Playing with Boundaries: Navigating Cross-Cultural Dating and Identity of Chinese Female Students in Globalized Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the cross-cultural dating between individuals during transnational educational program. When transnational education became widespread among Chinese female students, cross-cultural dating has become not as unusual and provided the opportunity for in-depth cross-cultural communication. However, it has also generated pressure that was imposed upon Chinese female student due to the difference between their home and host culture. Implementing an in-depth interview with Chinese female students who has or had been participating in transnational educational program that examines their dating experience, family influence, and development of personal identity when navigating between their home and host culture, this study found that these students dating abroad has to confront noy only the collectivistic expectation from their Asian parents due to generational gap and cultural unfamiliarity but also the challenge of identity formation under possible cultural shock from the host culture. Such hardship students confront in cross-cultural dating resulted in enhanced personal growth in that they are generally more acceptable of diversity, more shifted towards individualistic culture of satisfaction in life, and a more flexible approach towards relationship development.

Introduction

In the background of globalized education, communication and dating between individuals between different transnational cultures became increasingly frequent. Also, transnational educational programs has also became common. In this case, the pressure that the conflict between home and host culture and the expectations by society is often generated in common lives of Chinese female student taking transnational educational program. Although cross cultural dating has been a frequently discussed topic of research, the studies specifically referring to the female students from China is still limited. Amidst this backdrop, this study aims to delve into the under-explored experiences of Chinese female students dating abroad. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how these women navigate the labyrinthine expectations and pressures from their families and home culture while studying abroad. Further, this research will examine how these women construct and maintain their cultural identity in relationships with romantic partners in their host countries. We will probe into the tensions between the cultural identities they cultivate in romantic relationships and the broader socio-cultural norms of both their home country and host society. Under the trend of globalization, the study of cross-cultural communication and dating patterns will uncover the complex implications for individuals in different cultural contexts. At the same time, this study will also contribute to our understanding of how cultural identities are constructed and maintained in the context of globalization.

Literature Review

The dating life of overseas Chinese female students has been a topic of interest and controversy in both academic and popular discourses. This topic is significant and relevant for the fields of education, gender, and identity studies, as it reflects the complex and dynamic interactions between transnational educational migration, gender and sexuality, and identity formation. The main objectives of this literature review are to: (1) examine the existing literature on the global trends, motivations, and consequences of transnational educational migration, especially among young, middle-class Chinese women seeking higher education in Western countries; (2) explore the gender and sexuality aspects of transnational educational migration, such as how migrant women's experiences and choices are shaped by gender roles and norms, sexual culture and practices, and power relations in their home and host societies; and (3) analyze the identity formation of transnational educational migrants, such as how they construct and negotiate their cultural, ethnic, and personal identities in relation to their dating life abroad.

Transnational Educational Migration

Transnational educational migration refers to the movement of students across national borders for the purpose of pursuing higher education. This phenomenon has been increasing in recent decades due to globalization, neoliberalism, and the expansion of the international education market (Findlay et al., 2012). Among the various groups of transnational educational migrants, young, middle-class Chinese women have emerged as a significant and distinctive population. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2020), China is the largest source country of international students in the world, with more than one million Chinese students studying abroad in 2018. Among them, about 60% are female, and most of them choose to study in Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia (Wang & Collins, 2019).

The literature on transnational educational migration has examined the motivations and consequences of this phenomenon from different perspectives. Some studies have focused on the economic factors that drive Chinese women to pursue higher education abroad, such as the desire to enhance their human capital, employability, and social mobility in a competitive global market (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Other studies have emphasized the cultural factors that influence Chinese women's decision to study abroad, such as the aspiration to experience different lifestyles, values, and opportunities in a cosmopolitan environment (Waters & Leung, 2013; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Moreover, some studies have explored the psychological factors that motivate Chinese women to seek higher education abroad, such as the need to escape from the pressure and constraints of their family and their home culture (Ho et al., 2014; Yeoh & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019).

The literature on transnational educational migration has also discussed the effects of this phenomenon on migrant women's social, cultural, and economic capital. Some studies have highlighted the positive outcomes of transnational educational migration, such as acquiring valuable skills, knowledge, networks, and credentials that enhance migrant women's career prospects and social status in both their home and host societies (Marginson et al., 2010; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2017). Other studies have pointed out the negative outcomes of transnational educational migration, such as facing difficulties in adapting to a new academic system, culture shock, language barriers, discrimination, or exploitation that undermine migrant women's well-being and integration in their host societies (Baas, 2010; Li & Bray, 2007). Furthermore, some studies have revealed the ambivalent outcomes of transnational educational migration, such as experiencing a loss or gain of social, cultural, and economic capital depending on the context, timing, and direction of their mobility (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017; Waters, 2006).

However, the literature on transnational educational migration has some gaps or limitations that need to be addressed. One of them is the lack of attention to the role of gender and sexuality in transnational educational migration. As Brooks and Waters (2011) argue, "gender is often treated as an unproblematic variable

rather than a central analytical category" (p. 11) in this field of study. Moreover, there is a dearth of studies that take into account how cultural norms and expectations around gender and sexuality from both home and host societies interact and impact the experiences of young, middle-class Chinese women studying abroad. Existing research has often addressed these aspects separately or given preference to one over the other, thus missing the chance to develop a more nuanced understanding of this intersection. In addition, existing studies on the economic and socio-cultural outcomes of transnational educational migration have often focused on career prospects, acculturation experiences, or mental health issues, largely neglecting how these outcomes may affect other aspects of migrant women's lives, such as their intimate relationships, dating practices, and experiences of love and romance.

Gender and Sexuality

Gender and sexuality are two interrelated aspects of human identity that influence how people perceive themselves and others, how they behave and interact in different situations, how they express their feelings and desires, how they form relationships and partnerships, how they face opportunities and challenges in life, and how they are treated and valued by society (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2012). Gender and sexuality are also socially and culturally constructed, meaning that they are not fixed or natural, but rather vary across time and space, and are influenced by various factors, such as norms, values, beliefs, practices, institutions, and power relations (Foucault, 1978).

The literature on gender and sexuality aspects of transnational educational migration has examined how migrant women's experiences and choices in their dating life abroad are shaped by the intersection of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and culture (King et al., 2018; Mohanty et al., 2006; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2017; Yeoh & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019). Some studies reviewed that overseas Chinese female students face the expectations and pressures of their family and their home culture in their dating life abroad (Ho et al., 2014; Yeoh & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019). Their family and home culture often have conservative and patriarchal views on gender and sexuality, such as the preference for early marriage and childbearing, the emphasis on female chastity and fidelity, the disapproval of premarital sex and cohabitation, the opposition to interracial or intercultural relationships, and the stigma attached to divorce or singlehood. These expectations and pressures can affect overseas female students' dating decisions and behaviors, such as who they date, how they date, when they date, and why they date. They can also cause conflicts or tensions between overseas female students and their family or home culture, especially when their dating choices or outcomes do not conform to their family or home culture's expectations or values. Overseas female students also encounter and negotiate different sexual norms and values in the host societies. The host societies often have more liberal and diverse views on gender and sexuality (Chen & Yang, 2019; Lee & Rice, 2012). These norms and values can offer overseas female students new opportunities and challenges in their dating life abroad.

However, the gap in the existing literature on gender and sexuality aspects of transnational educational migration is the need for more in-depth and nuanced studies on the lived experiences and meanings of overseas Chinese female students' dating life abroad, particularly how they construct their strategies to deal with the con. Overseas female students construct and express their sexual identities and behaviors in different cultural contexts. Their sexual identities and behaviors are not fixed or homogeneous, but rather vary across time and space, and are influenced by various factors, such as personal characteristics, interpersonal relationships, social contexts, cultural backgrounds, historical events, etc. (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2012; Foucault, 1978). Overseas Chinese female students may adopt different strategies to negotiate their sexual identities and behaviors in different cultural contexts, such as assimilation, integration, separation, or marginalization (Berry, 1997). They may also face different opportunities or challenges in constructing and expressing their sexual identities and behaviors in different cultural contexts, such as empowerment or oppression, recognition or rejection, inclusion or exclusion, etc. (Mohanty et al., 2006; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2017).

Identity Formation

Identity is a construction of an individual based on recognition of some common origins or similar characteristics shared by a person or a group(Giddens, 1991). The construction of identity has never been terminated---it always occurs in process. Materials and symbolic conditions are often needed to sustain a particular act of identification, once sustained, the identity seldom grant toleration to differences(Giddens, 1991). Summing up, formation of identity is a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption (Giddens, 1991).

Academic literature covering the topic of identity formation in female students participating in transnational educational program discussed the problem students face in adjusting towards a new identity in foreign host culture and its probable difference with their home culture (Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Salisbury et al., 2008). Some perspectives conclude that the most frequent problems that the students face during the cultural adjustments includes stress, social support, country of origin, length of residence, and language proficiency (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). These stresses were often present in the aspects of academics, acculturative stress, discrimination or prejudice, and adjustment difficulties. In most cases, a self-accessed proficiency in language and a longer term of residence indicates fewer problems to face during adjustments(Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Other literature proposes that an individual's status in social hierarchy serves as an indicator of difficulty in identity formation. Most of the immigrants in lower social class could not fully use their social and cultural capital to create value for themselves in the upper segment of the labor market (Riano & Baghdadi, 2007). Moreover, some other literatures say that transnational students often encounter unfairness, discrimination, and cultural intolerance from their host society; it also suggests that not all problems international students face are taken as a matter of adjustment (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Despite the fact that these literatures above have given significant contribution to the academic field, there are gap and limitations that can be explained in my article. Although the literatures above stated out the obstacles and problems transnational student face in their host culture, it has not made survey nor discussed they method they chose to navigate through these obstacles in their formation of identity during transnational educational program. This is a main part of the thesis in which my article would made effort to cover.

Research Method

In order to explore how Chinese female students studying in Western countries navigate the expectations and pressures of their family and home culture in their dating lives abroad, and how they construct and maintain their cultural identity in relation to their romantic partners and host society, this research utilizes a qualitative methodology. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Chinese female students who are studying or have recently graduated in Western countries, focusing on their cross-cultural dating experiences. These interviews were designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives, feelings, and reflections on dating across cultures, their family's expectations, and their personal identity within their host society. The questions are open-ended to allow for a rich, nuanced exploration of the subject matter, and the data collected has been analyzed thematically to identify patterns and insights that can inform our understanding of these complex dynamics.

Family Expectations and Negotiation

In the realm of cross-cultural dating, the experiences of these Chinese female students abroad are deeply etched with the imprints of familial expectations, a theme resonant with the collectivist narratives emphasized in Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. For instance, one student's recounting of her parents' unease, "My parents

are always apprehensive about me dating someone from a different cultural background," vividly illustrates the tension between individual romantic desires and collective family norms, a conflict sharply outlined in collectivist cultures as per Hofstede's (1980) observations. This tension is further nuanced by the intergenerational dynamics in these families. The shift in parental attitudes, from opposing dating in high school to urging marriage post-university, mirrors a script from the traditional playbook, yet is fraught with contradictions in the modern context. This phenomenon, akin to what Inglehart and Baker (2000) describe as a clash between traditional and modern values, is evident in one student's remark: "When I was in high school, my parents were against dating, but at university, they started pressuring me to find a Chinese boyfriend." This narrative is a microcosm of the larger transformational tale playing out in many immigrant families, where traditional timelines for life events are being questioned and reshaped.

In navigating these familial waters, the students' strategies range from direct confrontation to subtle acquiescence. Active resistance, as seen in one student's approach of confronting racially insensitive comments from parents, echoes the individual agency celebrated in Western contexts, a paradigm shift highlighted in Markus and Kitayama's (1991) theory of independent versus interdependent self-construal. Conversely, some students chose a more passive approach to these familial tensions. "It's easier to just stay quiet and not share much about my personal life," a participant mentioned, indicating a tendency to internalize feelings or avoid confrontation. The response styles were often influenced by the students' experiences with their parents during adolescence. "Growing up, we never really talked openly about personal matters, so I find it hard to express my dating choices to my parents," a student explained, illustrating how past family communication patterns impacted their current response strategies.

Cultural Differences in Dating

In the kaleidoscope of social relationships, the students' accounts reveal a striking dichotomy between the interpersonal dynamics in China and abroad. They perceive a distinct difference, noting that relationships in foreign countries are more straightforward and person-centric. This observation echoes Hofstede' theory of individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 1980), where Western societies, with their individualistic leanings, encourage personal connections that are less influenced by societal hierarchies. "In China, social status often dictates the contours of friendships, but this seems less common abroad," one student mused, capturing the essence of Hofstede's perspective. This divergence in social interaction styles can be traced back to the educational underpinnings of each culture. In China, the educational ethos, heavily influenced by Confucian ideals, places a significant emphasis on academic excellence, often overshadowing personal development aspects such as relationship building (Chen, 2001). In contrast, Western education, with its roots in more liberal philosophies, seems to adopt a more balanced approach, valuing personal growth alongside academic pursuits. This difference in educational priorities, as seen through the students' lenses, profoundly impacts the social landscape of adolescent relationships. The students also noted a starkly different atmosphere for minority sexualities and premarital sex in Western countries, a reflection of the more inclusive and liberal social norms prevalent there. This observation aligns with the broader themes of tolerance and diversity championed in Western societies, as discussed in the works of scholars like Inglehart and Welzel (2005), who explore the cultural shifts towards greater acceptance and liberalization.

When it comes to the realm of dating, the procedural nuances stood out sharply in the students' experiences. They described a more gradual and phased approach to relationships in foreign countries, with stages like casual dating and exclusivity preceding a formal commitment. This process, as one student put it, "gives us more time to really understand each other before deciding on a relationship," underscoring the emphasis on personal connection and mutual understanding. In stark contrast, the dating scene in China was portrayed as more fast-paced and direct, often bypassing the initial exploratory stages in favor of immediate exclusivity and

relationship confirmation. This approach, according to the students, reflects a more pragmatic and future-oriented perspective, where considerations of marriage and financial stability are paramount right from the onset of a relationship. The contrast in dating cultures is not just a matter of procedural differences but also reflects deeper cultural underpinnings. As one student aptly summarized, "In Western countries, dating feels more like exploring the individual, rather than planning for the future." This distinction speaks volumes about the cultural contexts shaping relationship dynamics, where the exploration of individuality and personal connection takes precedence in one, while pragmatic future planning and social considerations dominate the other.

Identity and Growth in Transnational Dating

During the transnational dating, a striking transformation emerges in the self-reported growth of these students. Most of them describe an evolution towards becoming "more open-minded" and possessing "a greater respect for diversity." This metamorphosis, it seems, is a byproduct of their immersion in the diverse milieu of their overseas educational experience. As one student eloquently put it, "Being exposed to so many different cultures and perspectives has opened my eyes. It's like seeing the world in a whole new light." This newfound open-mindedness is not just a superficial change but a profound shift in worldview, catalyzed by interactions with people from varied ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations.

Similarly, the journey of these students has been marked by a notable increase in independence and social prowess. Many participants reflected on their initial personalities as being "introverted" or "sensitive to others' opinions" before their studies abroad. However, their experiences in Western individualistic cultures have seemingly reshaped them into individuals who describe themselves as "more sincere," "less influenced by others," and "more confident." This transformation underscores a significant cultural shift from the collectivist roots of East Asian societies, where group harmony often overshadows individual expression, to the more individualistic ethos of the West. One student's reflection captures this sentiment: "I used to worry a lot about what others thought of me. But now, I feel more empowered to speak my mind and stand up for what I believe in." Moreover, a paradigm shift in their perception of success is evident. These students report moving away from a singular focus on academic achievements, prevalent in Chinese culture, to embracing personal growth and life experiences as markers of success. This shift aligns with the differing educational emphases between China and Western countries – the former prioritizing academic excellence, while the latter values individual development holistically.

When it comes to identity, the narrative is equally rich. Most students affirm their enduring identity as Chinese, despite integrating well into their host cultures. They acknowledge that, while they blend in, the fundamental cultural differences are indelible. Many have gained a deeper appreciation of their host culture, which in turn has fortified their sense of being Chinese. Intriguingly, some students recounted encounters with individuals who criticized their home culture without objectivity, a common experience among those studying abroad. These interactions, rather than diluting their Chinese identity, have often served to reinforce it, illustrating a phenomenon of identity perseverance that is distinctly polarized among students in trans-national educational programs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, female students studying abroad are confronted with a complex interplay of values: the collectivist principles prevalent in their Asian home culture, typically embodied by familial expectations, contrast with the individualistic norms encountered through relationships with partners from diverse cultural backgrounds. These students frequently contend with the pressures emanating from their home environment, particularly in the context of international relationships. Challenges include parental overprotectiveness and apprehensions regarding

the dependability of their partners, combined with expectations for an expedited transition to marriage after university. These anticipations, rooted in a generational perspective that may not resonate with the students' personal life plans, often lead to hesitance in engaging with unfamiliar cultural milieus.

Conversely, these students must also navigate potential cultural shocks arising from differing value systems and lifestyles. The distinct emphasis on individuality and personal exploration in Western relationships, as opposed to the long-term commitment expected in Asian cultures, can be particularly jarring. This disparity often results in increased anxiety and self-doubt for students raised in Asian cultures, as they struggle to reconcile these divergent viewpoints.

The necessity to adapt to both their family's expectations and their partner's cultural norms prompts significant self-reflection and personal growth in these students. Generally, they tend to adopt a more relaxed approach to relationships, prioritizing personal development and becoming more receptive to new ideas. Post-experience, many place greater importance on the personal enrichment a relationship offers, rather than its outcome. Their criteria for evaluating relationships shift from a collectivist Asian perspective to a more individualized focus on life enjoyment. Furthermore, having navigated initial cultural shocks, these students often develop a heightened capacity to embrace diverse viewpoints.

Acknowledgments

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