oppression*” due to women’s inherent physical weakness and planned for heterosexual hypergamy to gain more power. She further expressed her nationalistic views in her objection to feminist politics in Nordic countries, criticising “*their legalisation of prostitution and allowing 14-year-old girls to marry*”. She asserted “*New China abolished prostitution to protect women’s rights*” but remained silent when I prompted her for further elaboration. The only relevant information I found was in Chinese news sources (e.g., Zhuang, 2017) which seemed to “unveil” the oppression of women in the West, Middle East and Africa, serving the nationalist propaganda that “‘my’ country is better than ‘yours’” (Lin & Jackson, 2023, p. 346). This indicates nationalism, advocating for citizens to love their country due to its accomplishments and strength and to feel shame during times of national weakness, and to prioritise the nation’s interests over their own for the nation’s prosperity (Lin & Jackson, 2023).

Consequently, while Milan felt inspired by British policies favouring businesswomen and critiqued gender discrimination in China when experiencing a neo(colonial) curriculum in UKHE (see p.239), nationalism restrained her critical stance on women’s situations in China. Both her experiences of the neo(colonial) curriculum in UKHE and nationalist education in China clouded her critical assessment of the patriarchal, authoritarian, nationalistic, neo-colonial, and neoliberal influences in her life.

Besides belongingness and love, a few experienced concurrent fears in their subjectification of familism-patriotism. For instance, Lubai, who checked with me multiple times about the safety of discussing Taiwan’s political status, confessed that her current university job didn’t allow her to dissent from the party-state. This sensed danger, combined with her perceived lack of choices and emotional tie to family-nation, coerced her into accepting the status quo in China, incorporating gender injustice. The state’s emphasis on the consequences of being unpatriotic and demonising unpatriotic people (Lin, 2024) potentially coerced her into adopting adaptive preference.

Some participants displayed their patriotism through intolerance of political dissent. For example, Lei argued with her tutor about Taiwan, saying, “*I’ve invested my emotions in seeing Taiwan as our compatriots and our land*”, echoing studies on Chinese international students’ nationalist attitudes (e.g., Fei & Jackson, 2022). Some exhibited their patriotism more implicitly. They viewed individual Chinese people abroad as representatives of the nation and applied gendered standards to moralise Chinese women’s behaviours to protect national honour and avoid humiliation. For instance, Yan, discussing a Chinese woman she thought was looking for a British man to stay in the UK, noted, “*I felt she is losing our Chinese people’s face,*” indicating she, Chinese individuals and China shared the same face. This patriotic perception that individual Chinese abroad represent China placed individuals in a secondary role (Lin & Jackson, 2019) and involved disciplining them according to the state’s definitions of Chinese womanhood, thereby restraining their autonomy transnationally. Thus, some participants’ emotional ties to family and nation, integral to their identity as Chinese women, fostered a sense of belonging but also constrained their autonomy and critical understanding of the hegemonic power shaping Chinese womanhood.

Patriotism also restrained feminist development in China, as illustrated by the state-sponsored rhetorical making of feminists as gender and national traitors. When discussing feminism in China, many participants primarily referred to online verbal fights between feminists and antifeminists, and their consequences, like “*fuelling gender conflicts*” (Chen), “*stigmatising feminism*” (Lin) and “*restraining women from voicing their rights* (Hui)”. Specifically, some differentiated 女权 *nüquan*<sup>90</sup> from 女拳 *nüquan*<sup>91</sup> due to their same pronunciation in Mandarin and the stigma associated with the latter. A few used “*extreme feminism*” and “*radical feminism*” interchangeably to describe anti-men sentiment and gender conflicts in China. This suggests a discursive conflation in the Chinese language between feminism/women’s rightism and “*extreme feminism*”, often associated with gender and national traitors both online and in state discourses.

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<sup>90</sup> The literal translation is feminism. Feminism was translated into 女权主义 women’s rightism until the early 1990s, when feminism was translated into 女性主义 women’s genderism to promote femininity and re-establish gender/sex difference and hierarchy (Yu, 2015).

<sup>91</sup> The literal translation is women’s fists, and participants used it to refer to extreme feminism.

For instance, Weitian saw online feminism in China as anti-men. Chen noted that as part of the “*top-down campaign to clean the internet, some social media platforms underwent a crackdown on the extreme feminism,*” while the conflation meant the state-sponsored crackdown of feminist discourses. Emily further commented:

*Women’s voices are severely restricted in China. Feminism becomes a stigma on social media. No matter what women say, we’re seen as engaging in verbal fights. Expressing any reasonable demand is often met with trivialisation, demonisation, or attempts at criminalisation and suppression. They even accuse us of passing the knife to foreign forces and label us with derogatory terms to silence us.*

Emily believed that the state impacted this suppression of women’s voices. Collusion with foreign forces was a common, often unfounded, accusation associated with feminist discourses in China (Huang, 2023b). For example, Hui was warned by a person that this research was dangerous and associated it with hostile foreign forces because “gender equality” was mentioned on my participant recruitment poster. Ironically, while gender equality is written in the PRC’s constitution and highlighted in state feminism (Barlow, 2001; Hong-Fincher, 2019), individual women’s voices about gender equality were associated with hostile foreign forces posing harm to the country.

Wang (2021b) critiques the All-China Women’s Federation’s (ACWF) claim that feminists were encouraged by ‘Western hostile forces’ to cancel their legacy and Hong-Fincher (2019) observes state-sponsored stigmatisation and violent crackdowns on bottom-up feminist dissents in China. While the state often invoked its socialist rhetoric in differentiating itself from the “capitalist West”, its authoritarian power in defining feminism and growing intolerance of bottom-up feminism, particularly in Xi’s presidency (Hong-Fincher, 2019), marked a departure from women’s liberation in socialist, revolutionary China and the early reform era (Wang, 2021b).

In this crackdown, the state’s rhetorical making of feminists as gender and national traitors contradicted its patriotic education, which cultivate family-country emotion, as the anti-men and unpatriotic feminists were seen as threats to the stability and prosperity of family-country. For instance, when translating

“feminism” into Chinese, the state endorsed the less threatening “women’s genderism” over “women’s rights-ism”, which was considered “Western feminism” (Yu, 2015). Participants’ encounters with resistance to their feminist voices mainly stemmed from such accusations.

The subjectification of patriotism also encouraged some participants to see individuals as responsible for social welfare. Specifically, quoting reports about the “*record-low birth rate in China*” in media and official discourses, some expressed concerns, and a few felt personally responsible for “*the country’s sustainable population growth*”. Imagining a better future, Zhixing “*hoped for autonomy for everyone, who can be responsible for the choices they make*”. She felt strong responsibilities to support her original family, like financing her parents’ elderly care and younger siblings, her current family, like providing childcare to future children, and the country, believing that reproduction is a responsibility to the nation, which unmarried people should pay by tax.

Her sense of responsibility could be linked to the promotion of patriotism in moral education in China, which extended one’s sense of indebtedness from families to the country (Lin & Jackson, 2023). Despite her struggles with the pressure to reproduce and provide elderly care and childcare, her familism-patriotism, in forms of responsibilities, motivated her to rationalise and accept the lack of state provision of social welfare and overlook the state’s authoritarian role in the privatisation, marketisation and feminisation of elderly care and childcare.

Some participants’ patriotism encouraged them to ignore the state’s role in the heteropatriarchal oppression and other power structures, instead focusing on individualising responsibilities and gender/sex differences. For instance, while feeling indignant towards the stigmatisation of feminism in China, Lei’s nationalist emotion allowed her to overlook the state’s association of grassroots feminism with hostile foreign forces. She attributed the accusation of feminists as national traitors to “*individual ignorant men*” rather than the state. Similarly, she considered the state’s call for women to return home problematic due to the “*low quality*” of individual men and their family upbringing in China, thus excusing the heteropatriarchal propaganda. Despite growing gender awareness, Lei, like some participants, focused exclusively on static gender differences/similarities while

also ignoring gender (in)justice in the processes<sup>92</sup> and holding some essentialist views. Wang (2021b) discusses the state's authoritarian role in naturalising gender differences and privatising social welfare to rebuild pre-socialist gender and class hierarchies from the early 1990s. Thus, the subjectification of patriotism and transnational neoliberalism caused some to prioritise individual responsibilities for self-family-country, while overlooking the intricate power dynamics influencing their lives.

To conclude, some participants' emotional ties to family and the country, integral to their subjectivities as Chinese women, constrained their autonomy and critical understanding of the hegemonic power shaping Chinese womanhood. The state-sponsored rhetorical making of feminists as gender and national traitors further illustrated how patriotism restrained feminism in China. Additionally, the subjectification of patriotism and transnational neoliberalism led some to prioritise individual responsibilities for self-family-country. Consequently, this subjectification of familism, patriotism, and nationalism fostered an individualistic perspective, causing some participants to overlook the complex power relations shaping their ways of being, like heteropatriarchy, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism.

### **8.2.5 Conclusion**

Many developed neoliberal autonomy, as one way in which participants' development of autonomy related to the intersectional heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism. Neoliberal autonomy refers to participants' entrepreneurial ways of being, like individual accountabilities, autonomy, competition, and careful calculation, based on their dichotomous understanding of neoliberalism and heteropatriarchy. I situated their neoliberal autonomy within processes involving three aspects.

First, participants' subjectification of transnational neoliberalism refers to internalising neoliberal governmentality and entrepreneurial ways of being from their lived experiences between China and the UK. Second, subjectification of transnational intersectional injustices fostered some participants' biological-

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<sup>92</sup> I elaborate on this on p.168.

determinist view of womanhood and internalised sexism, limiting their imaginations of alternative ways of being beyond entrepreneurship and ways of relating beyond female competition based on a gendered scarcity mindset. Third, subjectification of familism, patriotism, and nationalism fostered their individualistic perspectives, overlooking complex power relations shaping their lives, like heteropatriarchy, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism.

In participants' transnational construction of Chinese womanhood, these aspects intersected in developing participants' entrepreneurial ways of being and dichotomising (hetero)patriarchy and neoliberalism in their understanding. These aspects can be used as apparatus to understand participants' development of neoliberal autonomy in their individual, contextualised processes, rather than as universal and ahistorical mechanisms. For instance, many participants considered their transnational experiences of neoliberalism as the solutions to their experiences of injustices.

Specifically, many saw neoliberal and meritocratic achievement as the main, and often only, means to gain and exercise their autonomy and resist gender injustice. For instance, during UKHE, Rui came to view financial independence as the only route to women's independence and resistance to social clocks. She also prioritised career over family based on a dichotomous understanding of either family or career for women (see p.238). This indicated her developed neoliberal autonomy, which later shifted her awareness of gender discrimination to an emphasis on biological sex differences, overlooking injustice. For instance, she insisted that "*gender discrimination doesn't exist in academia in China.*" Similarly, Fang believed economic and cultural capital was the only means to women's freedom from heteropatriarchal social clocks, attributing some "lower-class" women's reproductive pressure to their educational deficiencies, ignoring the heteropatriarchal power she had previously criticised.

Besides, a few participants, despite their awareness of gender injustice, perceived conflicts between their class privileges and some women's rights. For instance, such conflict propelled Grace to choose her company's interest, although this choice veiled the patriarchal restraints she had wished to resist, like her rationalisation of gender discrimination in job markets. The contradiction of

women's rights and their class privileges suggested the intersectionality in class-gender and patriarchy-neoliberalism in Chinese womanhood. However, when believing in the dichotomy in neoliberalism-heteropatriarchy and choosing the neoliberal side, some participants overlooked the (hetero)patriarchal restraints and its intersectionality with neoliberalism.

Additionally, subjectification of transnational neoliberalism, familism and patriotism caused some to prioritise individual responsibilities for self-family-country while disregarding heteropatriarchal power influencing their lives. For instance, the lack of accessible healthcare in the UK and China and her emotional connection with family-country developed Zhixing's strong sense of responsibility for self-family-country and neglect of the structural patriarchal influence. Jing, affected by the state-sponsored rhetorical making of feminists as gender and national traitors, considered herself an "*extreme feminist*", jeopardising her self-image and mental health. She felt the conflict between these negative impacts and her feminist academic pursuit, thus adopting a degendered, de-politicised and non-intersectional view of womanhood and strictly narrowing feminism to her studies (see p.214). This shifted her focus to self-improvement, overlooking some daily gender discrimination. Thus, subjectification of transnational neoliberalism, familism and patriotism strengthened some participants' dichotomisation of self-accountabilities and heteropatriarchy and coerced their belief in the former.

My framing of neoliberal autonomy largely aligns with the existing literature, which discusses autonomy as the psychosocial impact or governmentality of neoliberalism. For instance, literature on neoliberal subjectification documents entrepreneurial subjectivity (Foucault *et al.*, 2008; Scharff, 2016), individual responsibilities (Xie, 2021), and anxious autonomy as a way of being (de Lissovoy, 2018; Read, 2009). Negotiating with *Sùzhi*, Chinese youth's subjectivity construction reflects the free-choosing, self-determining, and self-responsible neoliberal subject (Fong, 2007; Liu, 2011). Additionally, existing studies on urban women of the one-child generation in China include autonomous modern womanhood adopting neoliberal individualism and deliberate masculinisation, alongside dependent modern womanhood (e.g., Liu, 2014). Through IHE, Chinese international students actively pursued global elitism (Xu, 2022) and Chinese



women students enhanced identification with mobile self-entrepreneurship (Kim, 2010; Martin, 2022).

In addition to aligning with existing literature, my framing of neoliberal autonomy is grounded in the research purpose of building critical feminist knowledge(s). For instance, critical socialist feminism seeks to elucidate and contest complex power dynamics in women's experiences (Spakowski, 2018; Tian, 2022), like the interplay of patriarchy, neoliberalism, party-state, colonialism, and imperialism in the PRC (Wang, 2017; Yin, 2022). For this feminist end, I conceptualise another way participants' autonomy can be related to the intersectional power relations influencing their ways of being.

### **8.3 Feminist autonomy**

#### **8.3.1 Introduction**

In participants' (re)construction of Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings, many developed feminist autonomies, as another way their development of autonomy related to the intersectional heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism. Feminist autonomy refers to participants' autonomy to make life choices, awareness of gender/sex perspectives and women's rights/feminism(s), and sometimes their resistance to social restraints and oppression of women. This encompasses emotions, attitudes, awareness, discourses, knowledge(s), actions, and reflections.

Below, I will first discuss four channels through which participants developed feminist autonomy: formal education in social justice and gender; autonomous, alternative, and cooperative learning; diverse and alternative womanhood, temporalities, and politics; and transnational media. I will then highlight participants' development of feminist solidarity, a constitutive part of feminist autonomy, before presenting a summary. Feminist autonomy, incorporating feminist solidarity, reflected participants' development of alternative ways of being beyond traditional-versus-modern womanhood and ways of relating among women beyond competition, thus transgressing the dichotomy of neoliberalism-heteropatriarchy.

### 8.3.2 Formal education of social justice and gender in UKHE

Some participants explicitly attributed their development of feminist knowledge(s) to formal education on social justice and gender in SHAPE in UKHE. Specifically, Ming and Liang appreciated learning discursive approaches in UKHE, which they applied to systematically critique patriarchy in the Chinese language and engage in activism. Ming's systematic learning of Western feminism(s) during her Master's studies underpinned her feminist awareness, thoughts, activism, and PhD pursuit. She also wrote to a British newspaper about her four experiences of discrimination as "*an Asian, Chinese, young and small-sized woman*" in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic and actively participated in Chinese feminist activism online. Participants who studied in UKHE for less than a year also benefited from such formal education. Zhi applied intersectionality, which she learnt during a session in her master's program, to illuminate her experiences, including gender-based harassment, layers of oppression for women of colour, sisterhood among Asian women, and barriers in socialising with white women. This enabled her to contextualise experiences of injustice within the layers of oppression and privileges, reducing her tendency to self-blame.

However, participants only discussed feminist scholarship from the minority world and often used their learning from UKHE to critique the oppression they experienced from China, but rarely the UK. I discussed UKHE curricula and the neo-colonial epistemic hegemony in neoliberal autonomy on p.238. Despite the significance of social justice and gender education, a neo-colonial approach to such education lacked the critical reflexivity of UKHE itself and limited some participants from fully seeing the transnational and complex power relations influencing their daily lives and subjectivities. Besides social justice and gender education, participants' non-subject-specific learning experiences in UKHE also nurtured their feminist autonomy.

### 8.3.3 Autonomous, alternative, and co-operative learning

Some participants' experiences with ways of learning and teaching in UKHE fostered their feminist autonomy. Their engagement with autonomous learning<sup>93</sup> and alternative learning<sup>94</sup> in UKHE developed their autonomy, criticality, feminist knowledge(s) and lifelong learning. Participants often highlighted the clearly defined learning outcomes, assessment criteria, related accountability, and great level of freedom to choose what knowledge to learn and develop in UKHE. For instance, Chen, experiencing explorative and knowledge-producing learning, "*enjoyed learning for the first time*". Ming used the freedom to choose topics in assessment to delve into her interest in social justice and gender. These experiences helped participants develop motivations for lifelong learning, self-accountability, self-knowledge, and critical thinking.

Chloe's experiences can illustrate the influence of autonomous and alternative learning on developing participants' feminist autonomy. Recalling her master's study in UKHE in 2017-2018, Chloe said:

*We systematically learnt research methodology when working on master's dissertations. Among them, feminist perspectives ignited my curiosity about feminism's significance...I recognised patriarchy's pervasive influence and found some philosophers' views, like Confucius and Plato, unacceptable. I realised that male-centric thinking had long shaped our learning. Studying in the UK exposed me to diverse perspectives... It was quite distinct.*

Her learning of diverse ways of knowing, incorporating feminism(s), and engagement with autonomous learning in writing her master's dissertation developed her feminist consciousness and learning motivations in the short term. She also commented on the long-term impacts, saying:

*I began to systematically read feminist literature, which transformed my understanding of women, my feelings, and*

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<sup>93</sup>Autonomous learning refers to participants' experiences of "taking more control over their learning" (Yurdakul, 2017, p. 15), such as explorative, student-centered, and knowledge-producing approaches to learning and teaching.

<sup>94</sup>Alternative learning refers to participants' learning of diverse theories, perspectives, and methodologies. They highlighted and often valued these relatively new experiences of epistemic diversity.

*attitudes towards life. I became more sensitive, reacting strongly to discriminatory language.*

*However, my self-awareness grew significantly. My former insecurities about appearance vanished; now, I prioritise inner freedom over societal expectations. Engaging with feminism liberated me, fostering independence and reducing concern for others' opinions. I deeply value this transformation.*

Her feminist consciousness and learning motivations, developed through autonomous and alternative learning during UKHE, fuelled her systematic learning of feminism after she returned to China. This learning continued to grow her self-authorisation and self-governance, enabling her to resist the regulations of women's bodies in China's beauty marketisation (Ma, 2023).

Like Chloe, many participants experienced long-term and deferred impacts of autonomous and alternative learning of UKHE on their feminist autonomy. For example, Lubai's encounter with autonomous learning in UKHE in 2017-2018 nurtured her learning autonomy, personal autonomy, and critical thinking, all of which she continued to grow in herself and her students after returning to work in HE in China. These long-term impacts of UKHE, such as autonomy, criticality, and lifelong learning, held the potential for social changes, like participants' awareness and resistance to hegemonies. However, Like Chloe, many experienced dissonances between their feminist autonomy and patriarchal realities, especially upon returning to China.

Additionally, participants experienced different extents of autonomous and alternative learning across diverse subjects in UKHE. Zhi, compared with her roommate's literature studies, experienced more constraints in her education master's program. She noticed that while her assignment requirements were more rigorous and lengthier, her roommate enjoyed more freedom with more innovative and shorter assignments.

Experiences of cooperative learning also fostered a few participants' autonomy, collaboration, and criticality, as evidenced by Yan's journey. In the first semester of a master's study in UKHE, Yan associated her self-perceived lack of autonomy and collaboration with Chinese womanhood, citing the societal neglect of women's selves, norms of individual work in Chinese meritocratic education, a

lack of structure of accountability in her previous civil service job, and perceived language barriers compared to native speakers. However, she observed changes in herself through broader UKHE settings, saying:

*The new environment heightened my awareness. In China, women are often overlooked, which can lead to self-neglect. Moving to a place which emphasises personal responsibility and critical thinking [in UKHE] provided ample training for my mind. Being in this new setting, away from my old one, lessened its influence. This environment, combined with mind training, sharpened my perspectives and self-awareness over time.*

In the second semester, Yan perceived growing self-knowledge, self-confidence, criticality, and ability to collaborate from experiencing autonomous learning, like clear learning outcomes, due dates, and accountability, and peer and institutional support. Initially lacking confidence, she deferred to native English speakers in group projects, assuming their language skills were superior. After gaining confidence and recognising her writing abilities, she actively contributed to teamwork in the second semester. The alternative ways of learning in UKHE, the scaffolding of autonomous and cooperative learning skills and the clear accountability nurtured her self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorisation respectively. The growing autonomy boosted her academic confidence and performance during UKHE and heightened her sensitivity to various hegemonies upon her return to China. She experienced strong conflicts between her autonomy and these hegemonic restraints, eventually deciding to re-emigrate to pursue a PhD in UKHE in her 30s.

In summary, autonomous, alternative, and cooperative learning in UKHE facilitated some participants' short-term and long-term development of autonomy, criticality, lifelong learning motivation, and feminist consciousness and resistance. Existing studies on the impact of IHE on Chinese students focus on their academic improvements, such as learning autonomy (e.g., Wang, 2018), academic confidence, collaboration, and classroom engagement (e.g., Heng, 2019; Zhang, 2020). Using a feminist lens, my conceptualisation may deepen the understanding of the long-term implication of engaging with these ways of learning and teaching in UKHE for Chinese women students' ways of being. Besides intended learning in UKHE, many participants developed their feminist autonomy through unintended

learning, particularly their encounters with diverse women during their UKHE time.

#### **8.3.4 Diverse and alternative womanhood, temporalities, and politics**

Participants' interactions with diverse and alternative womanhood during UKHE fostered their feminist autonomy. First, some attributed their feminist autonomy to the sheer diverse and alternative womanhood they observed and experienced. Dong highlighted that experiencing alternative womanhood in the UK transformed her from restrained and traditional Chinese womanhood, enhancing her autonomy and relationship with her parents. Through her four-year rich experiences in the UK, she encountered and drew inspiration from diverse women's bodies, sexualities, relationships, reproductive status, family roles, and academic and professional achievements, many of which were alternatives to the prescribed Chinese womanhood. To illustrate, she said:

*In China, I once held traditional beliefs about female chastity and monogamy with expectations of marriage following sexual relationships. However, exposure to diverse perspectives in the UK led to a significant shift. I abandoned conservative views on sex and relationships, prioritising my own feelings over parental expectations.*

*Interactions with diverse individuals, incorporating my husband's openly gay colleague, challenged my stereotypes, fostering my respect for different sexual orientations. Over time, I shared these views with my parents. Gradually, my mom started to accept different sexual orientations.*

Seeing, experiencing, and discussing alternative forms of sexuality, relationships, and sexual orientation in the UK shifted Dong and her mother from a heteropatriarchal view of sexuality and relationships to a perspective respecting women's autonomy and diverse sexual orientations.

Additionally, some attributed their developing feminist autonomy to female role models and women's embodied autonomy. Most highlighted their role models' internal motivations and pursuit of their academic and professional dreams, such as in STEM fields, despite various societal restraints. Observing and interacting with individuals who recognised and respected themselves helped participants develop self-authorisation. Some suggested that other women's autonomous

decisions outside the prescribed Chinese womanhood prompted them to think “*If she can...why can't I?*”. Notably, participants’ female role models were diverse in their races, nationalities, ages, sexualities, class backgrounds and assigned sex. This contrasts with the pursuit of middle-class ideals among young adults (Liu, 2008a, 2011) and urban women in China (Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021), and Chinese women international students (Kim, 2010; Martin, 2022), suggesting alternatives to the heteropatriarchal-neoliberal discursive ideal.

Indeed, some highlighted that women in the UK face less pressure to choose between career and family compared to China. Dong attributed the differences to the more equal share of domestic responsibilities and the legal protection of women’s jobs before, during and after their pregnancy in the UK. Before UKHE, Hui felt stuck between the prescribed traditional womanhood, which pressured her to forgo her postgraduate pursuit in STEM, and pastoral feminism, which rejected marriage and reproduction (see p.31). During UKHE, she interacted with women with diverse life journeys in STEM and reflected:

*I came to understand, as a woman, I have the right to make choices at any stage of my life. Rather than a clash of values, I observed diverse life choices made by others, challenging the notion that [pastoral] feminism demands certain behaviours like avoiding marriage or being anti-men. I believe feminism should prioritise empowering individuals to make their own choices.*

Others’ diverse life choices motivated her to see beyond the traditional-vs-modern and feminist-vs-antifeminist dichotomies and redefine feminism as personal autonomy. When explaining the more dichotomous choices for women in China and the lack of Chinese women in STEM, she sharply critiqued the injustice in gendered family responsibilities and the lack of recognition and pay for women’s housework in China, and strongly objected to the state’s call for women to return home. She noted:

*Why not encourage men to return home? In China, I believe we need a comprehensive women’s rights movement beyond just equal pay for equal work to address various aspects of equality.*

Like Hui, some participants became more aware and critical of the systematic restraints of women in China through interacting with alliterative womanhood

during UKHE. This suggested the feminist characteristics of their advocacy for autonomy.

For some, their developed feminist autonomy transcended national borders and challenged intersectional power relations affecting their lives beyond heteropatriarchy. During COVID-19, Elizabeth studied for her Master's in UKHE remotely while continuing her work and caring for her child in China. She initially lacked academic confidence and felt anxious but developed diverse perspectives of womanhood, confidence, and autonomy during UKHE, particularly through experiencing other's diverse lives. This ultimately led her to pursue a PhD. She recalled:

*If not for career advancement and salary increases, I probably wouldn't pursue a Master's...*

*When writing my dissertation, my supervisor was completing her PhD...She has been pursuing her PhD for five years, and I thought to myself "If she can continue her studies with two kids at home, why can't I?" Witnessing her dedication to her PhD despite familial responsibilities and modest pay in the UK education sector was inspiring. Studying for my Master's in the UK introduced me to diverse individuals with their unique approach to academia. They are not as anxious as those in my previous environment.*

*Realising I didn't have to confine myself to practicality, I now aim to study for the joy of it during my PhD. I believe studying in UKHE has significantly impacted me; I likely wouldn't have continued to a PhD if I had pursued my master's in China ...*

*I used to be overly critical of myself, always striving for more. But now, I feel a sense of confidence and liberation. Driven by passion, I'm eager to explore and grow in my field. Despite not having been to the UK, the experience has broadened my perspectives.*

She developed intrinsic academic motivation, confidence, and diverse, inclusive views, while also reducing external motivation, pressure, and anxiety through engagement with alternative women's paths during online UKHE. Her feminist autonomy included her abilities to make life decisions and resist patriarchal restraints of women's academic achievement and neoliberal self-governance, particularly constant self-improvement and anxious being.



De Lissovoy (2018) argues for the change from the oppressed and objectified self (Freire, 2020) to the fragmented and anxious selves in current neoliberal governmentality. However, through my intersectional lens, restrained autonomy and anxious autonomy both existed in the prescribed Chinese women's subjectivities due to the state heteropatriarchal-neoliberal governmentality of their ways of being. In fact, I argue that restrained autonomy and anxious autonomy mutually enabled each other. For instance, some participants' perceived lack of knowledge of their desired life reinforced their constant self-surveillance to follow social clocks and conformity to the prescribed ideal, and vice versa. De Lissovoy (2018) considers Freire's conscientisation and problem-posing unable to address the proliferating selves in neoliberal governmentality, proposing the pedagogy of betraying anxious autonomy. However, in my research, participants' feminist autonomy, as autonomy embedded in heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism, suggested conscientisation and betraying anxious autonomy in mutually enabling ways. The hidden curriculum during UKHE inspired their alternative being that resisted the prescribed heteropatriarchal-neoliberal being. Specifically, participants' observation, experiences, and sense-making of diverse womanhood during UKHE helped them imagine womanhood alternative to the traditional-vs-modern and family-vs-career dichotomies.

Participants also developed their feminist and temporal autonomy through interacting with women's diverse temporalities during UKHE. Some developed timings alternative to prescribed chrono-normativity and temporal autonomy through experiencing diverse timings of women's life events. Kai was asked about unforeseen circumstances hindering her progress during her study and job-hunting in the UK, interpreting it as "*mistakes are allowed in life*". She contrasted it with the determination of one's first degrees in job and marriage markets in China, saying:

*Mistakes aren't allowed in one's life and you must follow the template step by step to do everything correctly to have a good future...this expectation for women to follow one path created a narrow perception of them.*

She became more acceptant of vulnerability and more aware of the hegemonic synchronisation of womanhood through experiencing expectations for and possibilities of diverse temporalities in the UK.

Additionally, some slowed down their tempos and became more resistant to the speed fetish particularly prevalent in China through experiencing slower tempos of academic, personal, and social lives in the UK. Emily further critiqued that the rapid pace of trivial matters in China, like delivery services, deprived citizens of the rights and freedom to have personal time and masked systemic chrono-normative restraints, like academic barriers for women over thirty (see p.180). This echoes Lacanian psychoanalysis of neoliberal being where manageable and determined compulsions of drives with partial pleasure replaced the revolutionary desires (de Lissovoy, 2018).

Besides, some participants altered their view of past-present-future by encountering women who lived in the moment. Kai reflected:

*Our previous way of life was a continuous cycle of preparation: from school for university, from university for earning money, from earning money for retirement. Rarely did we pause to enjoy the present. Similarly, during my Master's study, worries consumed me - about graduating and finding a job. This led to pervasive pressure and anxiety. I couldn't fully engage in learning or calm down. However, after seeing many different people's life paths [in the UK], I now regret overthinking. I should have enjoyed the present... The future is beyond our control, but how we experience the present is up to us.*

Kai's awareness of the chrono-normative future orientations echoes Liu's observation of the systematic cultivation of delaying gratifications and constant preparation in China's school education (2011). However, Kai shifted to focus on the present self through encountering diverse temporalities in the UK. Generally, participants' transformations in their timings, tempos, and temporal autonomy in my research echo Xu's findings on the resistance to hegemonic temporal structure "in search of their time autonomy in career imagination" among Chinese international students in UKHE (2021, p. 22).

In participants' intercultural interaction during UKHE, a few reconstructed Chinese-ness and Chinese womanhood through encountering political views

alternative to mainstream nationalist discourses. Like some participants, Dong used to equalise the CCP to the country and herself. She started to separate the party-state from the country and separate nationalism associated with the authoritarian party-state from her emotions with the country by discussing CCP's politics with her British husband. She became more accepting of different views about CCP policies, indicating a (re)constructed Chinese-ness different from the nationalist Chinese-ness cultivated by the authoritarian party-state. Similarly, Kai witnessed many peaceful political activities by people from Hong Kong and Taiwan in the UK, realising they were different from the extremist portrayal in mainland China. She said:

*It made me think Chinese people and China can have considerable political diversity. Our Chinese people don't have to be very standard. In China, there is a saying that describes a very standard Chinese person as 'gēnzhèng miáohóng'<sup>95</sup>. But if you're not 'gēnzhèng miáohóng', you are still a Chinese person, right?*

She questioned and deconstructed the standardised and singular definition of Chinese-ness and potentially the CCP's authoritarian and hegemonic power to explain such definitions. Witnessing diverse and alternative politics diversified Kai's political views and definitions of Chinese-ness.

Additionally, before UKHE, she believed in the “non-cooperative Chinese feminist” ideas of strong-career women to resist patriarchy (Wu & Dong, 2019) (see p.31). However, she deconstructed the standardised Chinese womanhood and reconstructed autonomous womanhood by observing diverse and alternative Chinese womanhood in the UK. She disagreed with both patriarchal gender roles and the “entrepreneur Chinese feminist”, which advocates for financial compensation for women's reproduction (Wu & Dong, 2019) (see p.31). She commented:

*The concept of standardisation in China objectifies both women and men, creating an opposition between the two...Experiencing the diversity of life paths and political views [in the UK], I realise I don't have to conform to the standardised image of a woman as perceived by mainstream public opinion, the country,*

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<sup>95</sup> This is a Chinese idiom often used to describe someone who embodies the best qualities of Chinese culture, incorporating adhering to the CCP ideologies, principles, and policies.

*my parents and some feminists. Instead, I can explore who I am  
and what kind of life I want to lead first.*

Her intercultural interactions with alternative politics and womanhood during UKHE developed her feminist autonomy that resisted Chinese womanhood as defined by the state, mainstream discourses, parents, and popular feminist discourses in China. This inspired her to (re)claim the power of self-identification as a Chinese woman.

In summary, participants developed their feminist and temporal autonomy through experiencing diverse and alternative womanhood, temporalities, and politics in broader UKHE settings. This agrees with the findings that close interaction with American gender culture significantly impacted the perceptions of gender roles among Chinese women students (Matsui, 1995).

Matsui (1995) and Shu (2008) suggest that Chinese women might be unaware of patriarchy in both China and the US. However, my research echoes the findings on the positive impacts of their autonomous self-fashioning on challenging traditional gender roles (Kajanus, 2016; Martin, 2022) and the development of critical consciousness and their re-consideration of Chinese-ness among Chinese women international students (Qin & Lykes, 2006). Specifically, my participants developed autonomy, awareness of and resistance to prescribed womanhood, social clock, and related restraints, as well as imaginations of ways of being beyond the prescribed heteropatriarchal-neoliberal subjectivity and chrononormativity. Existing studies suggest that long-term students, rather than short-term sojourners, experience identity conflicts and negotiations between Western and Chinese cultures (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Scally & Jiang, 2020). However, my participants experienced subjectivity reconstruction regardless of the length of their study.

Additionally, to what extent participants can continuously exercise feminist autonomy after UKHE needs to be considered with their complex living contexts and related power relations. For example, although Elizabeth developed resistance to anxious ways of being through engaging with diverse womanhood during online UKHE, her concurrent experiences in patriarchal and “meritocratic” workplaces in China constantly led her to rationalise sexism. However, Hui,

pursuing a PhD in STEM in Germany, generally felt supported by institutional policies to continue developing her comprehensive and revolutionary feminist autonomy. Besides diverse alternatives in their physical environment, transnational media about gender and feminism(s) also played significant roles in participants' development of feminist awareness and autonomy.

### **8.3.5 Transnational media**

Many participants had complex relations with transnational media about gender and feminism(s). They developed awareness and knowledge(s) of alternative womanhood, feminism, bodily autonomy, and complex power affecting womanhood through engaging with media in Chinese and English languages. For instance, a few believed that women role models on social media raised their awareness of alternative life choices as acts of feminist resistance, such as the possibility of resisting heterosexual marriage. After reading feminist content on Twitter and Quora, Chloe said:

*Re-entering the Chinese internet, I became acutely aware of gender inequality. I used to think gender equality was prevalent before going abroad...but I later discovered even our language is discriminatory.*

During and after UKHE, media enabled some to access important information about women's bodies, commonly considered taboo in China, such as reproduction and menstruation. This helped them make more informed choices about their bodies and lives. Some noted that discussions about women's bodies remained taboo in Chinese media. Internet and media censorship in mainland China also restricted their access to such information on platforms like Google and Twitter. By engaging in discussions about women's bodies on these media platforms, they developed bodily self-governance and became more aware of the censorship's restraints on their bodily autonomy.

Many developed feminist knowledge(s) from media while concurrently becoming more sensitive and intolerant to sexist encounters and omnipresent anti-feminist discourses on social media. During UKHE, Jing developed feminist awareness and an interest in pursuing feminist research through engaging with media about gender, including public service advertisements, television series and social

media. However, she also identified herself as an “extreme” feminist and suffered from mental health challenges due to the ubiquitous discussion about news on sexual violence towards women and the prevalent stigmatisation of feminists on social media. Jing said:

*Flooded with feminist news and opinions on issues like rape in India and virginity tests for Muslim women, I decided to pursue a PhD but faced opposition and ridicule from my parents and others. Altogether, I became an extreme feminist, seeing myself as a warrior fighting for women...*

*Thinking men were all evil, I believed men and women were opposing forces, locked in a battle of survival where only one could prevail. I started to think, and I cannot remember whether it was something I conceived or if I was misled, that the world's resources were limited. Fighting for women's rights would harm men's rights.*

Although she engaged with transnational news about sexual violence in both Chinese and English during UKHE, her perceived hatred of men echoes the antifeminist rhetoric, which constructed “extreme feminists” as men-haters supporting gender/sex wars on Chinese social media (Huang, 2023a). Jing’s identification with this portrait resulted in her sense of isolation, self-doubt, and self-blame.

Participants’ discussions of media content about sexual violence centred on women’s trafficking and abduction. Zhi engaged with transnational news, like the Chained Woman incident<sup>96</sup> (Mao & Wang, 2023; Yuan, 2022) and the Jeffrey Epstein case<sup>97</sup> (Hallemann, 2024), becoming more aware of women trafficking and abduction globally and re-interpreting her own experience of being almost abducted. However, such engagement contributed to her biological-determinist hopelessness that attributed women’s abduction to their “*reproductive function*” and considered gender justice impossible due to biological sexual differences.

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<sup>96</sup> Occurring in 2022 in Jiangsu, China, it involved human trafficking, false imprisonment, sexual assault, and severe mistreatment of a mentally disturbed woman chained to a wall who gave birth to eight children. Due to media censorship and political control, Chinese internet users had to independently investigate the case, with some facing arrests. This incident fuelled online discussions about systematic trafficking and enslavement of women in the PRC.

<sup>97</sup> It centred around allegations of sex trafficking and sexual abuse of minors against the wealthy financier, bringing attention to issues of power, privilege, and the handling of sex crimes.

Similarly, some participants' engagement with social media discussions on sexual violence often escalated into gender conflicts and a scaremongering effect, restricting their lives and subjectivities. Rui, an academic with extensive international experience, confided she avoided overnight solo travel due to perceived danger, citing incidents of sexual violence and harassment against women in Chinese media as contributing factors.

Additionally, a few engaged with news about gender-based violence towards Chinese urban middle-class women<sup>98</sup>, doubting and rejecting their previously meritocratic approach to addressing gender oppression. Chloe recalled news about the murder of a Chinese woman at home, who, like her, was a UKHE graduate working in Shanghai. She said:

*This woman had an excellent education and a prestigious job ... However, the improvement in your education and finances doesn't provide you with the corresponding security. Your most basic human rights are violated. This incident significantly impacted me. I felt extremely insecure, especially when alone in Shanghai. Many of my women colleagues and friends also discovered signs of being followed after work during that time.*

Feeling so insecure, she critiqued the lack of systematic legal protection of women's human rights in China and changed her reproductive choices to be childless. She also painfully realised that meritocratic achievement couldn't eliminate or rise above the patriarchal oppression of women. This shifted her from constant self-improvement and capital accumulation to a sense of shared oppression and connectedness with Chinese women collectives.

Like Jing, some engaged with Chinese pastoral feminism, which was seen as the most easily accessible feminism on Chinese social media. It was often labelled as "extreme feminism" for promoting values against men, marriage, and reproduction. Participants acknowledged that pastoral feminism attracted public attention to women's rights and provided an alternative to traditional womanhood but couldn't fully agree with its mainstreamed advocacy. During UKHE, Yu and her husband felt inspired by feminist advocacies for matronymic naming practices on

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<sup>98</sup> Online discussions on the trafficking and enslavement of women have gained widespread attention since 2022, revealing instances of middle-class women being abducted in the PRC (Yuan, 2022).

Chinese social media, thus deciding to name their child after their grandmother's surname. However, the social media content contributed to Yu's postnatal depression. She explained:

*I encountered intense discourse about pastoral feminism and statements like 'staying unmarried and childless ensures safety.' This led me to question whether becoming a mother was a mistake, contemplating the freedom I might have had otherwise...*

*Exposure to news on violence against women left me conflicted, desiring to be a good mother while also experiencing regrets and depression. Pastoral feminist discourse on social media caused my self-doubt.*

Although identified as a feminist, Yu struggled with constructing motherhood as part of her subjectivity due to the anti-marriage and anti-childbirth discourses of pastoral feminism. She also felt tension between her academic pursuit and her new commitment to motherhood, arising from the dichotomy between (pastoral) feminist ideals of a successful career and traditional womanhood characterised by motherhood.

Kai's critique of social media as a source of oppressive hegemony and a space for hegemonic surveillance and discipline might explain Yu's conflict. Kai noted:

*Womanhood is often polarised between traditional women and extreme feminists online. Extreme feminists rejected the need for men and children, prioritising financial independence. Women are inherently diverse individuals and exist somewhere in between these two extremes. There should be a multitude of choices available, but the current discourse forced women to pick from the two extremes. The middle path is neglected.*

Kai specified that social media made personal choices more available for public scrutiny, leading to more pressure on those making gender-nonconforming life choices. This construction of traditional-vs-feminist dichotomies on social media potentially explained Yu's sense of dissonance from negotiating between reproducing and pursuing an academic career in her twenties.

Some became more aware of and critiqued the anti-feminist discourses that associated feminist voices with "crazy women" (Xuan) and "hostile foreign



forces” (Lei). This aligns with existing findings on stigmatising (pastoral) feminists as selfish gender traitors and nation traitors (Huang, 2023a; Liu, 2023) and the state’s active roles in distorting (anti)feminist discourses (Wang, 2021b). Many participants expressed concerns that the stigmatisation of (pastoral) feminist discourse discouraged Chinese women’s feminist identities and restrained their discussions about women’s rights, echoing existing studies (Bao, 2023; Zheng, 2020). Some participants’ critiques went beyond gender oppression. For instance, Emily noted:

*Last year, I was disgusted by Weibo’s (a popular Chinese social media platform) promotion of masculinity, as it reinforced male dominance...There was a top-down campaign to clean the internet to ban men’s effeminate behaviour...why is being effeminate an insult?*

*A nation essentially stigmatised those gender-nonconforming individuals, subjecting them to immense pressure. This approach homogenises citizens, diminishing the diversity that should be respected and celebrated in society.*

*The top-down imposition of narrow ideologies is frustrating, creating an extremely restrictive online space with pervasive censorship. Paradoxically, biased and discriminatory opinions spread widely. This suggests open channels of communication but with heavy filtering and approval.*

Emily revealed that state authoritarian patriarchy affected citizens’ lives and subjectivities through highly censored media. Initially affected by the omnipresent anxiety regarding age and appearance on Chinese social media, she felt depressed, but later she revealed and resisted such hegemony. Her journey of (re)constructing Chinese womanhood illustrated complex negotiations with social media.

For a few, media became a space for them to connect with other women, resist sexist discourses, construct alternative feminist narratives, and engage in feminist activism. For Ming, social media was a battlefield to practice feminist actions and engage with feminist discussions globally. She provided an extensive list of debates and online activism she was involved in, saying:

*After learning about gender issues in the UK, I felt compelled to speak up on social media, realising if I didn’t, no one else might.*

*I started actively participating in debates and posting opinions to ensure issues about women's rights weren't overlooked.*

In summary, participants' engagement with transnational media on gender and feminism revealed a dynamic interplay among developing feminist knowledge(s), encountering injustices, and utilising media as both a source of awareness and a platform for feminist resistance. Generally, participants' experiences align with findings on the complexity of Chinese social media, which facilitated creative feminist actions (Hong-Fincher, 2019; Yin & Sun, 2021) while also stigmatising feminists and depoliticising feminism (Bao, 2023; Liu, 2023). Participants' engagement with media about feminist content and gender-based violence also fostered their sense of connection and solidarity, so the next section explores their feminist solidarity.

### **8.3.6 Feminist solidarity**

Many participants developed feminist solidarity, as a constitutive part of feminist autonomy, referring to integrative relationships between individual women and women collectives. These relationships offer alternatives to the competition encouraged by neoliberal-heteropatriarchal subjectification.

Many quoted the phrase “*girls help girls*” to articulate their feminist solidarity, and some discussed ways to help other (Chinese) women. For instance, Ming, inspired by examples of female leadership in combatting male chauvinism in the news, decided to pursue a PhD in female leadership to reimagine different uses of power in institutions. Additionally, Xuan said:

*My understanding of women expanded. I am more concerned about women's future and how Chinese women's consciousness needs to be acknowledged and guided. This change correlates with these parts of the collage. I find it interesting. My understanding of women extended beyond myself. I feel a greater sense of mission as part of a collective of women.*

Some shared similar experiences in the collage-facilitated focus group discussion, suggesting their development of feminist solidarity through this collective conscientisation and re-imagination of alternative ways of being and relating beyond the isolated selves in competition.

Participants developed feminist solidarity during UKHE through different means, starting with their engagement with transnational media related to gender and feminism. As discussed on p.272, engaging with news about gender-based violence towards Chinese urban middle-class women led some to discredit their previously meritocratic approach to addressing gender oppression. The Chained Woman incident, in particular, drew attention to sexual violence, triggering transnational solidarity among participants across social classes and geographic locations. For instance, Hui, pursuing an academic career in STEM in Europe, constantly engaged with media about Chinese women's rights transnationally. Feeling a strong sense of empathy and solidarity, she said:

*I felt heartbroken over the news about Chained Woman. If we let society's disregard for women persist, we risk everyone facing similar situations. This affects us all; this involves many individuals... Most abductions target women because they think women are commodities. It's gender/sex-based oppression. [The news] pushed me to a breaking point, fuelling my radical feminism.*

Hui articulated her solidarity with women of different social classes and regions. She emphasised:

*We need a women's rights movement to achieve equality in various aspects, ensuring women have equal opportunities and conditions as men. Despite claims that certain jobs are gender-specific, such as construction work, in reality, the tasks performed are often the same. Many women work on construction sites, undertaking physically demanding tasks, yet they earn less and are often overlooked. There's still surprise that women work in such roles in today's world.*

Participants often invoked the example of the "inherent" unsuitability of women for construction work to justify essentialist understandings of women. Rendering women construction workers invisible reflected participants' classed and gendered abjection of these workers, who violated the hegemony of gendered work (Xie, 2021). It is valuable that Hui, as an elite researcher in STEM at a top institution in Germany, voiced the visibility of women construction workers in China. She developed a belief in revolutionary feminism from feeling empathetically connected with all women and critiquing various power relations. Besides engagement with media, Hui's encounters with transnational

intersectional injustice, alternative womanhood, and friendship with diverse women nurtured her intersectional, coalitional, and revolutionary feminism.

Participants' engagement with media often intersected with other experiences, like their formal learning of feminism(s), to develop their feminist solidarity. For instance, Ming used her systematic learning of gender in UKHE in social media activism. Appreciating the power of language, she proactively voiced for women's rights in online debates. She also wrote to a British newspaper about her experiences of attacks during COVID-19. Additionally, participants developed feminist solidarity through friendship with and support from women of different nationalities, ethnicities, sexualities, and classes during UKHE. Liang was inspired by her previous woman leader's support of all women subordinates and colleagues, thus believing in women's collective as communities of connected fates and the significant role of women's leadership in building these communities. Jia felt comfort and connection as a lesbian from engaging with online feminist blogs and interacting with many lesbians, feminists, and like-minded Chinese women during UKHE.

More broadly, some developed a sense of connectedness from experiencing interpersonal encouragement, mutual support, and community engagement during UKHE, like volunteering in schools, communities, and charity shops. This connectedness helped some resist the systematically encouraged standardisation and competition (i.e. the pressure to be the same as others but better). For instance, Elizabeth shifted from anxious ways of being in competition to a sense of connectedness, confidence, and appreciation of individual diversity through observing course-mates' diverse lifestyles and experiencing their appraisals of her multitasking abilities.

Overall, participants developed feminist solidarity via different means, including engagement with media related to gender and feminism(s), learning of feminist knowledge(s), friendship with and support from diverse women, and connectedness from interpersonal encouragement, mutual support, and community engagement.

Some participants grew consciousness of women as collectives with their increasing emphasis on respecting individual diversities and agencies. For instance, Hui said:

*We have received more education [than previous generations], including our experiences living abroad. We have seen different things and observed how different women live in other countries. We have known the kind of life most advantageous for women. Those of us abroad may bring this back with us.*

Her awareness of diversities and choices extended to women across borders. Indeed, participants' feminist autonomy included autonomy to make life choices, awareness of gender and women's rights, and resistance to patriarchal restraints and oppression. Their feminist solidarity referred to integrative relationships between individual women and women collectives. Thus, their feminist solidarity extended the autonomy from individual selfhood to all women's selfhood and deconstructed women's competition encouraged by systematic heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism. Participants' feminist solidarity is a constitutive part of their feminist autonomy, differentiating it from neoliberal autonomy.

This feminist reimagination of alternative ways of being and relating echoes critical socialist feminism's call for communities that value diversity and are internally democratic (Ding, 2019; Song, 2023). Beyond critiquing neoliberalism's erosion of social connections, critical socialist feminism proposes a vision to reimagine and reconstruct social relationships, community democracy, and autonomy rooted in the principles of individual freedom and equality, fostered through civic spirit and community consciousness (Song, 2023; Zhu & Xiao, 2021). My discussion of feminist solidarity, grounded in Chinese women's experiences of neoliberal subjectification and communities, provides one pathway to this collective imagination of community-based feminism.

### **8.3.7 Conclusion**

In participants' (re)construction of Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings, many developed feminist autonomies, as another way their development of autonomy related to the intersectional heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism. Feminist autonomy referred to participants' autonomy to make life choices,

awareness of gender/sex perspectives and women's rights/feminism(s), and sometimes their resistance to social restraints and oppression of women.

Many developed their feminist autonomy through various channels: formal education in social justice and gender; autonomous, alternative, and cooperative learning; diverse and alternative womanhood, temporalities, and politics; and transnational media. These four channels often intersected in participants' development of feminist autonomy, with their role and significance varying across participants, times, space, and contexts. Many also developed feminist solidarity, a constitutive part of feminist autonomy, referring to integrative relationships between individual women and women collectives, offering ways of relating among women alternative to competition. Participants developed feminist solidarity through different means, including engagement with media related to gender and feminism(s), learning of feminist knowledge(s), friendship with and support from diverse women, and connectedness from interpersonal encouragement, mutual support, and community engagement.

Participants frequently negotiated between their feminist autonomy and intersectional injustice. This is because their growing feminist autonomy during and after UKHE often contradicted both their increasing awareness of intersectional injustices and the increasingly complicated injustice experiences compared to their lives before UKHE. The various channels for developing feminist autonomy and these two forms of contradiction were apparatus to understand participants' negotiations.

Feminist autonomy, incorporating feminist solidarity, reflected participants' development of alternative ways of being beyond the traditional-versus-modern womanhood dichotomy and ways of relating among women beyond competition, thus transcending the dichotomy of neoliberalism-heteropatriarchy. Developing feminist autonomy is particularly significant for Chinese women to resist the limiting dichotomy of traditional womanhood and modern womanhood. This dichotomy was shaped by the systematic dichotomisation of state heteropatriarchy and state neoliberalism in China and the subjectification of transnational neoliberalism, transnational injustices, and familism-patriotism in broader UKHE settings and transnational intersectional contexts.

## 8.4 Uncertain autonomy

Rather than framing feminist autonomy and neoliberal autonomy as opposing binaries, I will introduce uncertain autonomy to highlight complexities and dynamics. Many participants experienced uncertainties about how their autonomy related to intersectional heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism at some point in their narrated life histories.

Specifically, some, despite their belief in personal autonomy, showed doubt about a neoliberal approach to resisting (hetero)patriarchal restraints. For instance, while Rui believed that elite women's strong finances enabled choices outside of socially clocked marriages and reproduction, she doubted "*if the strong economic pursuit stemmed from material desires or autonomous spirit*". Similarly, Chloe started to doubt the class-advancing approach to justice when encountering media discussion about elite women's experiences of hypogamy, challenging her presumptions of female hypergamy. Ning felt confused when seeing wealthy women restrained by gender stereotypes when choosing their subjects of study in UKHE. Participants' encounters with middle-class and elite women's struggles with autonomy and justice challenged their presumptions that high-class status ensures autonomy and justice, leading them to feel uncertain about the entrepreneurial approach to their desired autonomous life and gender justice. Their presumptions mirror the state rhetoric that economic development improves citizens' living standards and happiness in shaping middle-class subjects (Guo, 2009; Xie, 2021), while their uncertainty cast doubt on the dichotomous understanding between economic and neoliberal achievement and heteropatriarchal restraints.

Concurrent with their uncertainty about the neoliberal approach, some experienced reverse cultural shock about women's rights in and from China. After UKHE, Ning and Lei described their encounters with gender discrimination in workplaces and social lives in China as "*cultural shock*". Reverse cultural shocks motivated a few to re-emigrate to the UK. They became hopeful towards their personal lives but felt hopeless about Chinese women's collective struggle, leaving them feeling dissonant and uncertain about an individualistic approach. Despite being in the UK, some experienced reverse shocks when encountering media

discussion about gender-based violence, like women's abduction, and gendered pressure and restraints from their social network in China. This left a few feeling powerless against the heteropatriarchal restraints and somewhat sceptical in their efforts to accumulate economic, cultural and mobility capitals.

Additionally, a few experienced identity struggles alongside their doubts. For instance, Qian enjoyed liberty but felt marginalised in broader UKHE settings, while also disagreeing with some norms in Chinese societies, like women's rights issues. She said, "*I felt an identity crisis again because I didn't fit in the West or China or belong anywhere.*" Hoping to find herself between China and the West, she often felt lost due to the confines of China-West binaries.

Although my discussion of uncertain autonomy is brief, largely due to word count restrictions, I chose to include it in my conceptualisation to highlight the complexities and dynamics of how participants' autonomy related to heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism, as well as to invite further conceptualisation in future research.

## **8.5 Conclusion**

In Chapter 6, I argued that many participants' contradictory constructions of modern womanhood versus traditional womanhood were shaped by the intersectionality of state heteropatriarchy and state neoliberalism through dichotomisation. Building upon this framework, chapter 7 elaborates on participants' transformation, highlighting their development of autonomy through broader UKHE settings. I observed various ways their autonomy could be understood in relation to their social conditions, especially within the context of (state) heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism, suggesting the explanatory need to understand their various autonomies. Additionally, relational autonomy as a feminist remaking of autonomy (Stoljar, 2022) inspired me to integrate the discussion of autonomy with social (in)justice embedded in Chinese women's histories and contexts, suggesting a normative value to analyse participants' various autonomies in their social conditions. Thus, in this chapter, I theorised three ways in which interview participants' autonomy could be understood in



relation to heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism: neoliberal autonomy, feminist autonomy, and uncertain autonomy.

Neoliberal autonomy refers to participants' entrepreneurial ways of being, like individual accountabilities, autonomy, competition, and careful calculation, based on their dichotomous understanding of neoliberalism and heteropatriarchy. Feminist autonomy refers to participants' autonomy to make life choices, awareness of gender/sex perspectives and women's rights/feminism(s), and sometimes their resistance to social restraints and oppression of women. Feminist autonomy, incorporating feminist solidarity, reflected participants' development of alternative ways of being beyond the traditional-versus-modern womanhood dichotomy and ways of relating among women beyond competition, thus transgressing the dichotomy of neoliberalism-heteropatriarchy. Participants' experiences of uncertainties about how their autonomy related to heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism further suggested complexities and dynamics beyond the framing of neoliberal autonomy and feminist autonomy.

Furthermore, the broader UKHE settings played significant yet complex roles in participants' transformations, so I elucidated the potential roles of UKHE in shaping participants' autonomy in relation to heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism. Specifically, many developed their feminist autonomy through various channels: formal education in social justice and gender; autonomous, alternative, and cooperative learning; diverse and alternative womanhood, temporalities, and politics; and transnational media. However, some developed neoliberal autonomy through experiencing and internalising transnational neoliberalism and injustices during UKHE, which further constrained their self-authorisation, self-determination, and self-governance. For instance, the deficit conceptualisation of international students and related pedagogies in the neoliberal framing of IHE and (neo)colonial curriculum (re)produced the hierarchical dichotomy of Western neoliberal womanhood versus Chinese (hetero)patriarchal womanhood. Xenophobic immigration policies and the neoliberal demand for productivity in UKHE, along with heteropatriarchal chrono-normativity in China, coerced many to internalise the dichotomy of neoliberal womanhood versus heteropatriarchal womanhood and "choose" the former.

My conceptualisation of neoliberal, feminist and uncertain autonomy is relevant to existing findings on Chinese women international students' autonomy/self-fashioning. Matsui (1995) and Shu (2008) find that while Chinese women students' successful academic experiences in the US further enhanced their self-confidence and self-esteem, they didn't perceive nor challenge patriarchy in either country. However, more recent studies suggest positive impacts of their autonomous self-fashioning through IHE on challenging traditional gender roles (Kajanus, 2016; Martin, 2022). The growing autonomy and unawareness of gender/sex hierarchies mirror neoliberal autonomy in my discussion, while the increased autonomy and feminist awareness and resistance align with feminist autonomy. My research not only confirms previously conflicting findings but also points to the need and possibility to differentiate them.

This differentiation is driven by the normative value of integrating the discussion of autonomy with social (in)justice. Rather than applying the violent notion of wrong/right, I consider neoliberal autonomy problematic, as it attempts to divide, separate, determine and hierarchise ways of being (e.g., the production of hierarchal dichotomies of Western modern womanhood versus Chinese traditional womanhood), thus dehumanising people, diminishing autonomy and (re)producing social injustice. Feminist autonomy, constructed from participants' life stories, illuminated the possibilities to expose categorisation and division, re-entangle power relations and people, and create new ways of being and relating to advance both autonomy and social justice.

Neoliberal autonomy and feminist autonomy can also be differentiated in the multi-dimensions of relational autonomy (Mackenzie, 2021). For instance, while feminist autonomy suggested diverse and alternative womanhood, neoliberal autonomy, based on a dichotomous understanding of neoliberal womanhood and heteropatriarchal womanhood, could be related to deformed desires (Stoljar, 2022) or cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), limiting imaginations of alternative ways of being, namely self-governance and self-determination.

According to de Lissovoy (2018, p. 202), "subjectivity is an essential political category and its ways of being are a crucial site of contest". Neoliberal autonomy mirrors de Lissovoy's (2018) discussion of neoliberal anxious being where

manageable and determined compulsions of drives replaced the revolutionary desire, self-surveillance replaced solidarity, and fragmented subjectivities were seemingly in control. De Lissovoy (2018) argues for the change from the oppressed and objectified self (Freire, 2020) to the fragmented and anxious selves in the current neoliberal governmentality. However, I argue that restrained autonomy and anxious autonomy mutually enabled each other in participants' (re)construction of Chinese womanhood. De Lissovoy (2018) considers Freire's conscientisation and problem-posing unable to address the proliferating selves in neoliberal governmentality, proposing the pedagogy of betraying anxious autonomy. However, in my research, participants' feminist autonomy, as autonomy embedded in the intersectional heteropatriarchy-neoliberalism, suggested conscientisation and betraying anxious autonomy in mutually enabling ways.

Therefore, feminist autonomy not only exposed and betrayed neoliberal autonomy, which included entrepreneurial ways of being and isolative ways of relating, but also prosed a new and revolutionary autonomy "not as individual freedom to choose among determined alternatives but rather as collective imagination against the given" (de Lissovoy, 2018, p. 199). For Chinese women in this research, this meant alternative ways of being beyond the dichotomy of traditional-vs-modern womanhood and alternative ways of relating beyond collectives-vs-individuals and competition. Additionally, my brief discussion of uncertain autonomy aims to highlight the complexities and dynamics of how participants' autonomy related to heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism, seeking to create space for contestation that transcends dichotomous thinking.

Drawing upon multi-dimensional autonomy with historicisation and contextualisation of Chinese women's social conditions, I conceptualised neoliberal, feminist and uncertain autonomy to construct a minor genre of political resistance to the neoliberalism-vs-heteropatriarchy individually and collectively where UKHE played a significant role. These conceptualisations shouldn't be used as ahistorical and static traits to essentialise and simplify participants' transnational lived experiences and identification. Rather, they can serve as apparatus to understand and (re)imagine power dynamics in the contradictory and complex lives of Chinese women through broader UKHE settings

and wider social contexts. Neoliberal autonomy, feminist autonomy, and uncertain autonomy – grounded in participants' autonomy, social contexts, and my critical socialist feminist agenda – are heuristics that are contestable and need to be contested in future research.

## 9 Chapter 9 (In)conclusion

*I believe that women are profoundly influenced by the culture they are in – by the culture itself, their experiences, and their surrounding environment. This significantly impacts their self-perception. This ties back to what Lei mentioned earlier about ‘courageously acknowledging one’s true self.’ Studying abroad in the UK can truly inspire you to understand and know yourself better. (Qian)*

Qian’s words summarise this research well: from highlighting the socio-cultural contexts that shape women’s self-perceptions to referring to the collage-facilitated focus group discussion with Lei and emphasising the growing courage and self-knowledge through wider UKHE contexts. Following Qian’s insight, this chapter first summarises this research, answers the questions posed and highlights the contributions made. By starting every chapter with participants’ quotes and living with the memory of our interactions in the past 3 years, I see more in Qian’s words and resist a conclusion. I hope that her growing knowledge of self leads to new possibilities and that this research similarly fosters the imagination and making of feminism(s), IHE, research and my future(s). Therefore, I will end this thesis with reflections and imaginations on relevant research, practices, and my own journey.

### 9.1 Research summary and answers

This section summarises the previous 8 chapters and provides answers to research questions. Focusing on Chinese women with experiences of UKHE, this research addresses the following questions:

1. In what ways did participants construct Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings and wider transnational intersectional contexts?
2. What is the role of UKHE in participants’ construction of Chinese womanhood?

**Chapter 1** explored how the personal, family, relational, educational, sociocultural, and state influences led me to ask these questions and seek

literature for better understanding. **Chapters 2 and 3** further contextualised these questions within the existing literature on Chinese womanhood and Chinese (women) students in IHE, respectively. Chapter 2 traced the genealogy of China's political economy, its fashioning of citizens, and histories of women's resistance, highlighting the contradictions and intersection of power relations in Chinese womanhood in post-socialist China. Chapter 3 reviewed the literature on IoHE and Chinese (women) international students, highlighting the growing critiques of the deficit conceptualisation of these students.

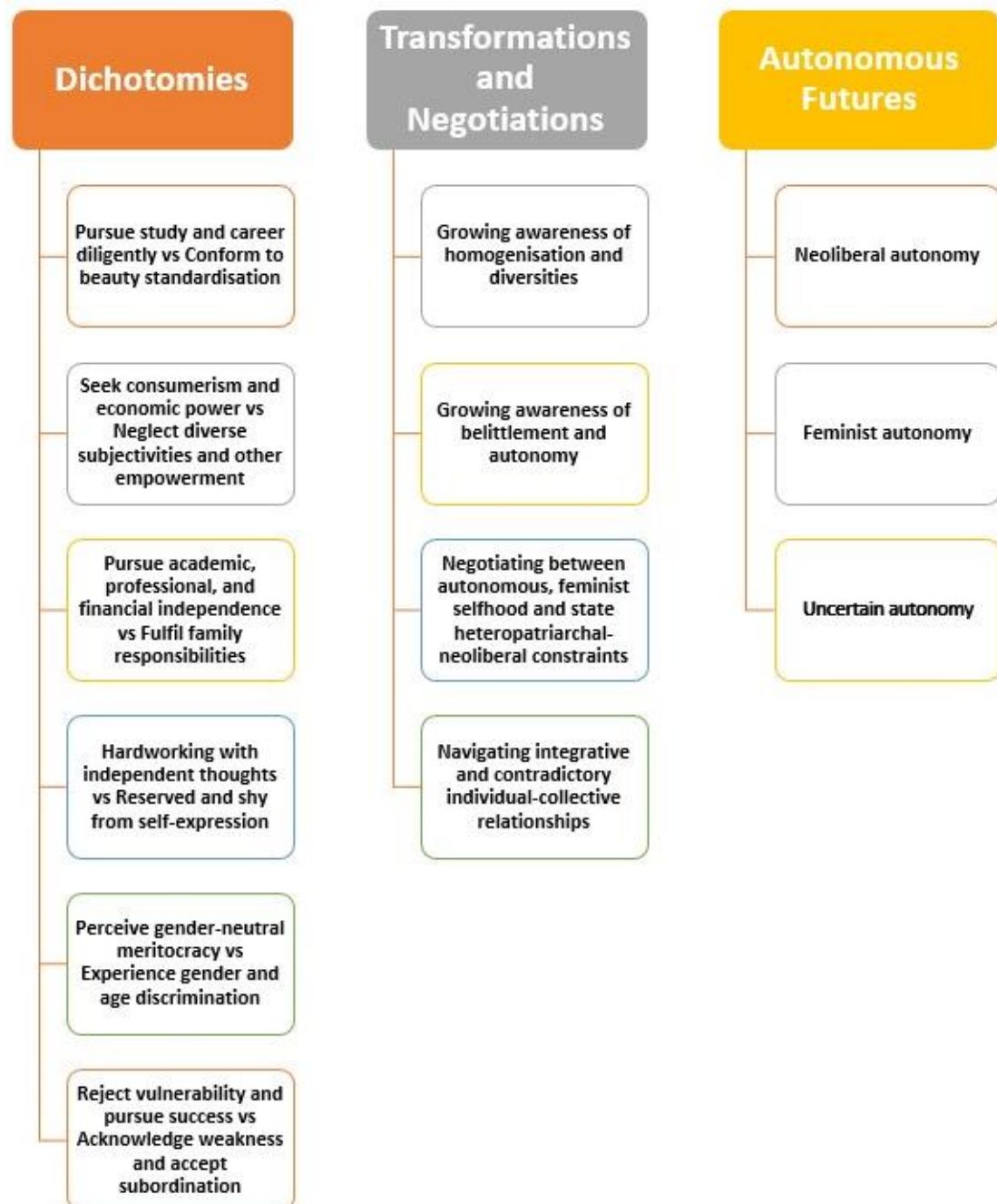
By integrating these two fields, I became interested in exploring whether, and how, Chinese women international students' autonomous self-fashioning, as well as the intersectionality of subjectivities and power through IHE, influence the paradoxes in Chinese womanhood, the PRC's fashioning of citizens, and China's broader neoliberal-socialist political economy. My research also aims to explore the role of IHE in shaping Chinese women international students' negotiations of subjectivity.

**Chapter 4** explained how the scholarship on Chinese feminism(s) and IoHE informs the theoretical framework I constructed to guide this research. My research employs transnational intersectionality, drawing on the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000), relational autonomy (Mackenzie, 2021) and temporality (Adam, 1994, 1995, 2022) (see p.99) to examine the transnationality of intersectional power relations and women's agencies across time and space for decolonial knowledge-building.

**Chapter 5** detailed the methodology used to answer these questions. I adopted LHR and ABR methods, involving a two-stage data generation process. A total of 56 participants joined 11 online collage-facilitated, culturally responsive focus groups. Subsequently, 30 of these participants participated in timeline-facilitated LH interviews. Dialectics, intersectionality, and temporality guided data analysis to reveal and counter the violence of categorical thinking. Initially, I used versus coding to analyse the collage-facilitated focus group data, followed by dramaturgical coding for the timeline-facilitated interview data. Later, the analysis focused on time, using chronological, life history, and temporal analyses.

Using visualisation (see Figure 9-1), I will summarise **Chapters 6, 7 and 8** to explain how they answer the two research questions. All three chapters contribute to answering RQ 1, while Chapter 8 addresses RQ2 by situating UKHE within participants' transformations and transnational power relations.

Figure 9-1 A visualisation of Chapters 6, 7, and 8



Participants often viewed themselves as self-contradictory and discussed various contradictions in their construction of Chinese womanhood. One significant contradiction in participants' perceptions was their "*modern and traditional Chinese womanhood*". Modern Chinese womanhood was characterised by academic and professional diligence, competitiveness, consumerist and economic power, and strong personalities. In contrast, traditional Chinese womanhood was associated with experiences of discrimination, conformity to beauty standards, the fulfilment of family responsibilities, subordination, acknowledgement of vulnerability, and the restraint of diverse subjectivities. However, the coexistence of various contradictory constructions challenged the seeming dichotomy of heteropatriarchal womanhood and neoliberal womanhood and suggested their intersectionality. Therefore, in Chapter 6, I argue that participants' perception of contradictions between modern and traditional Chinese womanhood, incorporating six specific dilemmas, was shaped by the intersectionality of state neoliberalism and state heteropatriarchy through dichotomisation.

During UKHE, the intersectionality of gender/sex, class, age, race, and nationality, along with the transnational intersectionality of patriarchy, post-colonialism, patriotism, and racial and national essentialism, further complicated their constructions. Thus, Chapter 7 highlighted participants' transformations in their construction of Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings. Participants became more aware of and resistant to the homogenisation, belittlement, restraints, and contradiction of the prescribed Chinese womanhood. They also developed towards diverse, autonomous, feminist, and integrated selfhood. Therefore, their sense of contradictions stemmed from several factors (see Section 6.8):

1. The dichotomisation of state neoliberalism and state heteropatriarchy.
2. The conflict between their perceptions of dichotomies and their intersectional lived experiences.
3. The tension between various restraints and their developing autonomy through broader UKHE settings.



Against this backdrop, Chapter 8 conceptualised three ways in which interview participants' autonomy could be understood in relation to heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism:

1. Neoliberal autonomy, based on a dichotomous understanding of neoliberalism and heteropatriarchy.
2. Feminist autonomy, transcending the heteropatriarchy-vs-neoliberalism binary.
3. Uncertain autonomy, denoting complexities and dynamics beyond the binary framing.

These concepts seek not only to understand participants' construction of modern-vs-traditional womanhood and their transformations towards autonomy but also to (re)imagine the power dynamics in their past-present-future (re)construction where UKHE played a significant yet complex role. **The discussion above answers RQ1, while also situating my response to RQ2 (the role of UKHE) within participants' transformations and transnational power relations.**

Specifically, many participants developed their feminist autonomy through various channels: formal education in social justice and gender; autonomous, alternative, and cooperative learning; diverse and alternative womanhood, temporalities, and politics; and transnational media. However, some developed neoliberal autonomy through experiencing and internalising transnational neoliberalism and injustices, together with their subjectification of familism-patriotism, which further constrained their self-authorisation, self-determination, and self-governance. After summarising this research, I will explicate its contributions.

## 9.2 Contributions

Transnational intersectionality, with its ability to capture the interplay of the product and the process of social relations in multiple locations, helped me understand the layers of complexity in participants' transnational construction of Chinese womanhood and contribute to the existing discussions.

Concerning Chinese womanhood, in empirical research, Liu (2014, 2018a) pioneers the discussion of Chinese young women's construction of modern and traditional womanhood and contextualises it within China's dual approach to modernity promoted by the neoliberal-socialist regime. Analysing the anti-feminist backlash in China, Wu and Dong (2019) observe that suppressed class antagonism has been hegemonically channelled into escalating gender antagonism. In theoretical discussions, critical socialist feminists critique the concurrence of patriarchy and neoliberalism, and the state's shaping role in this collusion (Song, 2023; Zhu, 2011). Drawing on the intersectionality of both categories and power relations, my argument bridges the empirical findings and theoretical literature and offers a detailed account of how the intersectionality of state neoliberalism-heteropatriarchy shaped participants' constructions of modern and traditional womanhood through dichotomisation.

Additionally, the Chinese state continued to revitalise patriarchal womanhood (e.g., moving towards greater coercion of women's reproduction and bodies) (Hong-Fincher, 2023; Zhu & Xiao, 2021), prioritise and marketise care economy (e.g., elderly care) (Meng, 2020; Xie, 2021), tighten repression of dissent (Wang *et al.*, 2021) and promote cultural nationalism (Lin, 2024). Against this backdrop, my argument helps illuminate young, urban, and university-educated Chinese women's complex senses of contradictions, struggles and sense of "stuck-ness" and interrogates the complex and sometimes hidden power structures.

My discussion of participants' construction of Chinese womanhood through broader UKHE settings unpacked transnational power relations beyond this specific intersectionality to account for layered complexities. This helps with understanding the impact of international UKHE on one of its largest demographics of international students (HESA, 2021, 2022), particularly their construction of subjectivities and its political implications, valorising some impact on personal autonomy and social justice and problematising some implicit neoliberal and (neo)colonial practices. For instance, in critical internationalisation studies, a few scholars discuss the implications of neoliberal ideology in UKHE, aggressive immigration policy discourse and racial stereotyping on international students' ways of being, highlighting their subjectification as income sources, consumers, and inferior others (Lomer, 2018; Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2023). My research

further specifies the impact of these power relations on Chinese womanhood within broader UKHE settings.

Specifically, the deficit conceptualisation of international students and related pedagogies in the neoliberal framing of IHE and (neo)colonial curriculum contributed to (re)producing the hierarchical dichotomy of Western neoliberal womanhood versus Chinese (hetero)patriarchal womanhood. The xenophobic immigration policies and neoliberal requirement of productivity in UKHE, along with the heteropatriarchal chrono-normativity in China, coerced many to internalise the dichotomy of neoliberal womanhood versus heteropatriarchal womanhood and “choose” the former. This form of “structural intersectionality” (Cho *et al.*, 2013) helped me interrogate the local and global domains of power in participants’ construction of subjectivities.

Specifically, my research not only confirms previously conflicting findings on whether Chinese women’s autonomous self-fashioning through IHE challenges traditional gender roles (e.g., Martin, 2022; Shu, 2008) but also points to the need and possibility to differentiate them. I conceptualised neoliberal autonomy, feminist autonomy and uncertain autonomy to construct a minor genre of political resistance to the neoliberalism-vs-heteropatriarchy where UKHE played a significant role. For Chinese women in this research, this meant alternative ways of being beyond the dichotomy of traditional vs. modern womanhood and alternative ways of relating beyond the framework of collectives vs. individuals and competition. Although my discussion of uncertain autonomy is brief, largely due to word count restrictions, I chose to include it in my conceptualisation to create space for future contestation that transcends dichotomous thinking.

Thus, the detailed examination of transnational power dynamics helped valorise and ground participants’ transformations in their social conditions to purposefully imagine alternative praxis of Chinese womanhood transcending these transnational axes of domination. This answers the call for feminists to establish new possibilities of subjectivities (ways of being and relating) for ordinary individuals to dismantle unjust intersecting structures in China (Song, 2023; Yin, 2022).

### 9.3 (In)conclusion

Having detailed the contributions of this research, I will briefly discuss its implications for future research and practices. My analysis of state heteropatriarchy and state neoliberalism in shaping Chinese womanhood through dichotomisation explicates one way power relations intersect in the fashioning of Chinese womanhood. Future research related to gender/feminism in China can investigate the operation of more power relations in shaping various subjectivities. Specifically, empirical research and theoretical discussion with a critical socialist feminist agenda can continue to explore the conceptualisations of neoliberal, feminist, and uncertain autonomy. For instance, future discussions may examine whether feminist autonomy, with feminist solidarity as a constituent part, contributes to imagining and making community-based feminism(s) in the contemporary PRC. This may also be discussed with feminist scholarship in other post-socialist contexts. Building on my brief discussion of uncertain autonomy, future research could also continue to conceptualise it, particularly within broader UK IHE contexts.

Future research on gender/feminism with international students can further study both the working of transnational intersectional power relations and students' agencies. If UKHEIs truly cared about social changes, as some of them advocated for, they need to take a long-term and comprehensive approach to evaluate UKHE's impact on students and societies, which in turn have implications for critical pedagogies and curriculum. For instance, my participants' construction of Western neoliberal womanhood versus Chinese heteropatriarchal womanhood, and their dissonance between increasing autonomy and awareness of societal restraints have implications for IHE researchers and practitioners. They may reflect on and investigate the complex power operations shaping their practices and create more power-sensitive, culturally responsive, alternative, and diverse pedagogies, curriculum, and assessments to re-imagining knowledge production in IHE and develop students' autonomy for social justice, especially in programmes and courses with large numbers of international students. I name this chapter (in)conclusion as I wish it to open up rather than close off imaginations for the praxis of feminism(s) and IHE, and my future(s).

I will now reflect on my transformation through this 4-year PhD journey, which is an integrated process of becoming a feminist as a person and researcher. Analysing the transnational intersectional power shaping Chinese womanhood has sensitised me to the complex power relations shaping who I am as a person. While I sometimes feel powerless, knowing that many aspects of life are beyond individual control, I also find myself becoming more empathetic towards others' struggles and our shared imperfections. Conducting focus groups and analysing participants' social relations allowed me to see the power of connection and community. While my quest for genuine connections involved vulnerabilities, loneliness, and pain, I feel motivated and brave to seek these connections.

Through this effort, I found a reading group of feminist scholars and activists with a particular interest in China, a group of practitioners who combined dance (my lifelong passion) with social causes, and applied theatre practitioners promoting theatre of the oppressed in the wider Chinese community. Through seeing and co-constructing participants' alternative ways of existence, I feel in myself the collapsing of the society-imposed criterion of a good life, the increasing appreciation of the value of my gut feelings, and the need to explore alternative ways of being.

My life has become broader, and so does my understanding of research. Analysing power relations in IHE conscientised me about how power shapes the research process, from what questions are asked, to who the researchers and participants are, to how findings are represented. Conducting arts-based research methods, dramaturgical coding, life history and temporal analyses transformed my understanding, attitudes, and feelings about (binary) categorisation, time, and representation.

The transformation propelled me not to report life histories in this thesis and motivated me to explore and experiment with other creative, arts-based representations. This transformation also motivated me to construct feminist autonomy, not for the sake of making categories, but to start the quest for alternatives. So, the data generation and analysis drove me to *see* the boundaries of a PhD thesis and inspired me to *make* alternative ways of representation and create findings to *imagine* alternative ways of being.

Towards the end of this thesis-making, I'm starting to imagine my post-thesis life. At this stage, I am less interested in a full-time academic job but feel excited to explore what my learning and transformation in the past 4 years mean for the wider society, myself, and my social relations. In my vision, this involves creative/arts-based practices for social justice, alongside an honest appreciation of my desires, connections, communities, and vulnerabilities. This way, I'm hoping to integrate the doing, being, and becoming as a person and researcher, and possibly "reimagine the meaning and practice of research itself" (Bradley & Perry, in press, n.p.).

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Participant demographics

Pseudonyms	Academic	Levels of study	Subjects	Years in Britain	Age	Sibling status <sup>99</sup>	Interview
Ming	Student	PGT & PGR	STEM	3	25	0	Y
Wei	Student	PGT	SHAPE & STEM	4	26	0	Y
Jing	Student	UG, PGT, & PGR	SHAPE	7	26	0	Y
Li	Student	PGT	SHAPE	1	23	1 OB	N
Tao	Student	PGT	SHAPE	1	24	0	N
Chen	Alumni	Pre-Master & PGT	SHAPE	1	26	0	Y
Yan	Alumni	PGT	SHAPE	1	32	0	Y
Lin	Alumni	Pre-Master & PGT	SHAPE	1	28	0	N
Wen	Alumni	PGT	SHAPE	1	24	1 YB	N
Xuan	Alumni	PGT	SHAPE	1	25	0	Y
Emily	Alumni	PGT	SHAPE	1	27	0	Y
Yu	Student	UG, PGT, & PGR	SHAPE	10	25	0	Y
Lei	Student	Pre-Master, PGT, & PGR	SHAPE	5	27	0	Y
Gabriel	Student	PGT & PGR	SHAPE	6	28	0	N
Qian	Student	UG	SHAPE	4	21	0	Y
Yang	Both	PGT & PGR	SHAPE	3	25	0	N
Kai	Student	PGT	SHAPE	1	27	0	Y
Zhen	Student	Pre-Master & PGT	SHAPE	3	25	0	N
Fang	Alumni	UG & PGT	SHAPE	6	32	0	Y

<sup>99</sup> Older Sister (OS), Younger Sister (YS), Sister (S), Older Brother (OB), Younger Brother (YB), Brother (B)

Pseudonyms	Academic	Levels of study	Subjects	Years in Britain	Age	Sibling status	Interview
Zoe	Student	PGT & PGR	SHAPE	7	28	2 YS	N
Yi	Student	PGT & PGR	SHAPE	3	28	0	N
Hui	Alumni	PGT	STEM	1	29	0	Y
Rui	Alumni	PGT & PGR	SHAPE	5	29	0	Y
Nora	Alumni	UG	SHAPE	3	25	0	N
Yunzhu	Both	PGT & PGR	SHAPE	4	30	0	Y
Wei	Alumni	PGT	SHAPE	1	27	0	N
Jia	Alumni	PGT	STEM	1	25	0	Y
Chloe	Alumni	PGT	SHAPE	2	27	0	Y
Han	Alumni	PGT	SHAPE	1	29	0	Y
Bei	Alumni	PGT	SHAPE	1	26	1 B& 1S	N
Dong	Alumni	Pre-Master & PGT	SHAPE	5	28	0	Y
Qiang	Student	PGT	SHAPE	1	19	0	N
Shu	Student	PGT	SHAPE	1	31	0	Y
Tian	Student	PGT	STEM	1	24	1 YB	N
Zhao	Student	PGT	SHAPE	1	22	0	N
Liang	Both	PGT & PGR	SHAPE	3	29	0	Y
Shan	Both	PGT & PGR	SHAPE	2	26	1 OS	N
Ning	Both	UG, PGT, & PGR	SHAPE & STEM	11	30	0	Y
Peng	Both	PGT & PGR	SHAPE	6	31	0	N
Stella	Alumni	PGT	SHAPE	1	24	1 B	N
Grace	Alumni	PGT	SHAPE	1	39	1 OB	Y
Zhi	Student	PGT	SHAPE	1	27	0	Y
Chun	Student	PGT	SHAPE	1	23	0	N
Gao	Student	PGT	SHAPE	1	22	0	N
Jun	Student	PGR	SHAPE	1	Unknown	Unknown	N
Milan	Student	UG	SHAPE	1	21	1 OS	Y
Ronglu	Student	PGT	SHAPE	0	24	0	Y

<b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Academic</b>	<b>Levels of study</b>	<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Years in Britain</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sibling status</b>	<b>Interview</b>
Shao	Student	PGT	SHAPE	0	23	0	N
Yifei	Student	PGT	SHAPE	0	34	0	N
Weitian	Student	PGT	SHAPE	0	27	Unknown	N
Elizabeth	Student	PGT	SHAPE	0	32	1 OS	Y
Zhixing	Alumni	Pre-Master, PGT	STEM	2	28	2 YS&YB	Y
Lubai	Alumni	PGT	STEM	1	26	0	Y
Pan	Alumni	PGT	STEM	1	27	1 OB	N
Renhui	Alumni	PGT	STEM	1	28	1 OS	Y
Amelia	Alumni	PGT	STEM	1	27	0	N

## Appendix 2. Slides used in collage-facilitated focus groups



1

### Research information/ 研究信息

- Research purpose/ 研究目的
- Research ethics / 研究伦理
- Self-introduction/自我介绍
- Research tool/研究工具:  
PowerPoint & Public domain photos/公共领域图片
  - <https://www.pexels.com>
  - <https://pixabay.com/>
  - <https://unsplash.com/>
- Research process and expectations/ 研究过程和期待
  - Make collage together (20mins) /一起做拼贴画
  - Group discussion & make collage (40mins) /小组讨论和拼贴画
- An example & any question? 一个例子。问题?

2

Understanding of Chinese womanhood before British Higher Education 在英国高校前的对中国女性的理解

3

Understanding of Chinese womanhood during British Higher Education 在英国高校中的对中国女性的理解

4



Understanding of other womanhood during British Higher Education 在英国高校中的对其他女性的理解

5

Understanding of Chinese womanhood after British Higher Education 在英国高校后的对中国女性的理解

6

## Conclusion/ 结语

- Concluding discussion/ 总结性讨论
- Research ethics / 研究伦理
- Thank you! What's next?/  
感谢参与, 接下来?



7

## Appendix 3. Slide templates in timeline-facilitated interviews



1

- **研究信息 Research information**
  - 研究伦理 Research ethics
- **小组讨论阐明 Focus group clarification**
  - (customised follow up questions)
  - 请问在小组讨论中您有不完全同意的地方吗? Was there anything you didn't fully agree with?
  - 其他 anything else?

2

(Collage clarification)

3

- **研究目的/Research purpose:**

对女性的理解和英国高等教育期间经历的互相影响

The interaction between understanding of womanhood and lived experience in British Higher Education over time

4

### 背景和经验 Background and Experience

#### 1. 女性相关的中国社会环境 Women-related social environment in China

传统的复兴 Revival of tradition

当下言论 Current discourses

女性经历 Women's experiences

中国田园女权 Chinese Pastoral Feminism

#### 2. 在英国的各种挑战: Various challenges in the UK

中国留学生、种族、女性 Chinese students, race, gender...

来自国内的挑战 Challenges from home country

#### 3. 个人策略和学校措施 Personal strategies and institutional support

### 背景和经验 Background and Experience

#### 4. 在英国多样的, 新的经历 Diverse and new experiences in the UK

自由包容开放, 多种价值观的环境 Free, inclusive, and open-minded environment with diverse values

其他国家女性 Women from other countries

社会性别教育 Gender education

女权运动 Feminist movement

后女权言论 Post-feminist discourse

#### 5. 在英国高等教育经历中对女性身份的探索 Exploration of womanhood through wider UKHE settings

矛盾 Contradictions

成长 Growth

差异 Differences

5

6

## 研究信息 Research information

- 研究目的 Research purpose: 对女性的理解和英国高等教育期间经历的互相影响
- 研究工具 Research tools: 纸, 笔
- 研究活动 Research activity: 时间线 & 访谈
- 时间线 (10-15分钟)/ Timeline (10-15 mins)
  - ▶ 请您画时间线表达您对于女性随着时间推移的理解。开头是您刚来英国的时间, 结尾是现在的时间。线的表现形式由您决定。
  - ▶ 在时间线的一边表达您对女性理解的几个重要节点。
  - ▶ 在时间线的另外一边, 表达和您女性理解的相关事件, 这些事件应该是您在英国期间发生的, 可以是个人的经历听闻, 也可以是任何国家的社会事件。(可参考我提供的事件)
  - ▶ 请您把这时间线的两边联系起来, 来表达在英国高等教育期间的经历是怎么影响到您对女性的理解的? 相反, 请问您对女性的理解是怎么影响到您的生活经历的呢? (可标注大概时间)
- 拍照发图-访谈

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## 结语 Conclusion

- 总结 Concluding remarks
- 研究伦理 Research ethics
- 感谢参与, 接下来? Thank you!  
What's next?



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